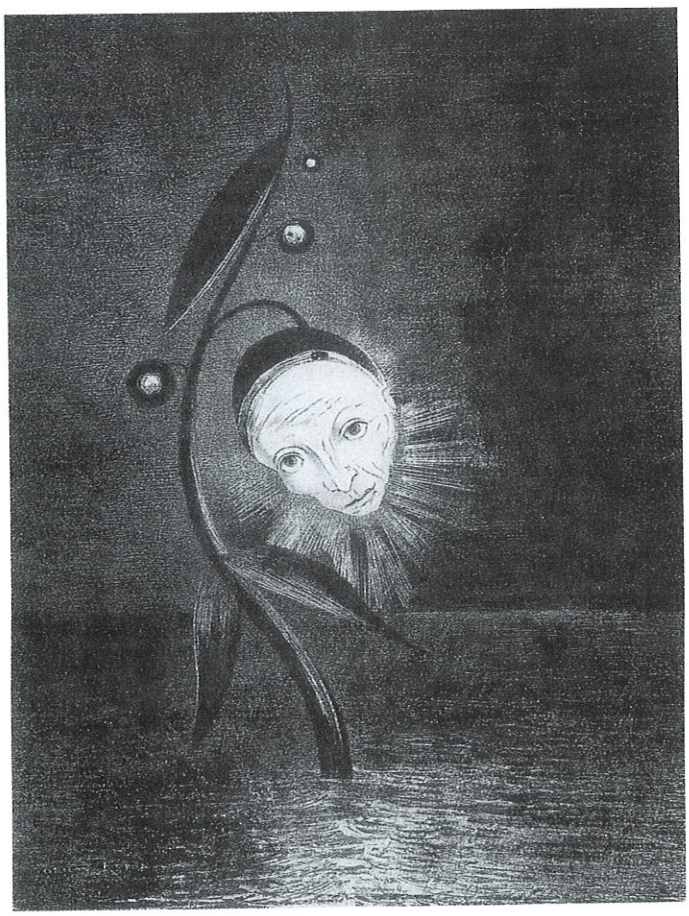

Fig. 428 **Odilon Redon**, *The Marsh Flower: A Sad, Human Face* (Plate 2 from *Homage to Goya*), 1885. Lithograph, printed in black, $10^{13}/_{16} \times 8''$. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

of Darwin. It is the latter, in fact, which offer the broad inspiration for the fantastic creature, as much sea serpent as primitive plant, that burgeons from the primordial ooze of Redon's imagination. Even stranger, one of its luminous buds has blossomed into a melancholic, disembodied head which, glowing radiantly within the bud's open crescent, almost metamorphoses into a fantastic eclipse in the night sky. One of Redon's closest friends in his native city of Bordeaux was a botanist, Armand Clavaud, who was knowledgeable about new concepts of biological evolution and who encouraged the artist to study the structure of living creatures, even those only visible through microscopes. Typically, Redon transformed these scientific images into private fantasies, so that here, studies of comparative biology or the evolution of man from the lowest forms of life born from the sea and nurtured by the sun are fused into an awesome hallucination. Extracting the terror and the wonder from the speculations of nineteenth-century scientists about the origins of life on this or any other planet, Redon even called one of his albums of prints *The Origins* (1883), creating a dreamworld counterpart to Darwin's *Origin of Species*. Redon's means are somewhat like Klinger's, insofar as he, too, depends on abrupt juxtapositions or fusions of literally described objects as well as on the frequent use of black to locate us in the immeasurable spaces of nocturnal fantasy; but his graphic techniques offer an infinitely more nuanced range of darkness in which the objects we recognize from the real world lose their palpability and, like phantoms, defy all laws of gravity. It was almost predictable that when, in 1895, Redon decided to turn from his beloved blacks and whites to color, he veered not only toward painting but toward pastel, a medium suitable to the blurred, granular ambience of his prints and drawings.

Although he was an exact contemporary of Monet, and in 1886 even participated in the last Impressionist exhibition, Redon, because of his slow artistic maturation was allied more closely to a younger generation which was gaining definition in the 1880s. Indeed, he helped to found and to direct the Indépendants in Paris, and his work was also shown with Les XX in Brussels, where, at the 1885 exhibition, his *Homage to Goya* must have found in Ensor a kindred spirit. His subjects, in fact, provide a rich cross-section of the concerns of a new generation drawn to the widest range of regressions and escapes from the material facts of middle-class life in the great urban centers of Europe: the organic forms of primitive, often microscopic creatures which would have so rich a legacy in twentieth-century art, from Miró to the early work of the Abstract Expressionists; the distant legends of St. Anthony as recounted by Flaubert or of the Nibelungenlied and Parsifal, as re-created in Wagner's music dramas, which were conquering Paris in the 1880s; the occult mysteries of Eastern religions or the Book of Revelation. Like so many late-nineteenth-century artists who gravitated toward the aesthetic of Symbolism or who, less programmatically, wished somehow to turn inward, Redon had to create a new visual language that might hover, float, and vanish but that could nevertheless stand in firm opposition to the Realist and Impressionist point of view that had ruled until the 1880s.

