



**3.25** Paul Gauguin, *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*, 1897–98. Oil on canvas, 4' 6¼" × 12' 3" (1.4 × 3.7 m). Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Tompkins Collection. Arthur Gordon Tompkins Fund.

### Van Gogh

Whereas Gauguin was an iconoclast, caustic in speech, cynical, indifferent, and at times brutal to others, **Vincent van Gogh** (1853–90) was filled with enthusiasm for his fellow artists and an, at times overwhelming, love for humanity. This impulse toward compassion had led him, after a short-lived experience as an art dealer and an attempt to follow theological studies, to become a lay preacher in a Belgian coal-mining area. There, in 1880, he first began to draw. After study in Brussels, The Hague, and Antwerp, he went to Paris in 1886, where he met Seurat, Signac, and Gauguin, as well as members of the original Impressionist group.

In his early drawings, Van Gogh revealed his roots in traditional Dutch landscape, portrait, and genre painting, using the same perspective structures, and depicting the broad fields and low-hanging skies that the seventeenth-century artists had portrayed. Van Gogh never abandoned perspective even in later years, when he developed a style with great emphasis on the linear movement of paint over the surface of the canvas. For him—and this is already apparent in his early drawings—landscape itself had an expressive, emotional significance.

After his exposure to the Impressionists in Paris, Van Gogh changed and lightened his palette. Indeed, he discovered his deepest single love in color—brilliant, unmodulated color—which in his hands took on a character radically different from the color of the Impressionists. Even when he used Impressionist techniques, the peculiar intensity of his vision gave the result a specific and individual quality that could never be mistaken for any other painter's.

The intensity in Van Gogh's art arose from his overpowering response to the world in which he lived and to the people he knew. His emotional problems are, though not well understood, a famous part of his larger-than-life reputation as it developed during the twentieth century. Such episodes as the incident in which he sliced off part of his ear during Gauguin's visit have overshadowed a reasoned

understanding of his work. More than any other artist, Van Gogh has come to typify the figure of the lone artist-genius, spurned and misunderstood by society. This legend is only partly borne out by the more complex reality of his life and work. Van Gogh may have suffered from a neurological disorder, perhaps a severe form of epilepsy, that was no doubt exacerbated by physical ailments and excessive drinking. As much as he wished to cultivate close relationships with other artists, especially Gauguin, his volatile personality rendered intimate associations difficult to maintain. He was prone to depression and suffered acutely during seizures, but he painted during long periods of lucidity, bringing tremendous intelligence and imagination to his work. His letters to his brother Theo, an art dealer who tried in vain to find a market for Vincent's work, are among the most moving and informative narratives by an artist that we have (see *Letter to Theo van Gogh*, below). They reveal his wide

#### SOURCE

### Vincent van Gogh from a letter to his brother Theo van Gogh, August 6, 1888

Today I am probably going to begin on the interior of the café where I have a room, by gas light, in the evening. It is what they call here a "café de nuit," staying open all night. "Night prowlers" can take refuge there when they have no money to pay for a lodging, or are too drunk to be taken in. All those things—family, native land—are perhaps more attractive in the imaginations of such people as us, who pretty well do without land or family either, than they are in reality. I always feel I am a traveler, going somewhere and to some destination. If I tell myself that the somewhere and the destination do not exist, that seems to me very reasonable and likely enough. The brothel keeper, when he kicks anyone out, has similar logic, argues as well, and is always right, I know. So at the end of my career I shall find my mistake. So be it. I shall find then that not only the Arts, but everything else as well, were only dreams, that one's self was nothing at all.

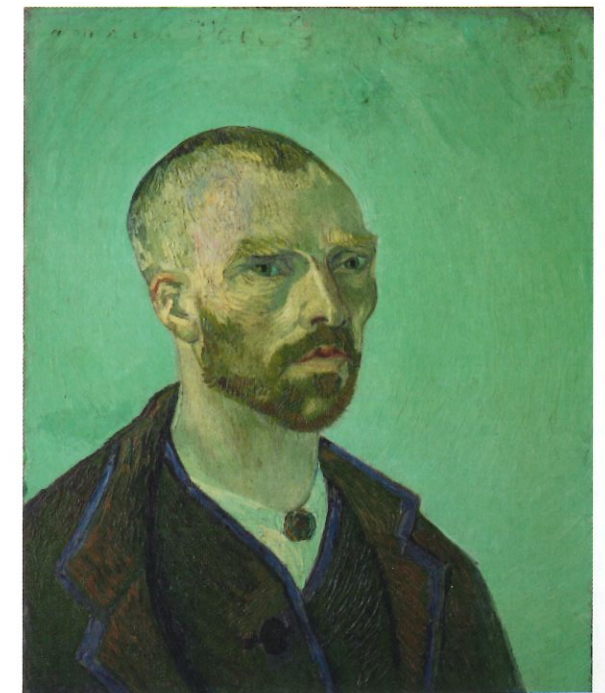


**3.26** Vincent van Gogh, *The Night Café*, 1888. Oil on canvas, 27½ × 35" (69.9 × 88.9 cm). Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven. Bequest of Stephen Carlton Clark, B.A. 1903.

