Émile Bernard

* 28 April 1868 Lille
† 6 April 1941 Paris

Émile Bernard is known as a Post-Impressionist painter who had artistic friendships with Van Gogh, Gauguin and Eugène Boch, and at a later time, Cézanne.

Most of his notable work was accomplished at a young age, in the years 1886 through 1897. He is also associated with Cloisonnism and Synthetism, two late 19th century art movements.

Less known is Bernard's literary work, comprising plays, poetry, and art criticism as well as art historical statements that contain first hand information on the crucial period of modern art to which Bernard had contributed.

Biography

Émile Henri Bernard was born in Lille, France in 1868. Due to his sister's illness in his younger years, Émile did not receive much attention from his parents; he therefore stayed with his grandmother, who owned a laundry in Lille which employed more than twenty people. She was one of the greatest supporters of his art.

The family moved to Paris in 1878, where Émile attended the Collège Sainte-Barbe.

He began his studies at the École des Arts Décoratifs. In 1884 he joined the Atelier Cormon where he experimented with impressionism and pointillism and befriended fellow artists Louis Anquetin and Henri Toulouse-Lautrec. After being suspended from the École des Beaux-Arts for "showing expressive tendencies in his paintings", he toured Brittany on foot, where he was enamored by the tradition and landscape.

In August 1886, Bernard met Gauguin in Pont-Aven. In this brief meeting they exchanged little about art, but looked forward to meeting again. Bernard remarked as he looked back on that time,"my own talent was already fully developed." He believed that his style did play a considerable part in the development of Gauguin's mature style.

Bernard spent September 1887 on the coast, where he painted La Grandmère - a portrait of his grandmother. He continued talking with other painters and started saying good things about Gauguin.

Bernard went back to Paris and met with Van Gogh, who, as we already stated, was impressed by his work. He then found a restaurant to show the work alongside Van Gogh, Anquetin, and Lautrec's work at the Avenue Clichy. Van Gogh called the group the School of Petit-Boulevard.

One year later, Bernard set out for Pont-Aven by foot and saw Gauguin. Their friendship and artistic relationship quickly grew strong. By this time Bernard had developed many theories about his artwork and what he wanted it to be. He stated that he had "a desire to find an art that would be of the most extreme simplicity and that would be accessible to all, so as not to practice its individuality, but collectively..." Gauguin was impressed by Bernard's ability to verbalize his ideas.
Bernard theorized a style of painting with bold forms separated by dark contours which became known as cloisonnism. His work showed geometric tendencies which hinted at influences of Paul Cézanne, and he collaborated with Paul Gauguin and Vincent van Gogh.

Many say that it was Bernard's friend Anquetin who should receive the credit for this "closisonisme" technique. During the spring of 1887, Bernard and Anquetin "turned against Neo-Impressionism."

1888 was a seminal year in the history of Modern art. From October 23 until December 23 Paul Gauguin and Vincent van Gogh worked together in Arles. Gauguin had brought his new style from Pont-Aven exemplified in "Vision of the Sermon", a powerful work of visual symbolism of which he had already sent a sketch to Van Gogh in September. He also brought along Bernard’s Le Pardon de Pont-Aven which he had exchanged for one of his paintings and which he used to decorate the shared workshop. Van Gogh made a watercolor copy of the "Pardon" (December 1888) which he sent to his brother, to recommend Bernard's new style to be promoted.

Bernard's style was effective and coherent as can also be seen from the comparison of the two "portraits" Bernard and Gauguin sent to Van Gogh at the end of September 1888 at the latter's request: self-portraits -at Gauguin's initiative- each integrating a small portrait of the other in the background.

One of Émile Bernard's drawings from the August batch ("...a lane of trees near the sea with two women talking in the foreground and some strollers" - Vincent van Gogh in a letter to Bernard - Arles 1888) also appears to have inspired the work Van Gogh and Gauguin did on the Allée des Alyscamps in Arles.

In 1891 he joined a group of Symbolist painters that included Odilon Redon and Ferdinand Hodler. In 1892 Bernard organized the first French retrospective of the work of van Gogh, who had died in 1890, and in the same year he exhibited works of a Symbolist and religious character at the first Salon de la Rose + Croix.

His close association with Gauguin had ended bitterly in 1891 when Gauguin was hailed by Georges-Albert Aurier as the leader of Symbolism and initiator of the Synthetist manner, an honour Bernard felt should be his own.

In 1893 he started travelling, to Egypt, Spain and Italy and after that his style became more eclectic. He returned to Paris in 1904 and remained there for the remainder of his life. Bernard had a complex and anxious personality, and his stylistic shifts and equivocations have been taken as signs of weakness.

After World War I he produced innumerable female portraits and nudes in a slick, highly finished manner that belied his avant-garde origins. The ambitious series of monumental figure paintings, the Human Cycle, on which he worked in Venice from 1922 to 1925, second versions of which were being produced in Paris (Venice, Guggenheim), were a major but consciously retrogressive undertaking.

He taught at the École des Beaux-Arts before he died in 1941 in his Paris studio on the Île Saint-Louis, 15 quai Bourbon.