Paul Gauguin and the Origins of Symbolism

The most spectacular rejection of late nineteenth-century society in an artist's life and art is found in the biography and the work of Paul Gauguin (1848–1903). His nomadic movements, which carried him from his birthplace, Paris, to what he hoped would be ever more primitive and therefore more beautiful and harmonious societies, were synonymous with his search for a remote, unspoiled art that might revitalize the moribund traditions of the West. As a child, he had lived in Peru, with his mother's family, and as a teenager, he had sailed the seas again with the French navy. In 1871, back in Paris, Gauguin suddenly halted his

wanderer's life when he accepted the regimen of working in a stockbroking firm, where, for release, he began to paint in his spare time. By 1881, this amateur could even submit eight paintings to that year's Impressionist exhibition. Two years later, with enormous relief, he quit his job, with the liberating declaration: "From now on I will paint every day."

As might be expected, Gauguin's earliest canvases adapt the prevailing styles of the Impressionist masters, and he was included with them up till their last group exhibition of 1886. That winter he went to the village of Pont-Aven, which, for a new generation of painters, was becoming the Barbizon Forest of the 1880s, a remote spot near the southern coast of Brittany, where sophisticated Parisians hoped to find and usually did find what they presumed, incorrectly, to be a pre-industrial world untroubled by economic problems and inhabited by simple, pious, and picturesque peasants, whose crude but potent folk art could inspire a search for a comparable directness and honesty. Gauguin was to return there in 1888, but not before another ocean voyage. This time, in 1887, he went to Central America and the Caribbean, where he worked on the early construction of the Panama Canal, earning enough money for what would turn out to be a six-month sojourn in Martinique. There, in a foretaste of the South Pacific Garden of Eden to which he would sail in 1891, he was dazzled by the exotic people, the lush colors, the tropical foliage. Adapting the techniques of Impressionism to a totally different climate and vegetation, he would try, as in *Martinique Landscape* (see fig. 431), to capture this paradise. Scattered here and there are the mottled brushstrokes of his Parisian colleagues, but these seem inadequate to represent a fairy-tale Caribbean vista, where the sunlit colors of the sea, of blossoming fruit and plants demanded another palette and another way of applying paint. Throughout, there are tentative efforts in a counter-Impressionist direction—the appearance of incisive contours that keep color in place, the attenuated decorative rhyming of the paired branches of the tall papaya tree at the left, the general heightening of hue that reaches its most intense pitch in the deep blue sea, and the push toward a patterned, shadowless flatness that brings even the distant contour of the mountain in close touch with the foreground vegetation. For a Westerner's eyes, such a landscape was almost mythical, an exotic escape or a place of strange legends and rituals. To depict it meant forging a new style that would have to break definitively with the Realist premises Gauguin had accepted in Paris.

It was in 1888 that such a style was clearly defined, not in exotic Central America, but back in Brittany, in Pont-Aven, where Gauguin worked in close contact with a painter of the next generation, Émile Bernard (1868–1941), whom he had briefly met there two years earlier. Scholars have argued about the priority and importance of Bernard's art in sparking Gauguin's own search for a personal language; but it is nonetheless clear that, by the fall of 1888, both painters were working in a common style that they hoped might convey not so much the seen world, but a more concealed world of ideas, of feelings, of a magic and mystery that seemed light-years away from the boulevards and department stores of Paris. They even coined a word, "Synthetism," to describe in somewhat vague, conceptual terms their new efforts to offer not a mirror image of the visible world but a more generalized synthetic image that would embody deeper, invisible meanings and emotions.

In Bernard's *Buckwheat Harvesters* (fig. 429), painted in September–October 1888 at Pont-Aven, the theme is familiar enough, a variant ultimately on Millet's by then canonic images of agricultural life. But these anonymous Breton peasants are painted as if they were illustrations to a folkloric legend, naïvely flattened and simplified against an intense orange-red ground that, instead of describing a particular wheat field during autumn harvest, conveys an almost primitive, synthetic idea of an enveloping environment of sunbaked earth. Nor are the figures any more individualized, the ruggedly stylized face in the foreground offering a basic type that can serve to evoke the other invisible faces. As for their toil, the standing and stooping motions seem decoratively locked in a bold pattern that freezes the strong oppositions of black and white, orange and yellow in a network of tough, clear outlines.

To create such a willfully simple style, which would reject the infinitely subtle techniques evolved by Realist and Impressionist painters in order to offer a facsimile of something directly perceived, Bernard and Gauguin found nourishment in styles as remote as possible from a modern, Positivist world and even talked about emulating the art of children. The repertory of sources consonant with this attack on post-Renaissance illusionism included Japanese prints; crude popular illustrations (especially the "images d'Épinal" of Brittany); the so-called primitives of Western painting, such as Giotto; the art of Egypt and Mesopotamia; many facets of medieval art, especially stained-glass windows, with their intense, luminous colors contained in the linear patterns of the leading, and cloisonné enamels, in which opaque, flat colors are similarly defined by metal partitions. It was the latter art form, in fact, which provided the visually descriptive term "Cloisonism," invented in 1888 by the critic Édouard Dujardin to describe the work of the painter Louis Anquetin, but easily expandable to include the analogous new styles developed in the circle of Gauguin and Bernard, as well as many aspects of the work of their mutual friend Van Gogh. Such sources of inspiration were not in themselves new to the 1880s. From the late eighteenth century on, artists as diverse as Flaxman and Manet had been able to absorb a wide variety of art that rejected the modeling and the fictive spaces of the Renaissance tradition. Yet this recurrent impulse in modern

Fig. 429 **Émile Bernard**, *Buckwheat Harvesters, Pont-Aven*, September–October 1888. Oil on canvas, 29¼ × 36". Collection Josefowitz, Switzerland.

painting found new impetus in the 1880s, at a time when so many artists found the prevailing values of late nineteenth-century society bankrupt. For Bernard's painting also conveys an outsider's romanticized awe of the unshaken faith and simple, harmonious cycles of peasant life, which here even have Christian overtones, the buckwheat of the harvest often being used for the Host of the Holy Communion.

