

Boy Sitting in the Grass, 1886

Collected by Theo and Vincent van Gogh

# Boy Sitting in the Grass

Emile Bernard

The attribution of this painting remained uncertain until 1992. However, any doubts were dispelled when the preliminary study of this work was discovered in the album titled *L'enfance d'un peintre* (fig. 1) , in which Emile Bernard (1868–1941) in his later years assembled numerous drawings from the period 1882–89. Since these drawings are unquestionably by Bernard, this painting can also be definitively attributed to the artist. <sup>01</sup>

## Unusual aspects

Understandably, prior to the discovery of the preliminary study, this work was not immediately recognized as a Bernard. First, the absence of a signature is unusual, as most of Bernard's works from 1886, the year when *Boy Sitting in the Grass* was made, are signed. However, it should be noted that he occasionally signed his earlier work at a later date. Second, the combination of the short impressionist brushstrokes for the grass and thick contour lines defining the boy is not in keeping with Bernard's style. Bold contour lines, which became more prominent in his work from 1887 onwards, were commonly accompanied by evenly painted areas of colour rather than short, dynamic touches. At the same time, Bernard's early body of work is difficult to characterize in terms of a 'logical' stylistic development. This complexity hampers the process of attributing or rejecting a painting based solely on its style. Bernard experimented with a wide range of styles and techniques over a relatively short period of several years. [02](#)

## Pont-Aven and Gauguin

*Boy Sitting in the Grass* probably originated during the six weeks Bernard spent in Pont-Aven in 1886, from 15 August to 29 September.<sup>03</sup> While there, he became acquainted with Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), Charles Laval (1861–1894), Henri Delavallée (1862–1943) and Achille Granchi-Taylor (1857–1921), among other artists. These encounters undoubtedly influenced Bernard's painting style, which, as mentioned above, had yet to acquire a distinctive identity. Prior to his stay in Pont-Aven, Bernard had travelled through Brittany on foot: his *voyage à pied*, as he called it. The paintings he made en route demonstrate a great affinity with the work of Claude Monet (1840–1926) (fig. 2). Bernard focused on capturing the landscape through short brushstrokes and contrasting colours. He perceived his Breton surroundings as a 'permanent impressionist exhibition' and wrote, 'on a fine day, it is the spitting image of Monet'.<sup>04</sup>

*Boy Sitting in the Grass* stands out among Bernard's earlier Breton paintings in that it is not a composition made *en plein air* but a creation based on a preliminary study. Bernard transferred his motif to the canvas by first 'drawing' the figure in thick purple lines and then filling in the rest of the painting. Both the use of a preliminary study and the manner of painting align with Gauguin's method. In fact, Gauguin also relied on preliminary studies for the figures in his paintings, applying them to the canvas with bold lines of paint. Bernard was impressed by Gauguin, describing him in 1886 as 'a very talented fellow, he is 36 years old, and draws and paints very well'.<sup>05</sup>



Paul Gauguin, *Bathing Boys at the Watermill in the Bois d'Amour*, 1886, oil on canvas, 60 × 73 cm, Hiroshima Museum of Arts

The similarities between *Boy Sitting in the Grass* and Gauguin's work extend beyond the painting technique. The subject matter also bears a resemblance to the older painter's work. It is highly likely that Bernard saw Gauguin's *Bathing Boys at the Watermill in the Bois d'Amour* (fig. 3), which features young bathers and could have served as an example. Moreover, Bernard's decision to depict the boy from the back may also have been inspired by Gauguin's work. It is worth noting that *Bathing Boys at the Watermill in the Bois d'Amour* was completed prior to Bernard's arrival in Pont-Aven.<sup>06</sup> We know that Bernard visited Gauguin's studio there, accompanied by Granchi-Taylor.<sup>07</sup> Therefore, he most certainly had the opportunity to see Gauguin's canvas at that time. It is possible that the depiction of a partially visible painter standing at a field easel in the upper left could be an anecdotal reference to Gauguin himself painting bathers. Bernard added this detail later, once the green paint of the grass had somewhat dried. This detail is not included in the preliminary study.

