



Study of a Woman Seen from the Back, 1888

Works Collected by Theo and Vincent van Gogh

Study of a Woman Seen from the Back

Paul Gauguin

This drawing served as the example for the large figure in *The Pigs* or *In the Heat of the Day* (fig. 1) , which Paul Gauguin painted in Arles. Yet it originated in Brittany, in Pont-Aven, in the months before Gauguin accepted Vincent van Gogh's (1853-1890) invitation to join him in Provence. The woman's clothing and head-covering clearly refer to a Breton setting. ⁰¹



Paul Gauguin, *The Pigs* or *In the Heat of the Day*, 1888, oil on canvas, 73 × 92 cm, private collection

Material and technique

On a large sheet of wove paper, folded in half, Gauguin laid in the contours of the figure's bare back, turned-down clothing, head-covering and raised arms by sketching these forms thinly in black chalk and then accentuating them with thicker lines. Finally, using gouache, he added volume by applying colour in short, hatched strokes.⁰² The medium has discoloured considerably over the years, seen in particular on the model's back, where nearly all the pigments have lost some of their colour, causing the scene as a whole to appear very faded.⁰³

Inspired by Degas

Gauguin seems to have depicted the woman holding out a cloth, which she might be about to hang over a balustrade, as suggested by the decorative motifs at the bottom of the drawing. This is merely a hypothesis, however, given the ambiguity of the woman's pose. Her right arm is especially puzzling: she seems to be keeping it close to her body, perhaps in order to support her head, which is inclined to the right.

Gauguin probably drew inspiration for this setting from Edgar Degas (1834–1917), whose influence – as regards the depiction of models in a wide variety of poses observed from unconventional viewpoints – is ubiquitous in Gauguin's oeuvre.⁰⁴ In January 1888, during an exhibition at Boussod, Valadon & Cie, he had frequently made sketches after Degas's paintings of women bathing that were on display.⁰⁵ One of these sketches depicts a woman in a pose similar to *Study of a Woman Seen from the Back*, albeit in reverse (fig. 2). Although it is not known whether this sheet actually served as the example for Gauguin's study, it does show that he assimilated Degas's careful consideration of poses and viewpoints when portraying models. Gauguin had long been depicting models seen from the back, which is something Degas often did in his paintings of bathing women (fig. 3). In such compositions as *The Mango Trees, Martinique*, *Breton Shepherdesses* (1886, Neue Pinakothek, Munich) and, above all, *Two Bathers* (fig. 4), the models turn their backs to the viewer in poses à la Degas.



Paul Gauguin, *Two Bathers*, 1887, oil on canvas, 87.5 × 70 cm, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires

The model Marie Louarn

In Pont-Aven it was not difficult to find models who were willing to take part in artistic experiments. The village had exerted an attraction on artists since the mid-nineteenth century; its 'painterly' inhabitants, making a virtue of necessity, were willing to pose in exchange for a reasonable hourly rate.⁰⁶ However, according to Henri Delavallée (1862–1943) – a painter in Gauguin's entourage – there was only one model who would pose in the nude: a girl by the name of Marie Louarn (or Loaurin).⁰⁷

In Sylvie Crussard's view, it is quite possible that Louarn posed for several sketches and paintings by Gauguin, including a small painted portrait (fig. 5). She is also thought to be the model in Charles Laval's (1861–1894) *Going to the Market, Brittany* (1888, Indianapolis Museum of Art).⁰⁸ In all of these works, the model is mainly recognizable by her pronounced jaw and mouth. She is also to be seen in Gauguin's study *Model, Frontal View* (fig. 6), which is identical in size and technique to the study in the Van Gogh Museum and was undoubtedly made during the same session. *Model, Frontal View* bears two frontal depictions of the same model, wearing an outfit identical to that seen in *Study of a Woman Seen from the Back*. It is quite likely, therefore, that Gauguin used Louarn as the model for both works.



