



Breton Woman with Child, 1886

Collected by Theo and Vincent van Gogh

# Breton Woman with Child

## Emile Bernard

On 6 April 1886, the young Emile Bernard (1868–1941) set out on a long walk through Brittany in search of new motifs. He would not return home until 6 October, exactly six months later. He called this journey his *voyage à pied*.<sup>01</sup> Along the way, he drew frequently and by his own account made over a hundred sketches in one month.<sup>02</sup> For these many drawings he used at least three sketchbooks, which unfortunately have since been taken apart.<sup>03</sup> The surviving sheets, and his paintings, reveal that the artist initially concentrated primarily on the landscape.<sup>04</sup>

## Gauguin

However, the focus of Bernard's artistic exploration changed upon his arrival in Pont-Aven on 15 August 1886. He began to direct his attention more towards the human figure, as seen in the paintings *Young Breton Woman in Pont-Aven* (fig. 1) and *Boy Sitting in the Grass*, as well as this drawing depicting a Breton woman with a child on her lap. Interestingly, Bernard actually happened upon Pont-Aven by accident. Originally, he had planned to continue his journey further south, all the way to Nantes.<sup>05</sup> But fate intervened when, by chance, he encountered Emile Schuffenecker (1851-1934) painting *en plein air* on the beach at Concarneau. The two struck up a conversation, and upon Schuffenecker's recommendation Bernard decided to make his way to Pont-Aven.<sup>06</sup> Schuffenecker gave him a letter of introduction that allowed him to make his acquaintance with Paul Gauguin (1848-1903), who had been staying there since mid-July.<sup>07</sup>

Bernard was impressed by Gauguin, and it was probably under the older painter's influence that his interest in depicting the human figure intensified.<sup>08</sup> Finding models in Pont-Aven was relatively easy, as the local population recognized the financial benefits of posing for artists. In fact, the presence of many artists there during the summer months had been an annual occurrence since 1860. Women strolled about daily in their traditional attire and were willing to sit for portraits in exchange for a small fee.<sup>09</sup>

Gauguin, in particular, frequently sketched these women, always in chalk and with thick outlines. Although he paid great attention to capturing the clothing, he often portrayed the faces of the women in a more sketchy or schematic manner. Occasionally, he embellished his drawings with touches of colour (fig. 2 and fig. 3).



Paul Gauguin, *Breton Woman in Profile with Study of a Hand*, 1886, black and coloured chalk on paper, 46.5 × 32 cm, private collection. Photo: © 2007 Christie's Images Limited

## Pen and ink

Following Gauguin's lead, Bernard also began using the services of the Pont-Aven locals, resulting in various drawings, including *Breton Woman with Child*.<sup>10</sup> He adopted a process similar to Gauguin's, albeit using pen and black ink instead of black chalk. He would begin by drawing the contours, and then use chalk to colour in specific areas, such as the woman's dress and face and the child's sun hat in this drawing. Finally, he applied hatching in ink on the blue chalk of the woman's dress to suggest folds. This approach resulted in a dynamic rendering of the blue fabric, adding a sense of movement that contrasts nicely with the woman's more schematically done collar, bonnet and face.

Bernard's use of pen and ink was prolific, as is evident in the extensive collection of his ink drawings that he compiled in the album *L'enfance d'un peintre*. Created later in his life, it contains hundreds of sketches from the period 1882-89 (fig. 4) .<sup>11</sup> His handling of the medium was free and direct, resembling the spontaneous nature of drawing with chalk or charcoal. He would sketch directly onto the paper with pen, bypassing the use of any preliminary underdrawing in pencil. In contrast, Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890) would often rely on an initial pencil underdrawing before applying ink lines with a reed pen.<sup>12</sup>

Bernard's approach to drawing with pen and ink was characterized by a sketchy and often rhythmic style, resulting in a multitude of lines that lent his work a certain spontaneity. This can be observed in *Breton Woman with Child*, with its repetitively applied lines, such as on the woman's collar and bonnet and the child's sun hat. The contours are most boldly emphasized, showcasing Bernard's pursuit of a clear and graphic style above all.