It was the religious steadfastness of many Breton peasants that also attracted Bernard and Gauguin, who both aspired—through an immersion of what to them seemed an unpolluted culture miraculously preserved in modern France—to a virtual revival of Christian art. Already in September 1888, Gauguin had attempted a religious theme in the new Cloisonist style, a peasant's vision, inspired by a sermon, of Jacob wrestling with the Angel. Attempting to bridge the huge gulf between his self-conscious search for the primitive and the genuine naïveté of these Christian believers, he offered the painting to a local church, whose priest, suspicious and uncomprehending of Gauguin's holy image, refused it. Gauguin's religious paintings were, in fact, unorthodox in more ways than the sophisticated crudeness of their style. In the *Yellow Christ* (fig. 430), probably painted in September 1889, the Western traditions of painting Christ on the Cross are clearly undermined in what might be called a spectator approach to religion, a viewpoint already proposed in many Romantic images, from Friedrich on, of the adherents, the rituals, and the artifacts of Christianity. For here, Gauguin is, in effect, playing the role not of a believer who creates an image of the Crucifixion, but of an anthropologist-observer, impressed, as he put it, by "the great rustic and superstitious simplicity" of this time-capsule world where that remote Catholic faith which had been so drastically challenged in the nineteenth century still seemed to be preserved. Here the three Breton women, like modern Marys at the Cross, sit steadfastly,

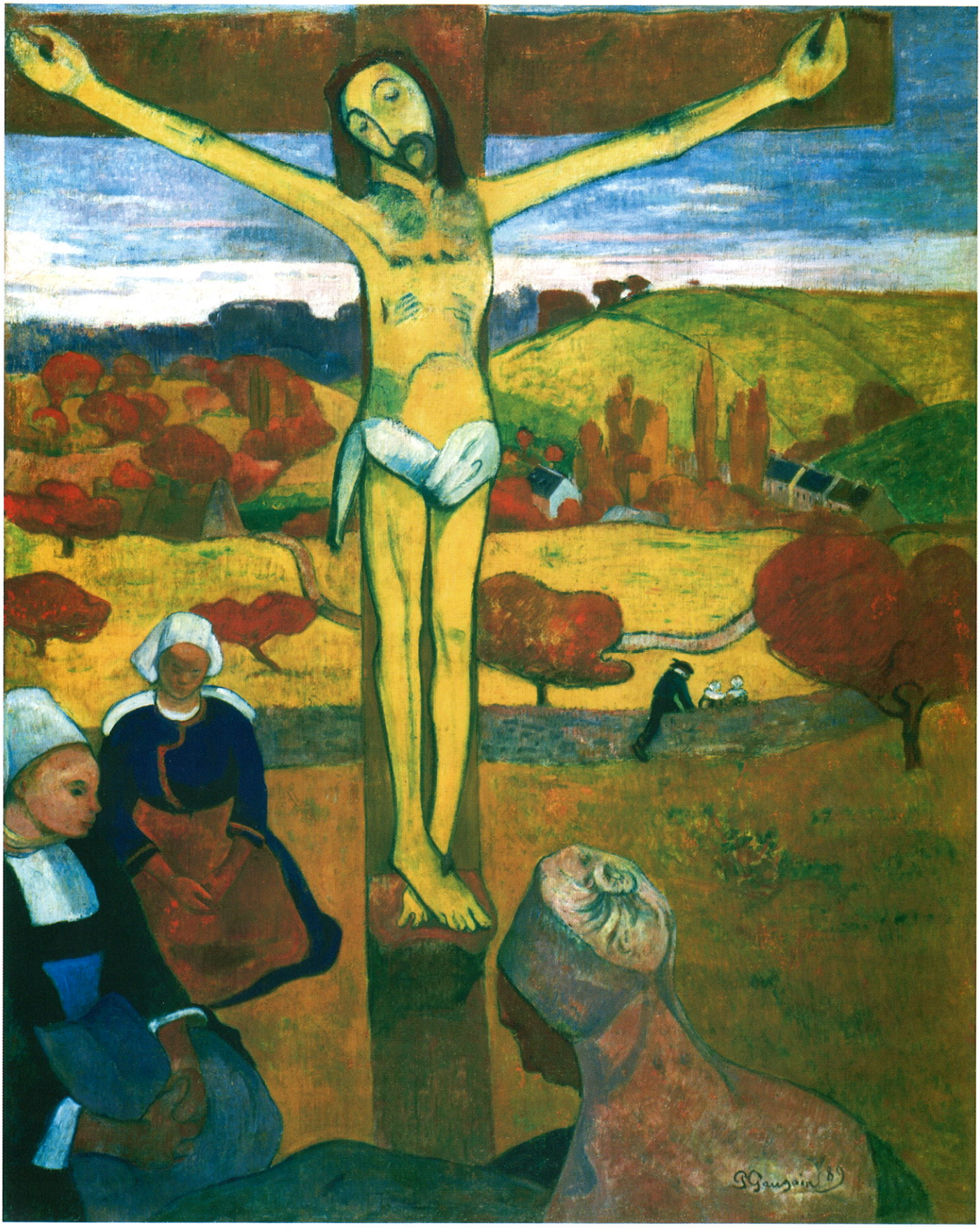

Fig. 430 **Paul Gauguin**, *Yellow Christ*, September 1889. Oil on canvas, 36⅜ × 28¾″.
Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, N.Y.