## Painting technique

After transferring the preliminary study onto the grounded canvas using purple paint, Bernard modelled the boy's body in fairly coarse brushstrokes.<sup>08</sup> He painted the shading on the boy's back in a greenish-blue hue, effectively conveying the greenish glow of the grass on the skin.<sup>09</sup> He then appears to have applied the skin colour around this passage. In some places it is clear that the teal hue was painted over, while in other places Bernard left parts of the ground layer unpainted around the shaded area. Finally, he painted over sections of the dark purple contour lines; the still wet purple paint then blended here and there with the freshly applied colour.<sup>10</sup> The overall effect makes a somewhat messy impression, demonstrating Bernard's hesitancy in modelling the boy's back. However, this all adds to the work's spontaneous character.

The grass in *Boy Sitting in the Grass* is rendered in a network of swiftly painted green and light blue brushstrokes applied wet-on-wet on a green ground. This artistic device greatly enhances the vigour of the work. Earlier paintings from Bernard's *voyage à pied*, such as *Village Street in Saint-Briac* (fig. 4), also feature similar short, hatched brushstrokes. However, in Pont-Aven Bernard would soon transition from this wet-on-wet application of short, dynamic touches to a pointillist style of painting, as exemplified in works such as *Two Breton Women in a Meadow* (fig. 5). By giving the boy deep red hair, Bernard introduced a striking complementary contrast into the painting. The presence of red amid a sea of green makes the colour stand out effectively. Bernard was highly interested in working in complementary colours. Throughout his *voyage à pied*, for example, he frequently explored the visual effects of the blue-orange colour pair (see fig. 2, and fig. 4).

While *Boy Sitting in the Grass* was painted using some strategies that may have been inspired by Gauguin, it is also a continuation of the direction in which Bernard worked during his *voyage à pied*. This can be seen in the bird's-eye perspective he used. Prior to his journey through Brittany, Bernard had already explored such an approach to perspective in *Asnières in the winter of 1885-86*, as is evident in *Fisherman and Boat*; however, he also used this perspective during the trip, as seen in *The Public Garden in Mayenne* (fig. 6). In *Boy Sitting in the Grass*, the bird's-eye perspective creates an effect whereby the horizon disappears from view and the composition is dominated by the grass and a small patch of vegetation at the top of the canvas. This is an interesting compositional approach, yet at the same time it may be perceived as too simple. Perhaps this explains why Bernard chose to incorporate the legs of a painter at the upper left.



Emile Bernard, *Two Breton Women in a Meadow*, 1886, oil on panel, 61.9 × 83.3 cm, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam

*Boy Sitting in the Grass* is modest in size, like most of the pictures Bernard painted during his *voyage à pied*. He later described the artistic output of his trip as a series of 'studies and drawings'.<sup>11</sup> This left Bernard somewhat frustrated because he had envisioned producing a 'grande machine', a large and fully realized masterpiece, influenced by his reading of the novel *L'Œuvre* by Emile Zola (1840-1902).<sup>12</sup> In his letters to his parents, he lamented his inability to rise above the studious nature of his work.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, he was also aware of the pitfalls of chasing after a masterpiece and recognized the importance of making many oil studies as part of his development.<sup>14</sup> While not necessarily a masterpiece, *Boy Sitting in the Grass* represents a significant step forward in Bernard's artistic growth and progress.

Joost van der Hoeven  
November 2023

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**Object details**

Boy Sitting in the Grass

**Artist**

Emile Bernard (1868 - 1941)