## A trimmed sheet

The drawing was executed on a sheet of wove paper, which was later trimmed on all sides to its current dimensions of 22.5 × 12.4 cm. None of the edges are straight, and it is evident that the trimming interrupted the lines on the left, right and bottom edges of the sheet. This is most clearly seen in the child's hat, which is now partially cut off. Bernard was fascinated by the visual effect of cropping, as is also evident in *Boy Sitting in the Grass*. His approach was most likely influenced by Japanese printmaking, although there is no direct evidence of Bernard actively engaging with this source of inspiration at this early stage of his career. However, it was very popular among the avant-garde circles to which Bernard belonged, and he may have been introduced to it by his friends Louis Anquetin (1861-1932) and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864-1901).

It is quite possible that Bernard used a sheet from one of the above mentioned sketchbooks for this drawing. The sketchbooks were composed of wove paper and typically measured approximately 31 × 20 cm.<sup>13</sup> After the sheet was trimmed, the artist pasted it onto another sheet of wove paper, which, because of its larger size (32.2 × 22.3 cm), cannot have come from any of the sketchbooks.<sup>14</sup> To enhance the drawing, Bernard added an additional framing line in black chalk, following the cutting edges of the drawing. This gave it the appearance of being in a passe-partout, lending it cachet. It is not known when Bernard made these adjustments to the sheet, but he probably kept his sketchbooks intact during his trip and only tore out this sheet after his return to his home town of Asnières.

# Given to Van Gogh

Until now, it has been assumed that Bernard sent this drawing from Brittany to Van Gogh in Arles as part of a shipment of ten drawings in late July 1888.<sup>15</sup> This assumption is based on a reconstruction of the ten drawings conducted by Mark Roskill in 1970.<sup>16</sup> This group further consisted of Breton scenes, brothel scenes and sketches of figures in an Arcadian landscape; all of these drawings are in the collection of the Van Gogh Museum. Roskill described them as stylistically consistent and exclusively originating in 1888. This holds true for all the drawings except *Breton Woman with Child*, which stands apart in displaying a less free and more graphic style and, crucially, was not made in 1888.<sup>17</sup> It is unlikely that Bernard would have included this work, which differs in style and date, in his dispatch to Van Gogh in 1888 alongside nine more recent drawings.<sup>18</sup> Instead, it is more plausible that Bernard gave *Breton Woman with Child* to his friend during one of their frequent meetings in Paris between late 1886 and 19 February 1888, when Van Gogh headed to Arles.<sup>19</sup>

The question then arises as to which drawing was the tenth in the July 1888 shipment. It is much more likely that it was the *Adoration of the Shepherds*. Roskill overlooked this work, even though it was produced in 1888 and must also have been given to Van Gogh by Bernard.<sup>20</sup>

Joost van der Hoeven  
November 2023

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### Object details

Breton Woman with Child

### Artist

Emile Bernard (1868 - 1941)

### Date

1886

### Medium

pen and synthetic ink and coloured chalk on wove paper mounted on wove paper

### Dimensions

32.2 cm x 22.3 cm

### Inscriptions

Emile Bernard 86

### Inventory Number

d0611V1962

### Credits

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)



### Provenance

Breton Woman with Child

Probably given by the artist, Paris to Vincent van Gogh, Paris, between late 1886 and 19 February 1888; left by Vincent van Gogh at the apartment of his brother Theo van Gogh, Paris; after his death on 25 January 1891, inherited by his widow, Jo van Gogh-Bonger, and their son, Vincent Willem van Gogh, Paris; administered until her death on 2 September 1925 by Jo van Gogh-Bonger, Bussum/Amsterdam/Laren; transferred by Vincent Willem van Gogh, Laren, to the Vincent van Gogh Foundation, Amsterdam, 10 July 1962; agreement concluded between the Vincent van Gogh Foundation and the State of the Netherlands, in which the preservation and management of the collection, and its placing in the Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh, to be realized in Amsterdam, is entrusted to the State, 21 July 1962; on permanent loan to the Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh from the opening of the museum on 2 June 1973, and at the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, since 1 July 1994.

## Exhibitions

### Breton Woman with Child

Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, *De verzameling van Theo van Gogh. Met uitzondering van de werken van zijn broer Vincent*, 31 March-11 May 1953, *Bretonne*