Fig. 431 **Paul Gauguin**, *Martinique Landscape*, 1887. Oil on canvas, 44½ × 33½". National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh.

their gaze inward, their hands clasped, beneath Gauguin's representation of an actual wooden crucifix hanging on the walls of a chapel at Trémalo. In a folkloric tradition, the crucifix was painted in colors, in this case a yellow tone for the flesh which Gauguin intensified in his pictorial re-creation. Inspired by this crude relic of a venerable faith, he let this golden yellow radiate throughout the landscape, which, as in the *Martinique Landscape* (fig. 431), rises upward at so steep an angle that the simplified contours marking out Christ's torso seem to fuse with the hills beyond. During his ill-fated, brief visit with Van Gogh in Arles the previous winter, Gauguin had written, "I have no use for shadows . . . since shadows are the *trompe l'oeil* of the sun, I am inclined to suppress them. . . . Put in shadows if you find them useful, or omit them, it is all the same." Here, confirming this revelation, the figures, real or carved, approach this shadowless, immaterial world, and the autumnal orange of the trees is transformed into decorative color cut-outs that convey, through their irregular contours, the sense of biomorphic vitality. Yet Gauguin, as he stated, also permitted himself the artistic license of inconsistency, far more so than Bernard, and he retains, as in the foreground rendering of the starched white Breton coif, passages of shadow (here pinkish-blue, the inheritance of

Impressionism). These vestiges of modeling not only alleviate what might otherwise be an inertly uniform flatness but also help to distinguish the quietly dramatic figures from their setting. Subtle and unorthodox, too, is Gauguin's off-center placement of the crucifix, an asymmetry alien to a primitive representation of so holy an object and one that underscores the viewer's position as a passing witness to a scene that, following Impressionist tradition, is cropped on all sides.

However fresh Gauguin's *Yellow Christ* may look as an almost mythic, childlike re-creation of a primitive age of faith, the impulses behind it were shared by other artists of far less pictorial daring. In the late 1870s, the Munich painter Wilhelm Leibl (1844–1900), who had been known mainly as a German disciple of Courbet, turned, as a refugee from the city, to the simpler and more pious world of the Bavarian peasantry. In *Three Women in Church* (fig. 432), which Leibl painstakingly worked on from 1878 to 1882 with endless sittings by local models, he expressed his attraction to these people, who preserved their folkloric costumes as they did their Christian rituals. As in the *Yellow Christ*, we are looking not so much at a religious painting as at a painting of people who are still religious; and again we see, as if from a passing angle of vision, a trio of peasant women (as usual, more observant than the men), rapt in the ancient faith inspired by their church and the holy texts they hold. The enduring character of this faith is further implied by the contrast of youth and old age, and we are only left to wonder, as in the case of Gauguin, whether the artist's attitude is one of charitable condescension toward people obviously less complicated than he was, or one of awe and envy at the sight of a faith so difficult to come by in a world of science and machines. The dilemma is like that of modern tourists who, watching a tribal ritual in, say, the South Seas, may be at once unhappy that they cannot experience the strength of so cohesive a religion but pleased that they are undoubtedly superior to, in Gauguin's phrase, this "superstitious simplicity." In Leibl's painting, that simplicity is also reflected in the scrupulous record of everything seen, so meticulously descriptive here that we may even read, magnifying glass in hand, the German Gothic script in the holy book. Such hyperrealism, as in the work of the Pre-Raphaelites, is intended to resurrect another kind of distant naïveté, the incisive drawing and truthful rendering of detail found in such German Renaissance masters as Holbein, whose clean, emblematic silhouetting of forms also attracted Bernard.

Fig. 432 **Wilhelm Leibl**, *Three Women in Church*, 1878–82. Oil on wood, 44½ × 30⅜". Kunsthalle, Hamburg.

Such regression to simpler styles and simpler societies was accompanied, especially in Gauguin's art, by a search for a comparable simplicity of emotion, in which fundamental human feelings of desire, of belief, of fear could be conveyed. For Gauguin, it was only one of the many inadequacies of Impressionism that it could not penetrate, with what he saw as its empirical, scientific orientation, "the mysterious centers of thought." Doubtless, the inward intensity of faith expressed by the Breton women at the base of the yellow Christ would be unimaginable were it painted in Monet's style of the 1880s. Gauguin's pursuit of these elemental human feelings, so thoroughly repressed by the respectable conventions of middle-class society, was constant; and when possible, he allied them to a no less elemental realm of myth and magic. In one of the most potent images of 1889, he resurrects, in his new 'Synthetist' language, the primal terror and shame of *Eve* (fig. 433). Cringing below a tree around which slithers the fateful serpent of sexuality, she holds her hands over her face and ears, as if shutting out the external world in order to be alone with her turbulent emotions. At opposite poles from Bonnat's *Job* (see fig. 374) in its rejection of the empirical world and in its crudely immediate projection of suffering, it is an image which depends on a strange relic from a remote culture, a Peruvian mummy that was exhibited in the 1880s in Paris's ethnological museum (now the Musée de l'Homme). Bound in a crouching position, its skeletal