knowledge of art and literature, and a highly sensitive perception that is fully equal to his emotional response. He was sharply aware of the extraordinary effects he was achieving through his expressive use of color. "Instead of trying to reproduce exactly what I have before my eyes, I use color more arbitrarily," he wrote, "in order to express myself forcibly." Echoing the Symbolist ideas of Gauguin, Van Gogh told Theo that he "was trying to exaggerate the essential and to leave the obvious vague."

Van Gogh could also present the darker side of existence. Thus, of *The Night Café* (fig. 3.26) he says: "I have tried to express the terrible passions of humanity by means of red and green." *The Night Café* is a nightmare of deep-green ceiling, blood-red walls, and discordant greens in the furniture. The perspective of the brilliant yellow floor is tilted so precipitously that the contents of the room threaten to slide toward the viewer. The result is a terrifying experience of claustrophobic compression that anticipates the Surrealist explorations of fantastic perspective, none of which has ever quite matched it in emotive force.

Vincent van Gogh carried on the great Dutch tradition of portraiture, from his first essays in drawing to his last self-portraits, painted a few months before his suicide in 1890. The intense *Self-Portrait* from 1888 was made in Arles and was dedicated to Gauguin (fig. 3.27). It formed part of an exchange of self-portraits among Van Gogh's artist friends to support his notion of an ideal brotherhood of painters. The beautifully sculptured head (which Van Gogh said



**3.27** Vincent van Gogh, *Self-Portrait*, dedicated to Paul Gauguin. 1888. Oil on canvas, 24½ × 20½" (62.2 × 52.1 cm). Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University Art Museums, Cambridge, MA. Bequest from the Maurice Wertheim Collection, Class of 1906.



**3.28** Vincent van Gogh, *The Starry Night*, 1889. Oil on canvas, 29 × 36¼" (73.7 × 92.1 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

View the Closer Look for *The Starry Night* on mysearchlab.com



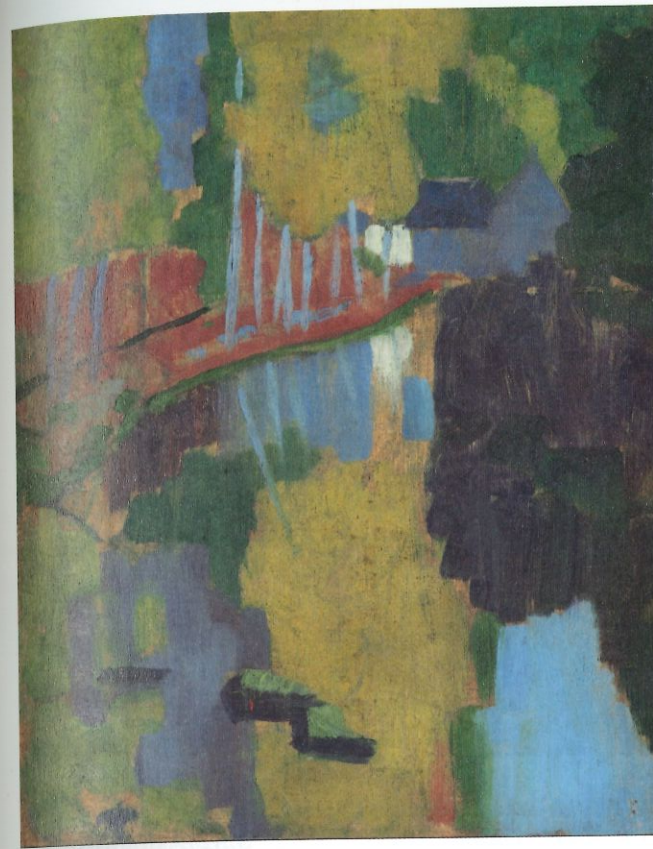
resembled that of a Buddhist monk) and the solidly modeled torso are silhouetted against a vibrant field of linear rhythms painted, according to the artist, in "pale malachite," akin to the monochrome backgrounds used by Northern Renaissance portraitists such as Lucas Cranach the Younger. The coloristic and rhythmic integration of all parts, the careful progression of emphases, from head to torso to background, all demonstrate an artist in superb control of his plastic means. "In a picture," he wrote to Theo, "I want to say something comforting as music. I want to paint men and women with that something of the eternal which the halo used to symbolize, and which we seek to give by the actual radiance and vibration of our colorings."