## Literature

### Breton Woman with Child

- Denys Sutton and Gabriel White, *Gauguin and the Pont-Aven Group*, exh. cat., London (Tate Gallery) 1966, no. 114, pp. 33–34
- Mark Roskill, *Van Gogh, Gauguin and French Painting of the 1880s: A Catalogue Raisonné of Key Works*, Ann Arbor, MI 1970, pp. 219–20
- Evert van Uitert and Michael Hoyle (eds.), *The Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh*, Amsterdam 1987, no. 2.26, p. 370
- Bogomila Welsh-Ovcharov, *Emile Bernard (1868–1941): The Theme of Bordellos and Prostitutes in Turn-of-the-Century French Art*, exh. cat., New Brunswick, NJ (Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum, Rutgers, State University of New Jersey) / Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum), New Brunswick, NJ 1988, pp. 13, 15
- Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten and Nienke Bakker (eds.), *Vincent van Gogh, Painted with Words: The Letters to Émile Bernard*, exh. cat., New York (The Morgan Library & Museum) 2007, pp. 226, 231, 242, 366
- Marije Vellekoop and Roelie Zwikker (eds.), *Vincent van Gogh Drawings*, 4 vols., Amsterdam & Surrey 1996–2007, vol. 4: *Arles, Saint-Rémy and Auvers-sur-Oise, 1888–1890* (2007), p. 147
- Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten and Nienke Bakker (eds.), *Vincent van Gogh - The Letters: The Complete Illustrated and Annotated Edition*, 6 vols., Amsterdam, The Hague & Brussels 2009, vol. 4: *Arles, 1888–1889*, nos. 649, 650, 651, pp. 196–97, 200, 202

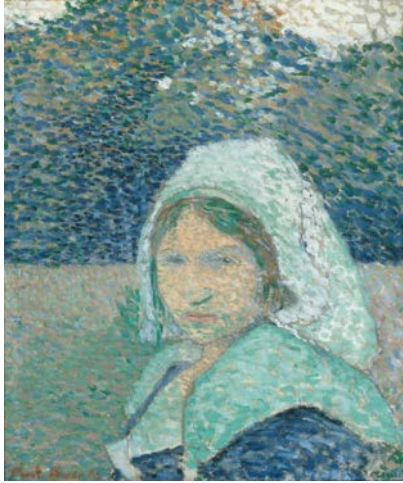
**Letters**

## Breton Woman with Child



- Vincent van Gogh, letter to Emile Bernard, Arles, 29 July 1888, [↗ 649](#);
- Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh, Arles, 29 July 1888, [↗ 650](#);
- Vincent van Gogh, letter to Emile Bernard, Arles, 30 July 1888, [↗ 651](#).

# Figures



**Fig. 1**

Emile Bernard, *Young Breton Woman in Pont-Aven*, 1886, oil on canvas, 52.1 × 45.1 cm, private collection. Photo: © 2006 Christie's Images Limited



**Fig. 2**

Paul Gauguin, *Breton Woman in Profile with Study of a Hand*, 1886, black and coloured chalk on paper, 46.5 × 32 cm, private collection. Photo: © 2007 Christie's Images Limited



**Fig. 3**  
 Paul Gauguin, *Breton Woman*, 1886, black chalk and pastel on paper, 48 × 32 cm, The Burrell Collection, Glasgow.  
 Photo: © CSG CIC Glasgow Museums Collection



**Fig. 4**  
 Page from Emile Bernard's album *L'enfance d'un peintre*, with drawings in black ink from 1885-86, Kunsthalle Bremen - Der Kunstverein in Bremen