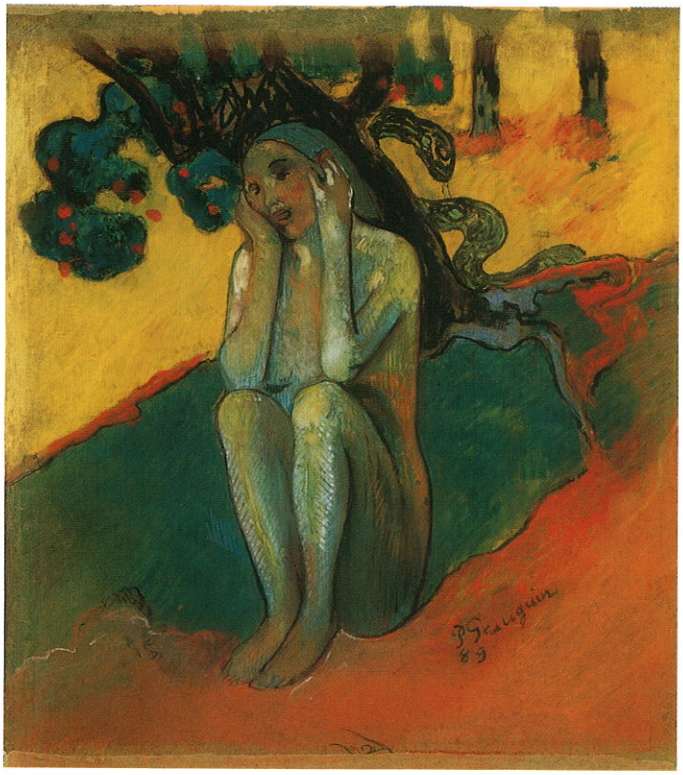

Fig. 433 **Paul Gauguin**, *Eve*, 1889. Watercolor and pastel on paper, 13¼ × 12¼". Marion Koogler McNay Art Institute, San Antonio, Texas.

arms and hands raised to the blank stare of a skull, it clearly attracted Gauguin as a chilling symbol of primitive terror, which could also be associated with his own ancestry, his mother's family being part Peruvian. His transformation of this grotesque anthropological exhibit was total, offering the experience of anguished guilt, the obverse side of that primitive paradise he also sought on this planet and in his art.

Such an image is both overtly simple and infinitely complex, choosing a consciously stark way of communicating the emotional equivalent of a soundless scream but also evoking with it an infinite number of associations within the viewer, not only of feeling, but of a whole structure of universal symbols that can range from folkloric tales of the loss of virginity to Milton's interpretation of it in *Paradise Lost*, both themes which Gauguin treated elsewhere. It was clear by the late 1880s that not only Gauguin, but many younger artists were pursuing these mysterious directions, and new words had to be coined to describe what was happening. Gauguin's and Bernard's Synthetism, Dujardin's Cloisonism were attempts to do this, but the more embracing word that stuck was Symbolism, as applied to the literary counterpart of these directions in a "Symbolist Manifesto" by Jean Moréas (whose portrait Gauguin would draw in 1891), published in 1886 in the widely read *Figaro Littéraire*. Moréas, claiming Baudelaire as the great prophet of the movement, found in such poets as Mallarmé, Verlaine, and De Banville the manifestations of this new aesthetic which would totally reject the everyday and the contemporary and move to a world of dreams, of nuances, of sensations. In a schematic summary, Moréas proposed that the new goals of Symbolism were "to objectify the subjective (the externalization of an idea) instead of subjectifying the objective (nature seen through the eyes of a temperament)," thereby reversing totally the premises of Realism. It was quickly realized that comparable ambitions could be found not only in the music dramas of Wagner but in the new novel by Huysmans. Published in 1884, *À Rebours* (Against Nature) turned its back on the writer's earlier viewpoint, allied with Zola's Naturalist accounts of Parisian life, in favor of an exploration of the decadent, world-weary sensibility of its hero, Jean des Esseintes, who, in the seclusion of a home that featured such artificial pleasures as a live tortoise with a jeweled shell, relished the strange art of Moreau and Redon. In March 1891, Georges-Albert Aurier tried to define these new currents in painting in an article in the *Mercure de France* which proclaimed Gauguin as the leader of the Symbolist movement and, in a heady series of conceptual imperatives, declared that this art should be "ideational, symbolic, synthetic, subjective, decorative," words which attempted to describe the various ways in which artists were trying to evoke invisible feelings, dreams, myths in what had to be a visible form, a painted surface whose growingly abstract and decorative character might somehow conjure up these ideas and sensations. Vague as it is, "Symbolism" has nevertheless remained the most useful umbrella term to cover the international manifestations, from the 1880s on, of these subjective pursuits.