This conception of the eternal is represented in *The Starry Night* (fig. 3.28). This work was painted in June 1889 at the sanatorium of Saint-Rémy, in southern France, where Van Gogh had been taken after his second breakdown. The color is predominantly blue and violet, pulsating with the scintillating yellow of the stars. *The Starry Night* is both an intimate and a vast landscape, seen from a high vantage point in the manner of the sixteenth-century landscapist Pieter Bruegel the Elder. In fact, the peaceful village, with its prominent church spire, is a remembrance of a Dutch rather than a French town. The great poplar tree in the foreground shudders before our eyes, while above whirl and explode all the stars and planets of the universe. Van Gogh was intrigued by the idea of painting a nocturnal landscape from his imagination. Scholars have tried to explain the content of the painting through literature, astronomy,

and religion. Although their studies have shed light on Van Gogh's interests, none has tapped a definitive source that accounts for the astonishing impact of this painting, which today ranks among the most famous works of art ever made. The defining quality of Van Gogh's paintings is that, as much as they depart from observed reality, they arise from a touch as meticulous as though the artist were painfully and exactly copying what he was observing before his eyes.

### A New Generation of Prophets: The Nabis

Paul Sérusier (1863–1927), one of the young artists under Gauguin's spell at Pont-Aven, experienced something of an epiphany when the older master undertook to demonstrate his method during a painting session in a picturesque wood known as the Bois d'Amour: "How do you see these trees?" Gauguin asked. "They are yellow. Well then, put down yellow. And that shadow is rather blue. Render it with pure ultramarine. Those red leaves? Use vermilion." This permitted the mesmerized Sérusier to paint a tiny work on a cigar-box cover (fig. 3.29), which proved so daring in form, even verging on pure abstraction, that the artist and his friends thought it virtually alive with supernatural power. And so they entitled the painting *The Talisman* and dubbed themselves the Nabis, from the Hebrew name for "prophet." The Nabis were a somewhat eclectic group of artists whose principal contributions—with some outstanding exceptions—lay in a synthesizing approach to masters



**3.29** Paul Sérusier, *The Talisman* (Landscape of the Bois d'Amour), 1888. Oil on wood cigar-box cover, 10½ × 8¾" (26.7 × 21.3 cm). Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

of the earlier generation, not only to Seurat but also to Cézanne, Redon, and Gauguin; particularly the last, for his art theory as well as the direct example of his painting.

Gauguin had been affected by the ideas of his young friend Émile Bernard when the two were working together in Pont-Aven in the summer of 1888. He derived important elements of his style from Bernard's notion of *cloisonnisme*, a style based on medieval enamel and stained-glass techniques. Certainly, the arbitrary, nondescriptive color, the flat areas of color bounded by dark, emphatic contours, the denial of depth and sculptural modeling—all stated by Gauguin in *Vision after the Sermon* (see fig. 3.22)—were congenial to and influential for the Nabis.

The group included Sérusier, Maurice Denis, Pierre Bonnard, Paul Ranson, and later Aristide Maillol, Édouard Vuillard, Félix Vallotton, Ker-Xavier Roussel, and Armand Séguin. The Nabis epitomized the various interests and enthusiasms of the end of the century. Among these were literary tendencies toward organized theory and elaborate celebrations of mystical rituals. Denis and Sérusier wrote extensively on the theory of

modern painting; and Denis was responsible for the formulation of the famous phrase, "a picture—before being a warhorse, a female nude, or some anecdote—is essentially a flat surface covered with colors assembled in a particular order." The Nabis sought a synthesis of all the arts through continual activity in architectural painting, the design of glass and decorative screens, book illustration, poster design, and stage design for the advanced theater of Ibsen, Maurice Maeterlinck, Strindberg, Wilde, and notably Alfred Jarry's shocking satirical farce *Ubu Roi* ("King Ubu", see Ch. 14, p. 320).

### Vuillard and Bonnard

Édouard Vuillard (1868–1940) and Pierre Bonnard exemplify the spirit and aims of the Nabis. Their long working lives linked the art of *fin-de-siècle* France to the mid-twentieth century. Both were much admired; their reputations, however, were for a long time private rather than public. Their world is an intimate one, consisting of corners of the studio, the living room, the familiar view from the window, and portraits of family and close friends. In his early works Vuillard used the broken paint and small brushstroke of Seurat or Signac, but without their rigorous scientific methods. In *Woman in Blue with Child* (fig. 3.30) he portrayed the Parisian apartment of Thadée Natanson, co-founder of *La Revue Blanche*, and his famously beautiful and talented wife, Misia, who is depicted in the painting playing with her niece. As was often his practice, Vuillard probably used his own photograph of the apartment as an *aide-mémoire* while working up his composition. It is a typical turn-of-the-century interior, sumptuously decorated with flowered wallpaper, figured upholstery, and ornaments. In Vuillard's hands, the interior became a dazzling surface pattern of muted blues, reds, and yellows, comparable to a Persian painting in its harmonious richness.



