



Adoration of the Shepherds, 1888

Works Collected by Theo and Vincent van Gogh

# Adoration of the Shepherds

## Emile Bernard

Among the many drawings that Emile Bernard (1868–1941) sent from Brittany to Vincent van Gogh (1853–1890) in Arles in 1888, only one depicts a biblical scene: the Adoration of the Shepherds, from the Gospel According to Luke. <sup>01</sup> This sheet, along with nine other drawings, probably reached Van Gogh on 29 July 1888. <sup>02</sup> The rest of the shipment comprised three brothel drawings, two allegorical scenes and four representations of Breton life. Of these latter four drawings, *Corner of a Chapel* also has religious connotations. <sup>03</sup>

## Crisis

Until the summer of 1888, with possibly a single exception, Bernard's repertoire was devoid of religious themes.<sup>04</sup> However, at the end of June 1888, a shift occurred as he suddenly began to explore religious subjects. For a third consecutive spring, Bernard sought out the peace and quiet of the Breton coastal town of Saint-Briac, where he intended to focus on creating a 'grand tableau', a goal he had not been able to achieve in the previous two years.<sup>05</sup> This third attempt also resulted in failure, as he struggled to complete an ambitious composition depicting a village procession with numerous figures based on drawings after models.<sup>06</sup> Frustrated by the villagers' inability to pose and disheartened by the project's outcome, he referred to it as a 'travail de chien' – dog's work, or sheer drudgery – in a letter to his parents.<sup>07</sup> He had been working for less than four years, yet this setback plunged him into a momentary crisis in which he seemed to have lost direction. Objectives such as working from models, depicting contemporary subjects and creating a 'grand tableau' no longer seemed to hold the same significance for Bernard. By mid-June, he even questioned the very purpose of his artistic endeavours, asking Van Gogh: 'What's the use of working?'<sup>08</sup>

## A shift towards biblical subjects

However, in a letter to his parents a few weeks later, there is no sign of this low point at all. Bernard's spirits seemed to have lifted, and he was suddenly immersed in work and had never before felt so bold.<sup>09</sup> This renewed self-confidence and energy was fuelled by a new project he had undertaken: decorating two of the walls of a studio space he was allowed to use temporarily with biblical themes. On one wall he painted the Circumcision of Christ, on the other the Adoration of the Shepherds. Bernard had previously painted a mural at the inn where he was staying, on commission from the owner, Mme Lemasson (who also owned the house in which his studio was located). While the technique, therefore, may not have been entirely new to Bernard, the subject matter was all the more so. Indeed, the project was not only at odds with what Bernard had created thus far in terms of subject matter, it also marked a departure from his earlier abandoned 'grand tableau': instead of using models for a contemporary village procession, he now relied on his imagination for biblical scenes.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the fixed nature of the decorations meant that he could not take them with him to Pont-Aven or Paris and, moreover, they were unsellable.

The mural depicting the Adoration of the Shepherds measured 2 by 4 metres and featured no fewer than twenty figures, while the one portraying the Circumcision was slightly smaller but still contained at least as many figures, according to Bernard. He executed the decorations using only three colours of ordinary wall paint: blue, red and white.<sup>11</sup> Bernard was fully aware that his work might be lost (which did happen eventually, likely in the 1960s). Realizing the potential for this loss, he had photographs taken of the scenes, but regrettably neither these photographs nor the building have been preserved.<sup>12</sup>



Emile Bernard, Adoration of the Shepherds, 1888, pencil and pen and ink on paper, 22.1 × 40 cm, private collection.

Inscription: 'Emile Bernard peint grandeur nature à St-Briac en 1888. Sur le mur de ma chambre. long. 5 met haut. 2 met.' ('Emile Bernard painted life-size in St-Briac in 1888. On the wall of my bedroom.

Length: 5 metres, height: 2

metres.')

Photo: © 2017

Christie's Images Limited

## Two drawings and a photograph

All that remains of Bernard's mural are a colour photograph capturing a small fragment at the upper right, probably taken just before the building's demolition (fig. 1) , a drawing that may have served as a study for the decoration (fig. 2) , and this drawing, which he sent to Van Gogh.<sup>13</sup> The latter work appears to be a variation of the motif, possibly created shortly after he completed the mural. The distinct outlines in the drawing suggest that it might have served as an exploration for a print, indicating that Bernard intended to share his mural with a wider audience through lithographs or etchings. This could clarify why the composition of the drawing he sent to Van Gogh differs so much from the study for the mural. Bernard adapted the drawing to better suit a lithographic stone or an etching plate, making adjustments such as narrowing the representation and removing the trompe l'oeil columns that were initially meant to integrate the mural into the architecture.<sup>14</sup> Mainly, he elaborated the landscape in the background. These alterations notwithstanding, elements in the study sheet and the drawing Bernard sent to Van Gogh are related. For instance, many of the figures can be recognized in both compositions; the groups of figures at the right in particular exhibit many similarities in both drawings. The bearded man standing behind Mary, a recurring figure in both drawings, can also be identified in the photograph of the remaining fragments of the decoration. Although there may have been the idea of creating a print after the mural, as far as is known, it was never realized.