Paul Gauguin, *Model, Frontal View*, 1888, black chalk and charcoal, opaque and transparent watercolour on wove paper, 26.3 × 40.4 cm, Jean Bonna collection, Geneva

Example for the painting *The Pigs* or *In the Heat of the Day*

In any case, Gauguin did not use the sketch for a painting in Pont-Aven; he turned to it again only in mid-November 1888, when he was staying with Van Gogh in the Yellow House in Arles and constant rain kept the artists indoors. Gauguin sought to turn this disappointment into an opportunity to paint from memory (*peinture de chic*), from the imagination (*de tête*) or from existing drawings.⁰⁹

Gauguin painted *Night Café, Arles* (1888, Pushkin State Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow), using a portrait drawing he had made in Arles (*L'Arlésienne (Mme Ginoux, née Marie Julien, 1848-1911)*, 1888, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco), and *The Wine Harvest: Human Misery* (1888, Ordrupgaard, Charlottenlund), the latter reportedly painted completely *de tête*.¹⁰ Both Van Gogh and Gauguin were very pleased with *The Wine Harvest: Human Misery*.¹¹ In the painting several Breton figures appear in a landscape that loosely refers to the autumnal, red-coloured vineyards that they had seen in the vicinity of Arles.¹² Gauguin thus combined a present-day observation with figures from the past.

For the next canvas in his series of imaginary scenes Gauguin sought inspiration in *Study of a Woman Seen from the Back*. He transferred the figure to the canvas almost literally - apart from adding an outstretched right leg - but he placed her in completely imaginary surroundings consisting of nearly abstract areas of colour. Instead of holding a cloth in front of herself as she does in the sketch, she seems to be resting against a bale of hay. Another bale of hay (more readily identifiable because of the pitchfork) appears in the right foreground.¹⁴ The large areas of yellow represent pigs, recognizable by a hanging ear at lower left and a tail at upper right.

The pigs

In Gauguin's symbolism, pigs could stand for sexuality. The fact that in this painting he combined two pigs with a semi-nude woman leaves little doubt about the underlying message. Shortly after completing it, Gauguin named this work *Les Cochons (The Pigs)*, which stresses the importance of the pigs in this work and underlines its sexual connotations. Moreover, the scene itself, featuring a woman resting against something, recalls the recumbent woman in *The Death of Sardanapalus* by Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863) (fig. 7) , although there the sexual reference is more obvious because the subject is a concubine.

By placing the model in an imaginary world, Gauguin changed the original context of the drawing, which he used only as a starting point for a painting - a working method now customary to him. In similar fashion, he integrated his drawn portrait of Marie Ginoux (*L'Arlésienne*) (1848-1911), which he had produced in the Yellow House, into the painting *Night Café, Arles*. Compared to that painting, *The Pigs* or *In the Heat of the Day* is a much more ambiguous and abstract work, in which Gauguin toyed with suggestive forms, the distortion of depth and colour combinations.

It was precisely the ambiguity and abstraction of *The Pigs* that Gauguin found so satisfying.¹⁵ He therefore submitted it to the 1889 exhibition of the Brussels artists' society Les Vingt. It is interesting to note that for this occasion he changed the title to *En plein chaleur (In the Heat of the Day)*, thus focusing on a different element in the scene and altering the work's meaning to some extent.¹⁶ This allusion to the heat that caused the woman to shed her clothing and rest against a bale of hay calls to mind Jean-François Millet's (1814-1875) *Vineyard Labourer Resting* (fig. 8) , the actual subject of which is the man's utter exhaustion. Viewed from that perspective, the woman's extremely tanned lower arm and hand become striking signs of outdoor work - a detail that Gauguin had already recorded in the drawing. This shift in emphasis underscores the multiple possible interpretations of the painting and the many points of departure offered by Gauguin's original drawing.

When Gauguin left Arles on 25 December 1888, he left this sketch behind, together with *Study Sheet with Portraits of Camille Roulin, Portrait of Joseph-Michel Ginoux* and *L'Arlésienne (Mme Ginoux, née Marie Julien, 1848-1911)*.¹⁷ Remarkably, he took along the study *Model, Frontal View*, possibly with the intention of using it for a painting - a project that never came to fruition.

Joost van der Hoeven
March 2023

Citation

Joost van der Hoeven, 'Paul Gauguin, *Study of a Woman Seen from the Back*, 1888', catalogue entry in *Contemporaries of Van Gogh 1: Works Collected by Theo and Vincent*, Joost van der Hoeven (ed.), Amsterdam: Van Gogh Museum, 2023.
[↗ doi.org/10.58802/WNSF2021](https://doi.org/10.58802/WNSF2021)

This contribution is licensed under a [↗ CC BY-NC-SA licence](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

**Object details**

Study of a Woman Seen from the Back

Artist

Paul Gauguin (1848 - 1903)

Date

1888

Medium

charcoal and opaque watercolour on wove paper

Dimensions

54.5 cm x 69.5 cm

Inventory Number

d0682V1962

Credits

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

**Provenance**

Study of a Woman Seen from the Back

Left by the artist with Vincent van Gogh, Arles, 25 December 1888; sent by Vincent van Gogh to his brother, Theo van Gogh, Paris, 30 April 1889; 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 (ratified 28 December 1970); 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