**3.30** Édouard Vuillard, *Woman in Blue with Child*, c.1899. Oil on cardboard, 19½ × 22¼" (48.6 × 56.5 cm). Glasgow Art Gallery and Museum, Kelvingrove.

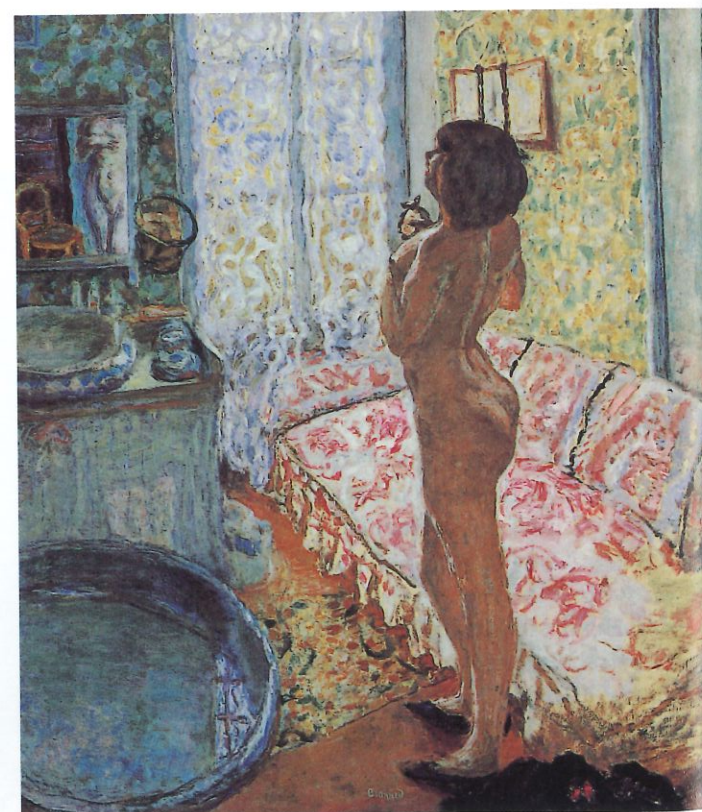




**3.31** Pierre Bonnard, *Promenade of the Nursemaids, Frieze of Fiacres*, 1899. Color lithograph on four panels, each 54 × 18 3/4" (137.2 × 47.6 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

at his most *japoniste* and decorative. At the same time, the figures of mother and children, the three heavily caped nurses, and the marching line of fiacres, or carriages, reveal a touch of gentle satire that well characterizes the penetrating observation Bonnard combined with a brilliant simplicity of design. Like his fellow Nabis, Bonnard believed in eliminating barriers between the popular decorative arts and the high-art traditions of painting and sculpture. He envisioned an art of "everyday application" that could extend to fans, prints, furniture, or, in this case, color litho.

In *Nude against the Light* (fig. 3.32), Bonnard has moved from the public sphere of Parisian streets to the intimate world of the nude in a domestic interior, a subject he exploited throughout his career as a means to investigate light and color. Bonnard silhouetted the model, his



**3.32** Pierre Bonnard, *Nu à contre jour (Nude against the Light)*, 1908. Oil on canvas, 49 × 42 1/2" (124.5 × 108 cm). Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels.

Space may be indicated by the tilted perspective of the chaise longue and the angled folds of the standing screen, but the forms of the woman and child are flattened so as to be virtually indistinguishable from the surrounding profusion of patterns. Such quiet scenes of Parisian middle-class domesticity have been called *intimiste*; in them, the flat jigsaw puzzle of conflicting patterns generates shimmering after-images that seem to draw from everyday life an ineffable sense of strangeness and magic.

Of all the Nabis, **Pierre Bonnard** (1867–1947) was the closest to Vuillard, and the two men remained friends until the latter's death. Like Vuillard, Bonnard lived a quiet and unobtrusive life, but whereas Vuillard stayed a bachelor, Bonnard early became attached to a young woman whom he ultimately married in 1925. It is she who appears in so many of his paintings, as a nude bathing or combing her hair, or as a shadowy but ever-present figure seated at the breakfast table, appearing at the window, or boating on the Seine.

After receiving training both in the law and in the fine arts, Bonnard soon gained a reputation making lithographs, posters, and illustrated books. His most important early influences were the work of Gauguin and Japanese prints. The impact of the latter can be seen in his adaptation of the *japoniste* approach to the tilted spaces and decorative linear rhythms of his paintings. But from the beginning Bonnard also evinced a love of paint texture. This led him from the relatively subdued palette of his early works to the full luminosity of high-keyed color rendered in fragmented brushstrokes, a development that may well owe something to both the late works of Monet and the Fauve paintings of Matisse.