It is certainly useful in describing Gauguin's continuing efforts to find in the most remote, exotic places a suitable environment in which to experience elemental emotions and to relive elemental myths. On April 4, 1891, after a farewell banquet presided over by Mallarmé and attended by many Symbolist painters and writers, he embarked at Marseilles for what he hoped would be the most geographically and culturally extreme distance from the modern world. The lure of the French colony of Tahiti, whose balmy, verdant landscape and primitive idols had already been painted by Hodges in 1776 (see fig. 2), had become legendary. Among many of Gauguin's contemporaries to go there was Pierre Loti, the French naval officer and travel writer; his visit, part of his lifelong wanderings over the seven seas, inspired *Rarahu* (1880), one of his many fictional accounts of an exotic world he knew firsthand. Gauguin's own voyage was preceded more immediately by those of the Scottish writer Robert Louis Stevenson (1889) and of two Americans, the historian Henry Adams and his friend the painter John La Farge (1890). But for Gauguin, the distant journey was envisioned as a totally personal commitment in his art and in his life to a civilization which,

GAUGUIN, REPRISED ROMANTICISM, AND CHRISTIAN SYMBOLISM

Paul Gauguin's Yellow Christ *(see fig. 430) combined Synthetism, Cloisonism, medievalism, primitivism, and a personal content linked to earlier Romantic art. Writer Claire Frèches-Thory drew out this aspect of the picture:*

> The work aroused the enthusiasm of the writer and critic Octave Mirbeau, who heaped it with praise in a long article for the *Echo de Paris* ... : "A rich, disturbing blend of barbaric splendor, Catholic liturgy, Hindu reverie, Gothic imagery, obscure and subtle symbolism." Mirbeau was especially struck by the wistful atmosphere of Gauguin's painting, the dramatic sky reflecting the artist's state of mind at this time of financial and emotional despair. During the period Gauguin was representing himself as the new Christ of painting; he also featured this canvas in the background of a self-portrait in which appeared a rendering of his ceramic with a grotesque head.[76]

This self-identification with Christ, so persistent in his work in Brittany, gave way to a very different conception of Christian symbolism during his time living in the South Seas. Ia Orana Maria *(see fig. 434) brings these new ideas to life. Gauguin described this picture to Daniel de Monfried, a friend and collector of his work, in a letter sent to Paris dated March 11, 1892:*

> An angel with yellow wings reveals Mary and Jesus, Tahitians just the same, to two Tahitian women—nudes dressed in *pareus*, a sort of cotton cloth printed with flowers that can be draped as one likes from the waist. Very somber mountainous background and flowering trees. Dark violet path and emerald green foreground, with bananas at the left—I'm rather happy with it.[77]

Just as in the earlier Yellow Christ *Gauguin faithfully reproduced the hill of Sainte-Marguerite that rises over the village of Pont-Aven, and the wooden cross from the chapel of Trémalo, in* Ia Orana Maria, *he floods the picture with particulars of his surroundings in Tahiti, as described by Frèches-Thory:*

> ... thatched boathouses in the distance range along pink-tinted sands; coconut palms, a breadfruit tree, hibiscus plants dotted with red flowers and, in the foreground at left, a *tiare moorea* with sweet-scented white blossoms. To stress further the natural bounty of Tahiti, Gauguin added an exotic still life in the foreground. A little wooden altar, or *fata*, is overladen with a bunch of *fei*, or wild red bananas, a great delicacy, as well as two globes of breadfruit and a native bowl filled with *maia*, or yellow bananas. As if the intensely colored *pareus* worn by the women did not fully satisfy Gauguin's rapacity for color, he imagined how an angel might dress in this faraway land and added a figure in a deep lavender gown with yellow, blue, and purple wing feathers.[78]

On August 30, 1893, Gauguin returned to France from Tahiti, landing at Marseilles with four francs on his person. In November he exhibited some fifty works of art at Paul Durand-Ruel's Paris gallery. Ia Orana Maria *was listed first in the catalogue. It was one of only eleven works that sold, bringing 2000 francs from Michel Manzi, an important collector and friend of Degas. In 1895 Gauguin returned to the South Seas, his imagined paradise, and never again went back to France.*

as in a dream of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, might represent mankind in an unspoiled state.

In his first year in Tahiti, 1891, Gauguin painted an extraordinary tribute to the universality of religion and myth that he had intuited in Brittany, a work on which he inscribed "Ia Orana Maria," a translation into the Maori language of the words "Ave Maria," spoken by Gabriel to the Virgin (fig. 434). This luxuriant image of the tropical paradise dreamed of by Westerners brings with it the viewpoints of a missionary, an anthropologist, and a myth-maker. Resplendent in blue and yellow wings, the Tahitian Angel of the Annunciation floats above the pure white flowers of a young tree and points out to two native women, bare-breasted in their cotton waistcloths (called *pareus*), the vision—or is it a reality?—of a naked infant Jesus seated on the shoulder of his mother, Mary, who also wears a *pareu* but one which covers her breasts. We can guess what Gauguin would have thought of Courbet's quip, "Show me an angel and I will paint one."