Study of a Woman Seen from the Back

London, Tate Gallery, *Gauguin and the Pont-Aven group*, 7 January-13 February 1966, no. 282, *Nude Woman seen from Rear*

Zurich, Kunsthaus Zürich, *Pont-Aven : Gauguin und sein Kreis in der Bretagne*, 5 March-11 April 1966, no. 302, *Frauenakt von hinten*

Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh, *Van Gogh en zijn Franse vrienden. Het cloisonisme als stijl 1886-1891*, 9 April-14 June 1981, no. 57b, *Study for Woman in th Hay: Pigs: In Full Heat*

Arles, Musée d'Arles, *Van Gogh et Arles*, 4 February-15 May 1989, no. 35, *Nu dans le foin*

Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *Theo van Gogh 1857-1891. Kunsthandelaar, verzamelaar en broer van Vincent*, 24 June-5 September 1999, no. 161, *Studie voor Vrouw in het hooi*

Paris, Musée d'Orsay, *Theo van Gogh 1857-1891. Marchand de tableaux, collectionneur, frère de Vincent*, 27 September 1999-9 January 2000, no. 161, *Étude pour « Dans le foin »*

Tokyo, Seiji Togo Memorial Yasuda Kasai Museum of Art, *Vincent van Gogh drawing exhibition. Van Gogh and his time from the Van Gogh Museum and the H.W. Mesdag Museum*, 14 September-13 November 2000, no. 56, *Study for 'Woman in the Hay'*

Madrid, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, *Gauguin y los orígenes del simbolismo*, 28 September 2004-9 January 2005, no. 60, *Mujer de espaldas, estudio*

Cleveland, Cleveland Museum of Art, *Paul Gauguin: Paris, 1889*, 4 October 2009-18 January 2010, no. 53, *Study for "Woman with Pigs" or The Heat of the Day*

London, Tate Modern, *Paul Gauguin: Maker of Myth*, 30

September 2010-16 January 2011, no. 89, *Study for 'In the Heat (Pigs) / En Pleine Chaleur (Cochons)'*



Literature

Study of a Woman Seen from the Back

- Denys Sutton and Gabriel White, *Gauguin and the Pont-Aven Group*, exh. cat., London (Tate Gallery) 1966, no. 282, p. 45; BVG01638
- Felix Andreas Baumann *et al.* (eds.), *Pont-Aven: Gauguin und sein Kreis in der Bretagne*, exh. cat., Zurich (Kunsthaus Zürich) 1966, no. 302, p. 87; BVG00931
- Ronald Pickvance, *The Drawings of Gauguin*, London 1970, p. 25; BVG00076
- Wayne Andersen and Barbara Klein, *Gauguin's Paradise Lost*, New York 1971, pp. 91-92, 295; BVG02534
- Bogomila Welsh-Ovcharov, *Vincent van Gogh and the Birth of Cloisonism*, exh. cat., Toronto (Art Gallery of Ontario) / Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum), Toronto 1981, no. 57b, pp. 192-193; BVG04466
- Evert van Uiter and Michael Hoyle (eds.), *The Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh*, Amsterdam 1987, no. 2.99, p. 382; BVG08057
- Ronald Pickvance, *Van Gogh et Arles: Exposition du Centenaire*, exh. cat., Arles (Musée d'Arles) 1989, no. 35, pp. 80-81; BVG08455
- Ronald de Leeuw, *The Van Gogh Museum: Paintings and Pastels*, Zwolle 1994, pp. 198-199; BVG14126
- Chris Stolwijk, Richard Thomson (eds.), with a contribution by Sjraar van Heugten, *Theo van Gogh, 1857-1891: Art Dealer, Collector and Brother of Vincent*, exh. cat., Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum) / Paris (Musée d'Orsay), Amsterdam & Zwolle 1999, no. 161, pp. 160, 162; BVG14736
- Sjraar van Heugten *et al.* (eds.), *Vincent van Gogh Drawing Exhibition: Van Gogh and His Time From the Van Gogh Museum and*

the H.W. Mesdag Museum, exh. cat., Tokyo (Seiji Togo Memorial Yasuda Kasai Museum of Art) 2000, no. 56, pp. 150-151, 192; BVG15949