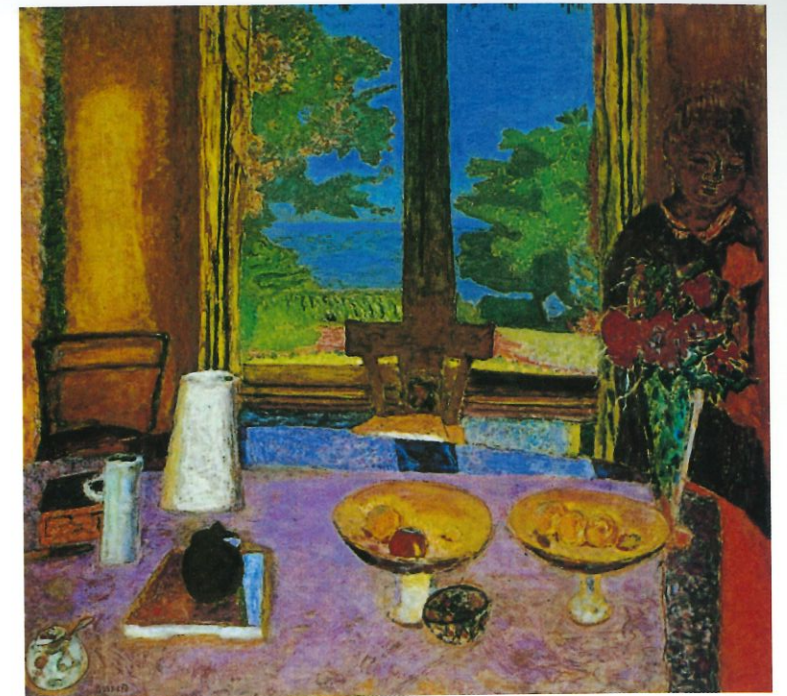
The large folding screen *Promenade of the Nursemaids, Frieze of Fiacres* (fig. 3.31) is made up of four lithographs, based on a similarly painted screen. With its tilted perspectives and abbreviated, silhouetted forms, it shows Bonnard

ever-youthful wife Marthe, against the sun-drenched surfaces of her boudoir. Light falls through the tall French windows, strongly illuminating the side of the woman turned from our view but visible in the mirror at left.

This use of reflections to enlarge and enrich the pictorial space, to stand as a picture within a picture, became a common strategy of Bonnard's as well as Matisse's interiors (see fig. 11.10). But in its quiet solemnity and complete absence of self-consciousness, Bonnard's nude is deeply indebted to the precedent of Degas's bathers, even to the detail of the round tub (see fig. 2.35). Like those of the older artist, Bonnard's composition is disciplined and complex, carefully structured to return the eye to the solid form of the nude, which he surrounds with a multitude of textures, shapes, and colors. But Bonnard creates an expressive mood all his own. As she douses herself with perfume, the model seems almost transfixed by the warm, radiant light that permeates the scene.

Bonnard's color became progressively brighter. By the time he painted *Dining Room on the Garden*, in 1934–35 (fig. 3.33), he had long since recovered the entire spectrum of luminous color, and had learned from Cézanne that color could function constructively as well as sensually. In this ambitious canvas Bonnard tackled the difficult problem of depicting an interior scene with a view through the window to a garden beyond, setting the isolated, geometric forms of a tabletop still life against a lush exterior landscape. Now the model, his wife Marthe, is positioned to one side, an incidental and ghostly presence in this sumptuous display. By the mid-1930s, virtually all the great primary revolutions of twentieth-century painting had already occurred, including Fauvism, with its arbitrary, expressive color, and Cubism, with its reorganization of Renaissance pictorial space. Moreover, painting had found its way to pure abstraction in various forms. Perfectly aware of all this, Bonnard was nonetheless content to go his own way. In the work seen here, for instance, there is evidence that he had looked closely at Fauve and Cubist paintings, particularly the works of Matisse—who was a devoted admirer—and had used what he wanted of the new approaches without at any time changing his basic attitudes.

While some Post-Impressionists like Gauguin and Van Gogh preferred to work in isolation or in the company of one or two like-minded colleagues, others, such as the Nabis, sought to develop new organizations that might provide the practical as well as moral support artists enjoyed when affiliated with a traditional academy or guild. Neo-Impressionism, the quasi-scientific handling of color created by Seurat and Signac, made its appearance in 1884, when a number of artists who were to be associated with the movement exhibited together at the Groupe des Artistes Indépendants in Paris. Later that year the Société des Artistes Indépendants was organized through the efforts of Seurat, Henri-Edmond Cross, Redon, and others, and was to become important to the advancement of early twentieth-century art as an exhibition forum. Also important were the exhibitions of Les XX (Les Vingt, or "The Twenty")



**3.33** Pierre Bonnard, *Dining Room on the Garden*, 1934–35. Oil on canvas, 50 1/4 × 53 1/2" (127.3 × 135.9 cm). Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.

in Brussels. Van Gogh, Gauguin, Toulouse-Lautrec, and Cézanne exhibited at both the Indépendants and Les XX. James Ensor, Henry van de Velde, and Jan Toorop exhibited regularly at Les XX and its successor, La Libre Esthétique, whose shows became increasingly dominated first by the attitudes of the Neo-Impressionists and then by the Nabis.