**Date**

1886

**Medium**

oil on canvas

**Dimensions**

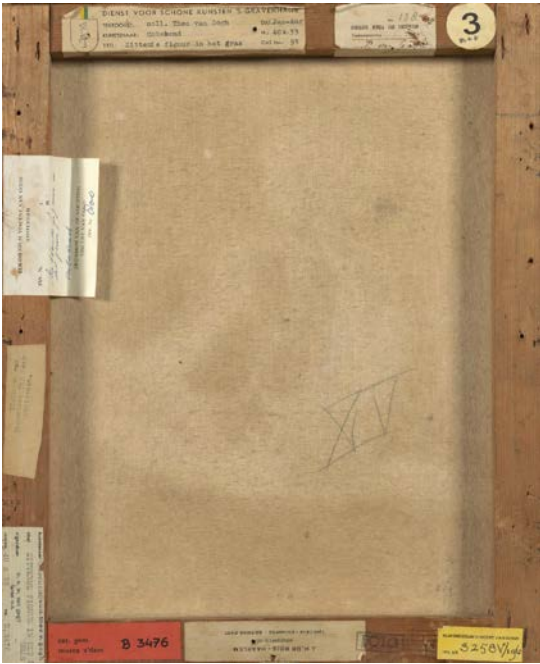
40 cm x 32.7 cm

**Inventory Number**

s0258V1962

**Credits**

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)



Boy Sitting in the Grass

Front & Back





### Provenance

#### Boy Sitting in the Grass

Probably exchanged by the artist, Paris with 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 (as Unknown, Zittende figuur in het gras); 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

#### Boy Sitting in the Grass

The Hague, Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, *De verzameling van Theo van Gogh. Met uitzondering van de werken van zijn broer Vincent*, 1953, no. 93, *Zittende figuur in het gras*

Otterlo, Kröller-Müller Museum, *De verzameling van Theo van Gogh. Met uitzondering van de werken van zijn broer Vincent*, 1953, no. 93, *Zittende figuur in het gras*

Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, *De verzameling van Theo van Gogh. Met uitzondering van de werken van zijn broer Vincent*, 31 March-11 May 1953, no. 93, *Zittende figuur in het gras*

Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, *Collectie Theo van Gogh*, February 1960

Otterlo, Kröller-Müller Museum, *Collectie Theo van Gogh*, April-May 1960



## Literature

### Boy Sitting in the Grass

- Evert van Uitert and Michael Hoyle (eds.), *The Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh*, Amsterdam 1987, no. I.2, p. 306
- Fred Leeman, 'Boy Sitting in the Grass: Attributed to Emile Bernard', *Van Gogh Bulletin* 7 (1992), p. 23
- Aukje Vergeest, *The French Collection: Nineteenth-Century French Paintings in Dutch Public Collections*, Amsterdam 2000, no. 57, p. 66
- 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, p. 366
- 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*, no. 640, pp. 174–75
- Fred Leeman, *Émile Bernard (1868–1941)*, Paris 2013, no. 49, pp. 107–9
- Marije Vellekoop *et al.* (eds.), *Van Gogh's Studio Practice*, Amsterdam & Brussels 2013, p. 368 n. 26, p. 370 nn. 36 and 40, p. 383 n. 99, p. 384 n. 102
- Jean-Jacques Luthi and Armand Israël, *Émile Bernard: instigateur de l'école de Pont-Aven, précurseur de l'art moderne: sa vie, son œuvre: catalogue raisonné*, Paris 2014, no. 47, p. 145



## Letters

### Boy Sitting in the Grass

Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh, Arles, 15 July 1888,

↗ 640.

# Figures



**Fig. 1**

Emile Bernard, *Study for Boy in the Grass*, in the album *L'enfance d'un peintre* (p. 125), 1886, charcoal on paper, Kunsthalle Bremen - Der Kunstverein in Bremen



**Fig. 2**

Emile Bernard, *Beach and Rocks at Cancale*, 1886, oil on canvas, 46 × 55 cm, private collection



**Fig. 3**

Paul Gauguin, *Bathing Boys at the Watermill in the Bois d'Amour*, 1886, oil on canvas, 60 × 73 cm, Hiroshima Museum of Arts



**Fig. 4**

Emile Bernard, *Village Street in Saint-Briac*, 1886, oil on canvas, 55 × 45.5 cm, private collection



**Fig. 5**

Emile Bernard, *Two Breton Women in a Meadow*, 1886, oil on panel, 61.9 × 83.3 cm, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam



**Fig. 6**

Emile Bernard, *The Public Garden in Mayenne*, 1886, oil on canvas, 38 × 46.3 cm, private collection