## Footnotes

- 01 After studying for a year and a half in the Paris atelier of the academic painter Fernand Cormon (1845–1924), Bernard ventured to use colour in an avant-garde manner during class, for which he was promptly expelled. Disillusioned and in search of freedom and new motifs, he undertook a long journey on foot through Brittany. The destination had been recommended to him by his fellow students, probably Charles Tampier (1855–1908) and Louis Anquetin (1861–1932). This trip lasted from 6 April to 6 October 1886. Emile Bernard, *L'aventure de ma vie*, unpublished manuscript, c. 1939, Bibliothèque de l'INHA, Paris, BCMN Ms 374, pp. 48–49.
- 02 Bernard c. 1939, p. 50: 'I found everything beautiful, and I made more than a hundred drawings in a month' ('Tout me paraissait beau, et je fis plus de cent de dessins en un mois').
- 03 This number can be inferred from the fact that Bernard sent two sketchbooks to his parents during the first two months of his voyage à pied. Since sheets from sketchbooks from after that are known, Bernard must have had at least one more sketchbook. Emile Bernard, letter to his parents, 8 June 1886, in Laure Harscoët-Maire, 'Lettres d'Émile Bernard (1886): de Cancale à Saint-Briac', *Le pays de Dinan* 17 (1997), p. 123: 'Father has criticised me for my sketchbook, which troubled me greatly as I believed [...] it was better than the other one' ('Père m'adresse des reproches pour mon cahier ce qui m'a beaucoup déconcerté car je croyais [...] qu'il était meilleur que l'autre'). It is unknown by whom and when the sketchbooks were dismantled.
- 04 See also Dorothee Hansen, 'L'enfance dun peintre: Ein Album mit frühen Zeichnungen von Emile Bernard', in Dorothee Hansen (ed.), *Emile Bernard: Am Puls der Moderne*, exh. cat., Bremen (Kunsthalle Bremen), Cologne 2015, pp. 8–25.
- 05 Emile Bernard, letter to his parents, 17 July 1886, in Harscoët-Maire 1997, p. 135: 'I want to go down as far as Nantes' ('je veux descendre jusqu'à Nantes').
- 06 Bernard c. 1939, p. 21.
- 07 Emile Bernard, 'Notes sur l'école dite de "Pont-Aven"', *Mercure de France* (December 1903), in Anne Rivière (ed.), *Émile Bernard, propos sur l'art*, 2 vols., Paris 1994, vol. 1, p. 64.
- 08 Emile Bernard, letter to his parents, 19 August 1886, quoted in Maurice Malingue, *La vie prodigieuse de Gauguin*, Paris 1987, p. 92: 'There's also an impressionist called Gauguin, a very talented fellow, he's 36 and paints very well' ('Il y a aussi un impressionniste nommé Gauguin, un garçon très fort, il a 36 ans et dessine et peint très bien').
- 09 Henry Blackburn, *Breton Folk: An Artistic Tour in Brittany*, London 1880, p. 132: 'Pont Aven has one advantage over other places in Brittany; its inhabitants in their picturesque costume (which remains unaltered) have learned that to sit as a model is a pleasant and lucrative profession, and they do this for a small fee without hesitation or *mauvaise honte* [bashfulness/false modesty].'
- 10 Another example of a drawing from 1886 with Breton women is *Breton Women in a Meadow* (Hansen 2015, cat. 10).
- 11 This album is in the Kunsthalle Bremen. See Hansen 2015, p. 8.

- 12 For example, see Marije Vellekoop and Roelie Zwikker (eds.), *Vincent van Gogh Drawings*, 4 vols., Amsterdam & Surrey 1996–2007, vol. 4: *Arles, Saint-Rémy and Auvers-sur-Oise, 1888–1890* (2007), cat. 341, *The Seated Zouave*.
- 13 With thanks to Dorothee Hansen, Curator of 14th–19th Century Paintings and Deputy Director, Kunsthalle Bremen, for providing information about the sketchbooks of the first *voyage à pied*, which are currently kept in the Kunsthalle Bremen.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh, 29 July 1888 [↗ \[650\]](#): 'I've received from Bernard 10 croquis' ('J'ai reçu de Bernard 10 croquis').
- 16 Mark Roskill, *Van Gogh, Gauguin and French Painting of the 1880s: A Catalogue Raisonné of Key Works*, Ann Arbor, MI 1970, p. 220.
- 17 Roskill read the date on *Breton Woman on Child* as '88, while analysis and comparison of the dates on Bernard's drawings reveal that *Breton Woman with Child* was dated in 1886 by the artist himself. While Bernard is known to have applied dates to earlier works in later life, often antedating them, this is not possible in the case of *Breton Woman with Child* because Bernard disposed of the drawing as early as or before 1888. In addition, Bernard used watercolour to colour his drawings in 1888, while *Breton Woman with Child* was coloured with chalk.
- 18 Considering that Van Gogh and Bernard regularly sent each other drawings to update each other about their artistic progress, it is highly improbable that a drawing done two years earlier would have been part of such an exchange. Moreover, it is most unlikely that Bernard would have taken this drawing along with him to Brittany in 1888 when he spent another summer there, and then sent it to Van Gogh from there.
- 19 Perhaps he did this in passing; perhaps Van Gogh came into possession of the drawing when, just before leaving for Arles, he exchanged a large quantity of Japanese prints with Bernard for some of his works. See Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh, 15 July 1888 [↗ \[640\]](#): 'Then a month later, before I left, I no longer had the money and I'd also given a good many Japanese prints to Bernard when I made the exchanges with him' ('Or un mois plus tard avant mon départ je n'avais plus l'argent et j'avais encore donné pas mal de japonaiseries à Bernard alors que j'ai fait les échanges avec lui').
- 20 See the entry for [\*Adoration of the Shepherds\*](#).