Oilpaintings in museum collections

Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, The Netherlands
- Self-portrait, 1897, Oil on canvas, 52 x 42 cm, Inventory number SK-A-3263

Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, The Netherlands
- Self-Portrait with Portrait of Gauguin, 1888, Oil on Canvas, 46.5 x 55.5 cm
- Bernard’s Grandmother, 1887, Oil on Canvas, 53 x 64 cm
Beaune ; Musée des Beaux-Arts et Musée Marey
- PORTRAIT D’ALESSANDRO LEVIS, Inventory number 44.4

Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, Texas, USA
- The Artist’s Grandmother, 1887, Oil on canvas, 60 x 50.5 cm (23 5/8 x 19 7/8 in.)
  Accession Number 61.165

Chicago, Art Institute, Illinois, USA
- Still Life with Fruit, 1890, Oil on canvas, 10 3/8 x 19 3/8 in. (26.6 x 49.2 cm) Inventory 1979.1279

Laval ; Musée du vieux château
- PORTRAIT D’HOMME, without Inventory number
- ANNONCIATION, without Inventory number
- NATURE MORTE, without Inventory number

Granville ; Musée Richard Anacréon
- Baigneurs, Inventory number 75.1.2

Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indiana, USA
- Pont-Aven Seen from the Bois d’Amour, 1892, oil on canvas, 28 3/8 x 36 1/4 in. Accession number 1998.174
- Yellow Christ, 1889, oil on canvas, 27 9/16 x 23 5/8 in., Accession number 1998.171
- Breton Women with Seaweed, about 1892, oil on canvas, 31 7/8 x 25 13/16 in., Accession number 1998.173
- Breton Women at a Wall, 1892, oil on cardboard, 32 7/8 x 45 1/2 in., Accession number 1998.172

Lille ; Musée des Beaux-Arts
- CUEILLEUSES DE POIRES, Inventory number P 1822
- FEMMES AU BORD DU NIL, Inventory number P 1643

Madrid, Spain, Thyssen-Bornemiszsa Museum,
- Inside a Shop in Pont-Aven, 1887, Oil on canvas, 45.5 x 55.3 cm, INV. Nr. CTB.1996.8
- The Cliffs at Le Pouldu, 1887, Oil on cardboard pasted on panel, 57 x 77.5 cm, INV. Nr. CTB.2000.55
- Women Bathing, 1889, Oil on canvas, 47 x 57.2 cm, INV. Nr. CTB.1999.115
- The Annunciation, 1890, Oil on canvas, 34.9 x 47 cm, INV. Nr. CTB.2000.2

Nantes, Musée des Beaux-Arts
- Le gaulage des pommes, Inventory number Prov. 2284
- Nature-mort, Inventory number 969.6.1.P ; 6914

Narbonne ; Musée d’Art et d’Histoire
- Bords du Nil à Marg, effet du soir (titre d’usage), Inventory number 2008.6.1

New York, Museum of Modern Art, USA
- Iron Bridges at Asnières, 1887, Oil on canvas, 18 1/8 x 21 3/8” (45.9 x 54.2 cm) MoMA Number 113.1962

Paris, Musée d’Orsay, France
- ADAM ET EVE. Inventory number RF 1977 43 ; AM 1974 139
- APRES LE BAIN (LES NYMPHES), Inventory number RF 1977 38 ; AM 1849 P
- FUMEUSE DE HASCHICH OU FUMEUSE DE TOMBAC, Inventory number RF 1338 ; LUX 529
- LES BAGNEUSES A LA VACHE ROUGE, Inventory number RF 1984 21
- LES BRETONNES AUX OMBRELLES, Inventory number RF 1977 41 ; AM 3373 P
- MOISSON AU BORD DE LA MER, Inventory number RF 1982 52
- PAUL GACHET, Inventory number RF 1977 39 ; INV 20132
- **PAYSAGE BRETON**, Inventory number RF 1977 42 ; AM 4292 P
- **POTS DE GRES ET POMMES**, Inventory number RF 1977 40 ; AM 3193 P

Pasadena, Norton Simon Museum, California, USA
- **Brittany Landscape**, c. 1888-1889, Oil on canvas, 28-7/8 x 39-1/2 in. (73.3 x 100.3 cm) Inventory M.2008.1.1.P
- **Still Life with Flowers**, 1887, Oil on canvas, 19-3/4 x 24 in. (50.2 x 61.0 cm), Inventory M.1997.1.2.P

Philadelphia Museum of Art, USA
- **Portrait of a Woman**, 1919, Oil on canvas, 43 1/4 x 33 1/2 inches (109.9 x 85.1 cm), Accession Number 1973-76-1

Rennes ; Musée des Beaux-Arts
- **L'ARBRE JAUNE**, Numéro d'inventaire INV 64.13.1

Tokyo, The National Museum of Western Art, Japan
- **Parisian Woman**, oil on canvas, 81 x 130.5 cm, P.1959-0016
- **Self-portrait as a Troubadour**, 1892, oil on canvas, 81 x 65 cm, P.1990-0001

Valenciennes, Musée des Beaux-Arts
- **Vue de Tonnerre**, Inventory number P.57.141
- **Nature morte**, Inventory number P.57.140
- **Nus dans un Paysage**, Inventory number P.76.13

**Exhibitions**


Exposition collective au musée des Beaux-Arts de Quimper, regroupant vingt-neuf œuvres dont neuf d'Émile Bernard, printemps 2009.

**Bibliography**

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ISBN 2-85917-387-0

Daniel Morane, Émile Bernard, Catalogue de l'œuvre gravé, Musée de Pont Aven, 2000