## Albert Aurier

The fundamental and sudden shift that Bernard underwent in creating these biblical scenes is associated with his encounter with the poet and art critic Albert Aurier (1865–1892), who lived with his mother and sister in nearby Saint-Enogat (Dinard) in 1888.<sup>15</sup> In his memoirs, Bernard describes how Aurier visited Saint-Briac to see the murals he had painted for Mme Lemasson.<sup>16</sup> The two went on long walks and discussed poetry and art.<sup>17</sup> A few years later, Aurier would publish his ground-breaking essay on symbolism in visual art, wherein he argued that an artwork should be a material representation of an idea, rather than an illusory representation of reality. According to Aurier, a simple visual language was most suitable for this purpose, as it prevents the viewer from being distracted by *trompe l'oeil*. Aurier found examples of this in 'primitive' medieval painting, which is predominantly religious in nature.<sup>18</sup>

Aurier's ideas undoubtedly found fertile ground in Bernard's mind.<sup>19</sup> After all, since 1886, he had spent quite a lot of time in Brittany, embracing the 'primitive' way of life as a recurring theme in his work. Yet it was only after meeting Aurier that Bernard's interest shifted towards the region's religious medieval heritage. Looking back, he wrote in his memoirs that through his experiences there, 'little by little, I became once again a man of the Middle Ages.'<sup>20</sup> His fascination with medieval art expanded to Flemish, German and Italian 'primitives', including Jan van Eyck (1390–1441), Lucas Cranach the Elder (1472–1553) and Sandro Botticelli (c. 1445–1510).<sup>21</sup> The influence of the traditional *images d'Épinal* (Épinal prints), with their naive style, also became a source of inspiration for Bernard (fig. 3). Originally produced in Épinal, in the Vosges, these prints were characterized by a simple pictorial idiom and a limited colour palette. They were eminently affordable and immensely popular.

The drawing Bernard sent to Van Gogh reflects his interest in religious medieval heritage, not only in its biblical subject but also because of the economical lineation, the 'naive' rendering of fabrics and the simplified, caricatured portrayal of faces. These characteristics might have been influenced by Bernard's observations of Gothic stained-glass windows, such as those in the Basilique Saint-Sauveur in nearby Dinan. The fact that the drawing appears to have been conceived as a print was possibly also prompted by the omnipresent *images d'Épinal*. The limited use of colour in these prints could also have served as an example for Bernard, since, as mentioned, he used only three colours for the final mural (see fig. 3).



*Nativity (Naissance de N.S. Jesus-Christ)*, 1841, wood engraving in black, coloured with a template, 41.7 × 64 cm, Musée de l'Image, Épinal, MUDAAC collection. Photo: musée de l'Image - Ville d'Épinal / cliché H. Rouyer

## Further down the path of biblical scenes

Bernard's satisfaction with his biblical murals and drawings opened the way to further explore this direction. In 1889, he revisited the theme of the Adoration of the Shepherds twice. First, he made a woodcut of the scene, which he later coloured in with watercolour (fig. 4) . By employing this rudimentary technique, he forced himself to work with simplified forms to impart a medieval aesthetic to his biblical representation.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, he painted the same scene as part of a larger series of biblical paintings, depicting various evangelical episodes (fig. 5) . Over the subsequent years, Bernard continued producing biblical representations in a variety of media. One notable example is his involvement with the magazine *L'Ymagier*, for which he provided a substantial number of biblical prints between 1894 and 1896 (fig. 6) . Throughout these works, the influence of medieval visual culture and the *images d'Epinal* remained prominent in shaping Bernard's artistic expressions.<sup>23</sup>

## Bernard's faith resurrected

From his 1888 stay in Brittany, religion not only began to play an important role in Bernard's art, it also began to impact his personal life profoundly. Bernard was no stranger to the Church; he had lived with his devout grandmother in Lille for long periods during his childhood and attended a Catholic school.<sup>24</sup> Although his faith had receded into the background in the early years of his artistic journey, from 1888 his belief resurfaced with renewed intensity. In hindsight, Bernard wrote: 'Brittany had turned me back into a Catholic ready to fight for the Church.'<sup>25</sup> An excerpt from an 1891 letter by Annie Bonger-van der Linden, the wife of the collector of Bernard's work Andries Bonger (1861-1936), illustrates the form Bernard's devotion had taken: 'Bernard visited us yesterday. [...] He arrived, calm and stately, his hair longer than ever, also shabbier than ever, wearing old, much too large glacé leather gloves, clutching an old, antiquated missal at his chest. He went to mass at Notre-Dame. I hope this religious mania will not last long.'<sup>26</sup>



## Discussions about religion in modern painting

While Van Gogh did not explicitly mention Bernard's drawing of the *Adoration of the Shepherds* after receiving it, his letters to the younger artist do suggest that religion and medieval influences in modern art were topics of discussion. On 26 June 1888, Van Gogh wrote to Bernard: 'You would do very well to read the Bible.'<sup>27</sup> This was around the time Bernard began his wall decoration project, and presumably he had shared his plans with Van Gogh. At that time, Van Gogh had no inkling of the extent to which Bernard's religious reorientation would develop.