Gauguin's idea here continues and complicates the religious images of Brittany, for now the Christian world is translated into Polynesian terms. The foreground still life of exotic fruits may evoke not only the gifts of the Magi but the offerings Tahitians made to the idols of their own Maori religion, whose legends Gauguin was then studying and illustrating in a manuscript he called *L'Ancien culte maori* (The Ancient Maori Religion). Here, the serene, harmonious messages of Christian art and belief, so challenged in Gauguin's century, seem resurrected in a terrestrial paradise freed of guilt, freed of ugly materialism, and freed of an earthbound Realist style that could in no way have evoked such ineffable mysteries. As in medieval Christian art, which Gauguin, like Bernard, had so often admired for its combination of decorativeness and spirituality, abstract symbols can coexist with images, so that the two interlocking haloes of the Virgin and Child seem as compatible with this mythic environment as the words inscribed below on the yellowish ground, the secular counterpart of the gold

Fig. 434 **Paul Gauguin**, *Ia Orana Maria (Ave Maria)*, 1891. Oil on canvas, 44¾ × 34½". The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

Fig. 435 **Paul-Élie Ranson**, *Christ and Buddha*, c. 1890. Oil on canvas, 26¼ × 20¼". Private collection.

ground used in the art of the Middle Ages. Moreover, at the 1889 Paris Exposition Universelle, where Javanese gamelan players also inspired Debussy to more nuanced, exotic musical sonorities and harmonies, Gauguin had bought photographs of the sculptural reliefs of the Buddhist temple of Borobudur in Java and, carrying them with him to Tahiti, would use them there as sources for the gracefully rhyming postures of the two Tahitian worshipers, the exotic counterparts of the Three Magi. Fulfilling so many Symbolist goals, this gorgeous decorative surface, which seems composed of the very bounty of nature's paradise and which absorbs every color of the tropical rainbow, evokes a multitude of dense associations—the mysteries of Eastern and Western religions, the cyclical fertility of the soil and of its human inhabitants, the possiblity of finding in spirit or in geographic fact a paradise on earth.

As original in idea and sumptuous in result as it is, *Ia Orana Maria* was hardly unique in its mystical wedding of supernatural beliefs from the opposite sides of our planet. Already in 1888, in Paris, a younger group of artists, excited by contact with Gauguin's Breton paintings, banded together in a kind of secret society and called themselves Nabis, from the Hebrew word for prophet. Choosing for their very name an exotic, Near Eastern word, they explored, like devout students of comparative religion, the occult, supernatural aspects of Eastern faiths. In this, they belonged to the late nineteenth century's welling revival of spiritualist doctrines, including the cult of Theosophy, launched in New York in 1875 by the Russian, Mme. Helena Blavatsky and rapidly proselytized in Europe; and the Rosicrucian society, whose esoteric concern with mystical symbols and cabalistic writings also attracted many Westerners who wished the most total escape from earthly life in the capitals of Europe and America. In *Christ and Buddha* (**fig. 435**), a painting of c. 1890 by Paul-Élie Ranson (1862–1909), the Nabi most interested in such

occult matters, these crosscurrents are mystically depicted. In the background is the image of a crucified Christ which seems borrowed from Gauguin's *Yellow Christ* (see fig. 430), but this is worshiped by rows of Buddhist monks, whose own deity is represented twice in the seated figure, probably of Siamese origin, and in the huge head at the upper right, which resembles the buddhas at the Temple of Angkor-Wat in Cambodia. And to encompass still other universal religious symbols, the sacred lotus of Hinduism rises in the foreground and a phrase in Arabic, *furusiya nabiy*, which means a "knighthood of prophets" and refers to Ranson and the Nabis, is inscribed at the right. Of this group, which included the Neo-Catholic Maurice Denis and painters of a far less mystical persuasion, Vuillard and Bonnard (see pages 461–63), Ranson represented the most occult extreme. His scaleless, visionary world of floating deities and sacred symbols would proliferate in the even more vaporous and dreamlike fantasies that would soon be shown at the Rosicrucian Salons held in Paris between 1892 and 1897; and his espousal of Theosophic beliefs would find more consequential artistic issue in the work of the pioneers of abstraction, Kandinsky and Mondrian, whose rejection of the material world was also prompted by such mystical teachings.

Compared with Ranson's painting, even the most supernatural of Gauguin's Breton and Tahitian images look earthbound, the result of direct experience. In fact, in a manner that parallels Van Gogh's own fusion of art and life, Gauguin's work closely reflected his emotional and geographic biography. His last decade, which began in paradise, was troubled with medical, financial, and family problems. His return to Paris in 1893 was fraught with difficulties, from an unsuccessful show at Durand-Ruel's gallery to the theft of all his possessions by his Javanese mistress, Annah; and when he decided to go back to Tahiti in 1895, he was upset to find that Papeete had become yet more polluted by European infiltrations. By the end of 1897, the year he learned of the death of his twenty-year-old daughter, Aline, he stopped corresponding with the Danish wife and five children he had so long ago abandoned in Copenhagen. Deciding to take his own life, he wished to leave a last will and testament in the form of a huge canvas (over twelve feet wide) which, in its title, posed the ultimate trinity of questions, *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* (fig. 436), words which, like a sacred incantation, are inscribed on a flat decorative band in the upper left-hand corner: *D'où venons nous? Qui sommes nous? Où allons nous?* As a counterpart, Gauguin's own signature and date are inscribed at the upper right, giving the whole the character of an exalted suicide note. However, his efforts to kill himself with arsenic failed—he was in fact to die some six years later, in still more miserable circumstances—and the painting was sent to Paris in 1898 for viewing at Ambroise Vollard's gallery, where it elicited sympathetic, but often puzzled responses. The next year Gauguin explained, in a series of three letters, what he had in mind. Following Mallarmé's Symbolist aesthetic, he claimed that the work was "musical," that is, that it should communicate its meaning through an abstract, sensuous surface without a verbal scenario. He nevertheless troubled to itemize and identify some of the figures and narrative events, which begin at the right with a sleeping infant; continue in the center with a young girl, a kind of Tahitian Eve, picking fruit; and conclude at the left with, in Gauguin's words, "an old woman approaching death who seems reconciled and resigned to her throughts" and who looks like an aged version of his traumatized *Eve* of 1889 (see fig. 433). Presiding mysteriously over the scene is, at the left, a Maori idol who, with "both arms mysteriously and rhythmically raised, seems to