*La Revue Blanche*, a magazine founded in 1891, became one of the chief organs of expression for Symbolist writers and painters, the Nabis, and other artists of the avant-garde. Bonnard, Vuillard, Denis, Vallotton, and Toulouse-Lautrec (who was never officially a Nabi, although associated with the group) all made posters and illustrations for the magazine, which was a meeting ground for experimental artists and writers from every part of Europe, among them Van de Velde, Edvard Munch, Marcel Proust, André Gide, Ibsen, Strindberg, Wilde, Maxim Gorky, and Filippo Marinetti.

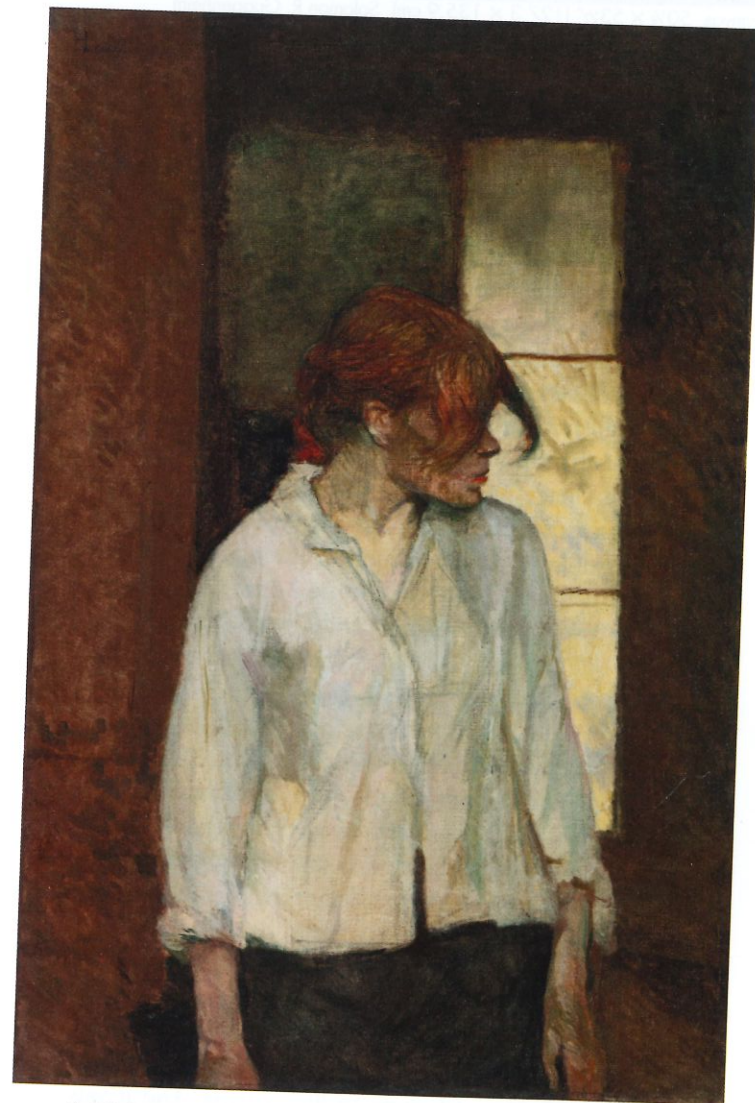
## Montmartre: At Home with the Avant-Garde

Just outside the nineteenth-century Paris city limits was the butte of Montmartre, a district where working-class Parisians driven from their neighborhoods by Haussmannization could find affordable housing. Dance halls and cabarets also proliferated in Montmartre, where alcohol was cheaper thanks to the absence of the city's liquor taxes. This combination of affordability and relaxed social mores made the district attractive to artists as well as dancers, singers, and prostitutes. By the 1880s, Montmartre had replaced the Latin Quarter as the center of bohemian life in Paris. And it was in Montmartre that **Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec** (1864–1901) found the subjects for his remarkable lithographs.



Although Toulouse-Lautrec may be seen as the heir of Daumier in the field of printmaking, he also served, along with his contemporaries Gauguin and Van Gogh, as one of the principal bridges between nineteenth-century avant-garde painting and the early twentieth-century experiments of Edvard Munch, Pablo Picasso, and Henri Matisse. Lautrec was interested in Goya and the line drawings of Ingres, but he was above all a passionate disciple of Degas, both in his admiration of Degas's draftsmanship and in the disengaged attitude and calculated formal strategies that he brought to the depiction of his own favorite subjects—the theaters, brothels, and bohemian cabarets of Paris.