- Daniel Wildenstein, Sylvie Crussard and Martine Heudron, *Gauguin: premier itinéraire d'un sauvage: catalogue de l'oeuvre peint (1873-1888)*, 2 vols., Milan 2001, vol. 2, pp. 410, 529-530; BVG16564 II
- Douglas W. Druick, Britt Salvesen and Peter Zegers, *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Studio of the South*, exh. cat., Chicago (Art Institute of Chicago) / Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum), New York 2001, no. 56, pp. 197-199; BVG16375
- Martin Gayford, *The Yellow House: Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Nine Turbulent Weeks in Arles*, London 2006, p. 129; BVG19330
- Colin B. Bailey *et al.* (eds.), *Suite française: dessins de la collection Jean Bonna*, Paris 2006, pp. 353-354; BVG19172
- Heather Lemonedes, Belinda Thomson and Agnieszka Juszcak, *Paul Gauguin: The Breakthrough into Modernity*, exh. cat., Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum) / Cleveland (Cleveland Museum of Art), Ostfildern 2009, no. 71, p. 130-131, 237; BVG20913
- Belinda Thomson *et al.* (eds.), *Gauguin: Maker of Myth*, exh. cat., London (Tate Modern) / Washington, D.C. (National Gallery of Art), London 2010, no. 89, pp. 151-152, 158, 240; BVG21352
- June Hargrove, *Gauguin*, Paris 2017, pp. 134-135; BVG24803
- Flemming Friberg, *Gauguin: The Master, the Monster and the Myth*, Copenhagen 2023, p. 139; BVG26587

Figures



Fig. 1

Paul Gauguin, *The Pigs or In the Heat of the Day*, 1888, oil on canvas, 73 × 92 cm, private collection



Fig. 2

Detail of Paul Gauguin, *Studies of Women at their Toilet*, 1888, black chalk on paper, 34.2 × 22.8 cm, Fonds des dessins et miniatures, Musée d'Orsay collection, Paris. Photo: (C) RMN-Grand Palais (musée d'Orsay) / Adrien Didierjean



Fig. 3

Edgar Degas, *Woman Bathing*, 1888, pastel on paper on cardboard, 72.5 cm × 57.2 cm, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (purchased with support from the VriendenLoterij, the Mondrian Fund, the Triton Collection Foundation and the members of The Yellow House)



Fig. 4

Paul Gauguin, *Two Bathers*, 1887, oil on canvas, 87.5 × 70 cm, Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, Buenos Aires



Fig. 5

Paul Gauguin, *Portrait of a Woman from Pont-Aven*, probably Marie Louarn, 1888, oil on canvas, 33 × 23 cm, private collection



Fig. 6

Paul Gauguin, *Model, Frontal View*, 1888, black chalk and charcoal, opaque and transparent watercolour on wove paper, 26.3 × 40.4 cm, Jean Bonna collection, Geneva



Fig. 7

Detail of Eugène Delacroix, *The Death of Sardanapalus*, 1827, oil on canvas, 392 × 496 cm, Musée du Louvre, Paris. Photo: © 2018 RMN-Grand Palais (musée du Louvre) / Franck Raux



Fig. 8
Jean-François Millet, *Vineyard Labourer Resting*, 1869, pastel chalk and black chalk on paper, 70.5 × 84 cm, The Mesdag Collection, The Hague