Fig. 436 **Paul Gauguin**, *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*, 1897. Oil on canvas, 4′ 6¾″ × 12′ 3½″. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

indicate the hereafter." In addition, there are symbolic animals—two cats, a goat, a bird, a lizard—whose meanings may belong to local folklore. But the general sense of the painting is clearly of a sweeping life cycle, which, nurtured by women and the fertility of nature reads, like an exotic language, from right to left under the awesome surveillance of a primitive deity.

Gauguin here felt not only the need to offer his own, as he put it, "philosophical work" on this most lofty theme, but wanted to express himself in terms that would improve upon the most officially acceptable French muralist who might deal with comparably high-minded allegories, Puvis de Chavannes (see fig. 257). As such, Gauguin hoped that his message would resonate to the viewer not through shared public symbols that could be translated by anyone, but rather through the verbally untranslatable effects of the decorative surface of the painting, the visual equivalent of music. In this, what Gauguin hoped to be a final painting that would summarize his aesthetic goals turned out to be prophetic of the ambitions of many twentieth-century artists. But for all its personal avowal, it was also a painting very much of the 1890s, when, as we shall see, more than one artist, aware that the century was drawing to a close, attempted to make grandly philosophical statements about the meaning of life, of history, of society, works which, as Gauguin put it about his own aspirations, would be "comparable to the Gospels."

The 1890s: Postscript and Prologue

Thanks to the magic of round numbers, we think not only in decades, but in centuries; and the prospect of a year numbered 1900 and a century numbered twenty gave the 1890s a special luster. The legerdemain and the hindsight of the historian can turn the decade either forward or backward, depending on whether the 1890s are considered as the prelude to the twentieth century or the finale of the nineteenth. For any proper history of twentieth-century art, to begin only in 1900 would be to ignore the fact that, for the younger artists and architects of the decade, the 1890s could be a time for daring, forward-looking experiment that could shed the past like an old skin and confront the bridge at the turn of the century with the cleanest of slates. By the 1890s, the sheer quantity of routine, pedestrian art for middle-class purchase must have been deadening, equatable with the overwhelming abundance of things for sale in the department stores that expanded from Chicago and New York to London, Paris, Berlin. To see, at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1889, a display of over one thousand six hundred paintings and drawings by contemporary French artists alone (almost none of whose names is remembered today) and then, at the 1900 Exposition Universelle, almost two thousand works in the same category, was not only a tribute to the population expansion of the later nineteenth century, but a challenge to any artist to be different from these multitudes. The very words used for many of the new styles and art periodicals that proliferated in that decade—*Art Nouveau, Modern Style, Jugendstil, Arte Joven, Joventut, Nieuwe Kunst*—proclaim in French, English, German, Spanish, Catalan, Dutch this need for newness and rejuvenation; and the historian who seeks out the roots of even the most revolutionary innovations of early twentieth-century art can easily find sources in the 1890s.

Yet, looked at from its past rather than its future, the 1890s can also be thought of as a last and summary chapter of the nineteenth century, in which the Romantics' legacy of introspection and imaginative wanderings in the domain of remote myth and history attains perhaps its last gasp, and in which the century's recurrent efforts to make grand, public statements of mural proportions that might synthesize questions of religion, of philosophy, of society reach a climax. And it was no less a time of art-historical retrospection and the swelling of national pride. At the Exposition Universelle of 1900, there was a contemporary international section which covered the century's final decade and, in the thousands of entries, covered the globe from Peru and Cuba to Turkey and Serbia; but there was also a major stocktaking of France's artistic achievement in the nineteenth century as represented by a survey of its art from 1800 to 1889, which started with Greuze and David and went up to Cézanne, Seurat, and Gauguin. Six years later, across the Rhine, the Germans provided a comparably nationalistic assessment in the 1906 Berlin exhibition of German painting from 1775 to 1875. Already in 1869, just before the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War, critics noted how the two nations were displaying a welling artistic rivalry.

As the last episode in a history of nineteenth-century painting, the 1890s also present problems of selection. Many major and minor figures who emerged in this decade—Bonnard and Vuillard, for instance—may be most at home here, though their work continues far beyond 1900, whereas others—Matisse, Kandinsky, Mondrian—who also began their careers in the 1890s seem more properly annexed to the history of the next decade. What may best be offered then is an abbreviated, synoptic view of the painting of the 1890s that may ask, to paraphrase the title of Gauguin's testamentary painting of 1897, "Where Did It Come From? What Was It? Where Was It Going?"

Although introspection may be a constant in the human condition and a familiar enough direction in Romantic art, many painters of the 1890s, as if in total rejection of the material and social world around them, turned to reverie, to dream, to an exploration of unnamable sensations and longings. A lone figure in an interior often provided, as it