## Footnotes

- 01 Fred Leeman, 'Jongen in het gras. Toegeschreven aan Emile Bernard', *Van Gogh Bulletin* 7 (1992), no. 3, p. 23. 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. It should be noted that in her dissertation, Bogomila Welsh-Ovcharov already attributed this painting to Bernard. See Bogomila Welsh-Ovcharov, *Vincent van Gogh: His Paris Period 1886-1888*, diss., University of Utrecht, 1976.
- 02 Thus, Bernard's known oeuvre from his stay in Pont-Aven in 1886 ranges from fairly traditional village scenes like *Street in Pont-Aven* (1886, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam), to experimental paintings with clear outlines like *Boy Sitting in the Grass*, to pointillist landscapes like *Two Breton Women in a Meadow* (1886, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam).
- 03 Neil McWilliam (ed.), *Émile Bernard: les lettres d'un artiste (1884-1941)*, Dijon 2012, no. 17, n. 1.
- 04 Emile Bernard, letter to his parents, 30 May 1886, in Laure Harscoët-Maire, 'Lettres d'Émile Bernard (1887): de Cancale à Saint-Briac', *Le pays de Dinan* 17 (1997), p. 120: 'Here [Cancale] it's a permanent impressionist exhibition; you only have to put your nose outdoors on a fine day, it is a spitting image of Monet; blouses in violet, red, pink etc.' ('Ici [Cancale] c'est une exposition impressionniste permanente; on n'a qu'à mettre le nez dehors quand il fait beau, c'est du Monet tout craché; des blouses violettes, rouges, roses, etc.)
- 05 Emile Bernard, letter to his parents, 19 August 1886, cited in Maurice Malingue, *La vie prodigieuse de Gauguin*, Paris 1987, p. 92: 'un garçon très fort, il a 36 ans et dessine et peint très bien'.
- 06 A. S. Hartrick, *A Painter's Pilgrimage through Fifty Years*, Cambridge 1939, p. 32: 'Gauguin, shortly after his arrival, a stranger to most, came back for déjeuner one day and passed through the crowd at the door of the auberge. He was carrying a canvas on which he had been painting some boys bathing on a weir, painted brilliantly with spots of pure colour in the usual impressionist manner.'
- 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: 'Granky-Taylor [*sic*], a painter and friend of Gauguin, took me to see him' ('Granky-Taylor [*sic*], peintre ami de Gauguin, me conduit chez ce dernier').
- 08 The primer consists of calcium carbonate (natural or synthetic chalk) with a protein-containing binder. With thanks to Muriel Geldof, RCE.
- 09 In early September, Bernard indicated in a letter to his parents that he had received the paint he had ordered, naming the colours though without specifying the exact pigments: green, white and violet. Possibly all these colours were used for this painting. See Emile Bernard, letter to his parents, early September 1886, in McWilliam 2012, no. 18.
- 10 With thanks to René Boitelle, paintings conservator, Van Gogh Museum, 20 September 2021.

- 11 Emile Bernard, *L'aventure de ma vie*, unpublished manuscript, c. 1939, Bibliothèque de l'INHA, Paris, BCMN Ms 374, p. 60: 'After spending two months in Pont-Aven, I had done a lot of studies and drawings' ('Après avoir passé deux mois à Pont-Aven j'avais fait beaucoup d'études, de dessins').
- 12 Regarding the *grand machine*: *ibid.*, p. 55: 'I lacked the means of a *grand machine*' ('les moyens d'une grande machine me manquèrent'). Regarding Zola: Emile Bernard, letter to his parents, 11 July 1886, in McWilliam 2012, no. 12: 'I bought Zola's work, which I've already reread three or four times' ('J'ai acheté l'œuvre de Zola que j'ai déjà relu trois ou quatre fois').
- 13 Emile Bernard, letter to his parents, 29 July 1886, in McWilliam 2012, no. 15: 'since my departure I have only done 12 canvases, and summarily at that' ('depuis mon départ je n'ai que 12 toiles faites et sommairement faites').
- 14 Emile Bernard, letter to his parents, 29 July 1886, in McWilliam 2012, no. 11: 'Art is a chasm, an awful chasm that absorbs youth, passion, affection, love, interests, if it truly is art' ('L'Art est un gouffre, un gouffre atroce qui absorbe jeunesse, passion, affection, amour, intérêts, quand il y a vraiment art').