Footnotes

- 01 See Daniel Wildenstein, Sylvie Crussard and Martine Heudron, *Gauguin: premier itinéraire d'un sauvage: catalogue de l'œuvre peint (1873-1888)*, 2 vols., Milan 2001, vol. 2, p. 530. Hereafter Crussard 2001.
- 02 Although the cloth held up by the woman seems to have been painted in with watercolour, here, too, Gauguin used gouache, diluted with water.
- 03 Observations made with a microscope by Nico Lingbeek, paper conservator Van Gogh Museum, 16 August 2019.
- 04 Richard R. Brettell, 'Gauguin the Collector, Gauguin the Impressionist', in Richard R. Brettell and Anne-Birgitte Fonsmark, *Gauguin and Impressionism*, New Haven 2005, p. 65.
- 05 The sheet of sketches after works by Degas is known as page 6 of the *Album Briant*. For the exhibition at Boussod, Valadon & Cie, see John Rewald, 'Theo van Gogh, Goupil and the Impressionists', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 81 (January-February 1973), pp. 17-18. Although it is possible to identify a number of works by Degas after which Gauguin made sketches, the work that served as the example for the sketch in fig. 1 has still not been found, a problem that is exacerbated by the lack of a catalogue to that exhibition.
- 06 Henry Blackburn, *Breton Folk: An Artistic Tour in Brittany*, London 1880, p. 132.
- 07 Charles Chassé, *Gauguin et son temps*, Paris 1955, p. 46.
- 08 See Crussard 2001, pp. 408-10.
- 09 Paul Gauguin, letter to Theo van Gogh, 14 November 1888, in Victor Merlhès, *Correspondance de Paul Gauguin: documents, témoignages: tome premier, 1873-1888*, Paris 1984, no. 181: 'But crikey (as they say), all this bloody rain is a terrible hindrance to plein air painting, and one gives oneself up to painting from memory.' ('Mais coquin de Diou (comme ils disent) le sacré temps de pluie les embête terriblement pour le plein air et on se livre à la peinture de chic.')
- 10 Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh, c. 3 November 1888 [↗ \[717\]](#): 'At the moment he [Gauguin] is working on some women in a vineyard, entirely from memory, but if he doesn't spoil it or leave it there unfinished it will be very fine and very strange.' ('Il a dans ce moment en train des femmes dans une vigne, absolument de tête mais s'il ne le gâte pas ni ne le laisse là inachevé cela sera très beau et très étrange.')
- 11 Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh, 10 November 1888 [↗ \[718\]](#): 'What will please you is that Gauguin has finished his canvas of the women picking grapes, it's as fine as the negresses and if, say, you paid the same price for it as for the negresses (400 I think) that would certainly be good too.' ('Ce qui te fera plaisir c'est que Gauguin a terminé sa toile des vendangeuses, c'est aussi beau que les négresses et si tu la payais le même prix que les négresses supposons (400 je crois) ce serait certes encore bien.') Paul Gauguin, letter to Emile Bernard, second week of November 1888, in Merlhès 1984, no. 179: 'It is my best canvas of this year, and as soon as it is dry, I shall send it to Paris.' ('C'est ma meilleure toile de cette année et aussitôt qu'elle sera sèche je l'enverrai à Paris.')

- 12 Paul Gauguin, letter to Emile Bernard, second week of November 1888, published in Merlhès 1984, no. 179: 'It's an impression of vineyards that I've seen at Arles. I put in some Breton women - never mind the exactness.' ('C'est un effet de vignes que j'ai vu à Arles. J'y ai mis des Bretonnes - Tant pis pour l'exactitude.')
- 13 Chronology according to Douglas W. Druick, Britt Salvesen and Peter Zegers, *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Studio of the South*, exh. cat., Chicago (Art Institute of Chicago) / Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum), New York 2001, pp. 182, 196.
- 14 This is supported by Van Gogh's reference to 'some hay' in a letter to Theo, 11 or 12 November 1888 [↗ \[719\]](#): 'Gauguin's working on a very original nude woman in some hay with some pigs.' ('Gauguin travaille à une femme nue très originale dans du foin avec des cochons.')
- 15 However, he could also imagine that some people might find it puzzling, and therefore unattractive. See Paul Gauguin, letter to Theo van Gogh, c. 22 November 1888, in Merlhès 1984, no. 183: 'If art lovers should find them [*Human Misery* and *The Pigs*] off-putting, don't be afraid to put them aside. As for me, I love them.' ('Si elles [*Misère humaine* et *Les cochons*] devaient effrayer l'amateur ne craignez pas de les mettre de côté, moi je les aime.')
- 16 See the catalogue to the exhibition *Vlme exposition des XX*, Brussels (Musée Royal de Peinture) 1889, no. 8 (*En pleine chaleur*).
- 17 Paul Gauguin, letter to Vincent van Gogh, 17 January 1889 [↗ \[737\]](#): 'Don't bother yourself with the studies that I deliberately left in Arles as not being worth the trouble of transporting them.' ('Ne vous occupez pas des études que j'ai laissées exprès à Arles comme ne valant pas la peine du transport.')
- A fourth drawing that was left behind, *L'Arlésienne (Mme Ginoux, née Marie Julien, 1848-1911)* (1888), was sold by Jo van Gogh-Bonger in 1910 and is now in the collection of the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco. See [Study Sheet with Portraits of Camille Roulin](#).
- 18 This is apparent from the fact that *Model, Frontal View* is not to be found in the inventory of the household effects drawn up for the fire insurance purchased after Theo's death in 1891. Many works that were inherited by Jo van Gogh-Bonger and her son Vincent Willem were on this list. Fire insurance policy Jo van Gogh-Bonger, list of artworks (Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, (Vincent van Gogh Foundation), inv. no. b4557V1982). Not every work in the collection was included in this list. Yet even if *Model, Frontal View* was one of the works excluded from the list, a note concerning its later disappearance from the collection - through a sale or a gift, for example - would have existed. No such note survives.