Because of years of inbreeding in his old, aristocratic family, Lautrec was permanently disfigured from a congenital disease that weakened his bones. Against his family's wishes, he pursued art as a profession after receiving an education in the private Parisian studios of Léon Bonnat and Fernand Cormon, painters who provided students with a more open and tolerant atmosphere than that found in the École des Beaux-Arts. In Cormon's studio Lautrec met Bernard and Van Gogh, both of whom he rendered in early portraits.

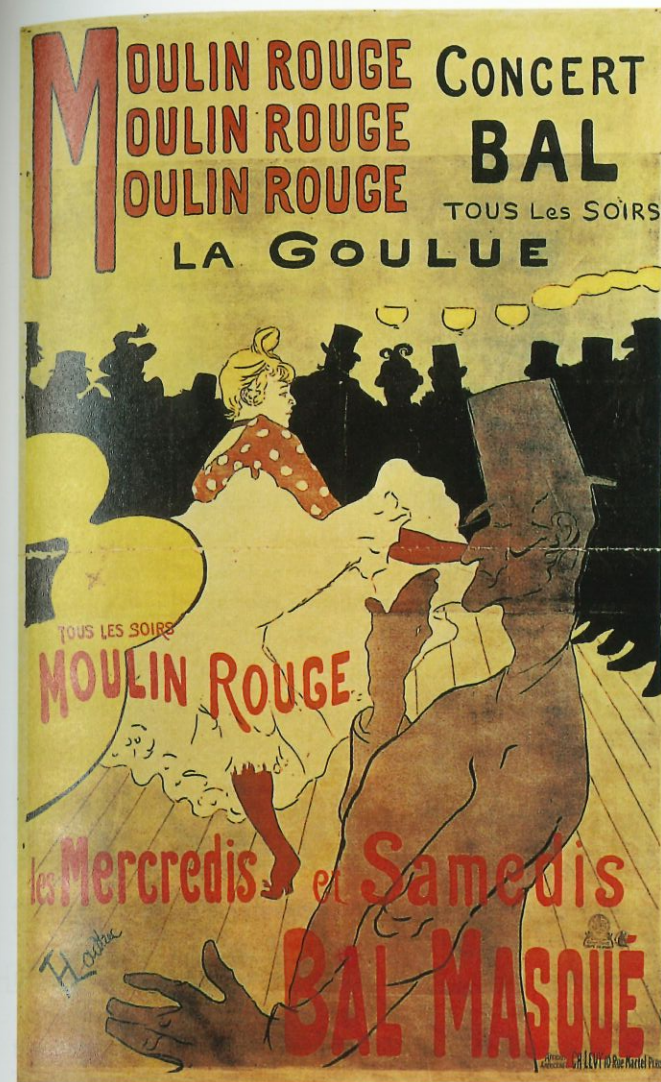


**3.34** Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, "À Montrouge"—Rosa La Rouge, 1886–87. Oil on canvas,  $28\frac{1}{2} \times 19\frac{1}{4}$ " (72.4 × 48.9 cm). The Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

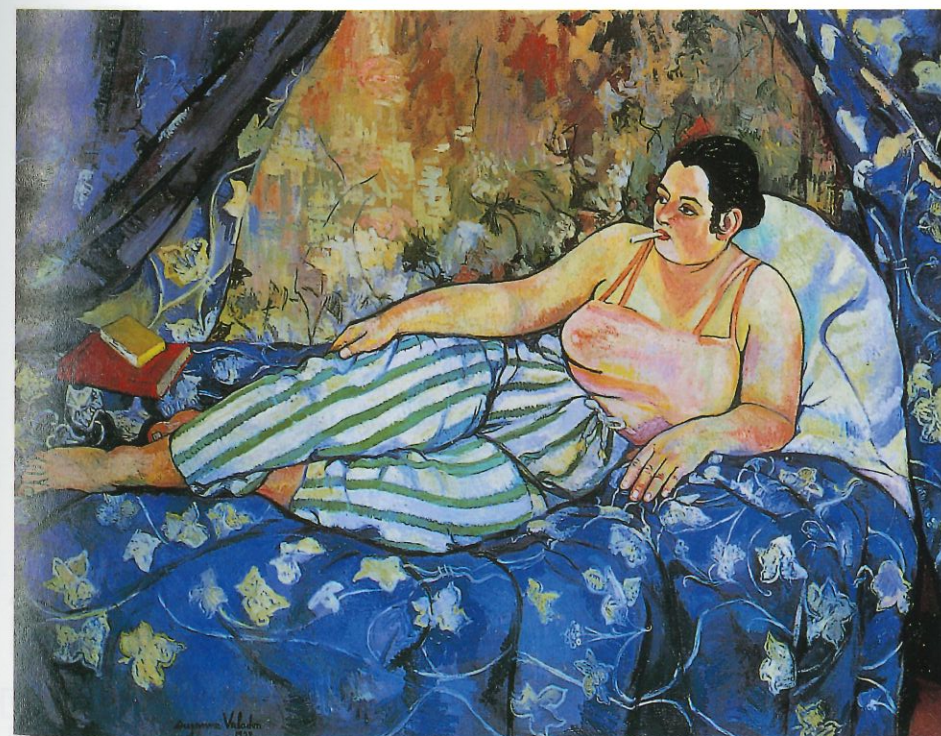
Lautrec is best known for his 1890s color lithographs of performers in Montmartre dance halls; his inventive and striking graphic style elevated poster design to the realm of avant-garde art, a shift in the perception of ephemeral works that would influence generations of progressive artists. But before devoting himself largely to graphic works, he had already proved himself to be a sensitive portraitist with paintings and drawings of a colorful cast of characters, including Carmen Gaudin, the woman portrayed in "À Montrouge"—Rosa La Rouge (fig. 3.34). The artist was drawn to the simple clothes, unruly red hair, and tough look of this young working-class woman, who, arms dangling informally, averts her face as she is momentarily silhouetted against the lighted window. Lautrec creates this simplified composition out of his characteristically long strokes of color in warm, subdued tonalities. But the somber mood of the painting has also to do with its subject. Lautrec's painting was inspired by a gruesome song written by his bohemian friend, the famous cabaret singer Aristide Bruant, about a prostitute who conspires to kill her clients.

The naturalism of Lautrec's early portraits gave way in the 1890s to the brightly colored and stylized works that make his name synonymous with turn-of-the-century Paris. His earliest lithographic poster, designed for the notorious dance hall called the Moulin Rouge (fig. 3.35), features the scandalous talents of La Goulue ("the greedy one"), a dancer renowned for her gymnastic and erotic interpretations of the *chahut*, the dance that had attracted Seurat in 1889 (see fig. 3.3). Lautrec's superb graphic sensibility is apparent in the eye-catching shapes that, albeit abbreviated, were the result of long observation.

At least as familiar as Toulouse-Lautrec with the district of Montmartre was Suzanne Valadon (1867–1939). Born in central France, she was the child of a peasant woman who moved with her infant daughter to Montmartre. As a teenager, Valadon joined the circus as a performer but soon left because of an injury. She became a popular model in a neighborhood filled with artists, posing for Toulouse-Lautrec as well as Puvis, Renoir, and Degas. An instinctive aptitude for drawing enabled this self-taught artist to achieve a remarkable degree of success in the male-dominated art world of the time. By the 1890s, some of her drawings had even been purchased by Degas, who introduced her to the technique of etching. Valadon made still lifes and the occasional landscape, but the bulk of her oeuvre was devoted to portraits and nudes. *Woman at her Toilet* (fig. 3.36) reveals her familiarity with Degas's images of bathers, yet departs from his treatment of them in her emphatic use of contour line and the unselfconscious intimacy of the two women, one of whom gently combs through the hair of the other. Here, the scene of women bathing avoids falling into the hackneyed territory of voyeuristic fantasy and instead conveys the dignity of its working-class subjects. In her paintings, Valadon embraced the intense color of her Post-Impressionist contemporaries while continuing to explore the body as the locus of physical as well as emotional intensity. The figure in her *Blue Room* (fig. 3.37) assumes a traditional odalisque



**3.35** Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Moulin Rouge—La Goulue*, 1891. Color lithograph,  $6' 3\frac{1}{4}" \times 4'$  (1.9 × 1.2 m). Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



**3.37** Suzanne Valadon, *Blue Room*, 1923. Oil on canvas,  $35\frac{1}{2} \times 45\frac{1}{2}"$  (90 × 115.9 cm). Musée National d'Art Moderne, Centre d'Art et de Culture Georges Pompidou, Paris.



**3.36** Suzanne Valadon, *Woman at her Toilet*, 1904–10. Tempera and pastel with white accent on paper,  $14\frac{1}{2} \times 14\frac{1}{2}"$  (36.4 × 37.4 cm). National Museum, Belgrade.

pose. But this forthright woman, unconventionally dressed in striped pants, has little in common with the bold courtesans of Manet (see fig. 2.21). Valadon's model follows intellectual pursuits (note the book on the bed), and she smokes a cigarette, hardly the habit of a "respectable" woman, even in 1923 when this work was completed. While her frank representations of a female subject recall depictions of prostitutes by her friend Toulouse-Lautrec, Valadon inventively places her unconventional odalisque in a richly decorative

space redolent with the *intimisme* of Vuillard's and Bonnard's scenes of quiet domestic life. She thus confounds the titillation of brothel imagery by merging it with the formal patterns and reassuring domestic imagery of the Nabis. Valadon's conception of the interior as a space where fantasy and reality might collide, commingle, or merge would find a literal counterpart in Art Nouveau architecture and design.