Van Gogh himself found comfort in the Bible, and, according to him, it triggered the 'artist's neurosis', by which he probably meant an intense focus on art.<sup>28</sup> However, he also informed Bernard that in his view, studying the Bible was distinct from using biblical subjects for contemporary painting. Van Gogh believed that no one had managed to enhance the words and creations of Christ through their paintings, apart from a handful of artists, including Rembrandt (1606-1669), Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863) and Jean-François Millet (1814-1875): to him, the works of these masters were already perfect. No further additions were needed. Even the Flemish, German and Italian 'primitives' such as Van Eyck, Cranach and Botticelli, whom Bernard had begun to study so intensively after meeting Aurier, Van Gogh dismissed as 'pagans' whose art had little to offer 'from a religious point of view'.<sup>29</sup>



Emile Bernard, *Virgin with Female Saints (La Vierge aux saintes)* from the journal *L'Ymagier* (July 1895), 1895, zincograph in black on laid paper, 47.5 × 35.4 cm, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (gift of Elin and Bengt Ekström)

As an alternative to Bernard's interest in the religious art of the 'primitives', Van Gogh proposed Dutch painting of the seventeenth century as a source of inspiration. The art of this period focused on depicting secular, everyday subjects. Van Gogh remarked: 'Those Dutchmen had scarcely any imagination or fantasy, but great taste and the art of arrangement; they didn't paint Jesus Christ, the Good Lord and others.'<sup>30</sup> He intended to demonstrate to Bernard that he need not necessarily rely on the Bible for subjects in his paintings. To bolster his argument, Van Gogh cited Bernard's earlier, non-religious works, such as portraits of his grandmother and still-life paintings. 'Profound study of the first thing to come to hand, of the first person to come along, was enough to really *create* something.'<sup>31</sup> By writing the word 'create' (*créer*) in italics, he sought to draw a parallel with Christ.

Conversely, discussions about biblical subjects did inspire Van Gogh to make two attempts at painting Christ in the Garden of Olives. However, he ultimately destroyed both works. Upon reflection, he preferred to paint olive groves in his immediate surroundings, as they were, instead of using them as a backdrop for a biblical scene.<sup>32</sup> Gauguin too was inspired by Bernard and introduced religious influences into his work, as is evident in his famous *Vision of the Sermon (Jacob Wrestling with the Angel)* (1888, National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh).<sup>33</sup> However, unlike Bernard, Gauguin was not particularly drawn to biblical scenes. Instead, he used religious imagery primarily as a means of expressing his own inner thoughts and feelings, such as in *Christ in the Garden of Olives* (1889, Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach), in which he portrayed himself as a suffering Christ figure.

Despite Van Gogh's efforts to dissuade him, Bernard remained committed to his exploration of biblical subjects, which had become entrenched in his repertoire. In November 1889, he sent Van Gogh six photographs of his new biblical paintings, including the *Adoration of the Shepherds* (see fig. 5 ).<sup>34</sup> Van Gogh increasingly felt that this new direction was a waste of Bernard's true talent, and in a letter to his sister Willemien (1862-1941), he described the subjects of the paintings as 'bizarre [...] and highly open to criticism'.<sup>35</sup> Responding to the pictures, he wrote to Bernard: 'So, they're a setback, my dear fellow, your biblical paintings, but ... there are few who make mistakes like that, and it's an error, but your return from it will be, I dare to say, astonishing.'<sup>36</sup> Whether Van Gogh truly held hope for Bernard's artistic redirection is a moot point: these lines were penned in his last letter to Bernard.

Joost van der Hoeven  
November 2023

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### Object details

Adoration of the Shepherds

### Artist

Emile Bernard (1868 - 1941)

### Date

1888

### Medium

pencil and pen and India ink on laid paper

### Dimensions

23.3 cm x 27.9 cm

### Inscriptions

Emile Bernard 88

primitieve Kunst. Emile Bernard

### Inventory Number

d0612V1962

### Credits

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)



### Provenance

Adoration of the Shepherds

Sent by the artist from Saint-Briac to Vincent van Gogh, Arles; received by him on 29 July 1888; sent by Vincent van Gogh to his brother, Theo van Gogh, Paris, the same day; 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

#### Adoration of the Shepherds

Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, *Collectie Theo van Gogh*, February 1960, no. 13, *De aanbidding*

Otterlo, Kröller-Müller Museum, *Collectie Theo van Gogh*, April-May 1960, no. 13, *De aanbidding*

London, Tate Gallery, *Gauguin and the Pont-Aven group*, 7 January-13 February 1966, no. 116, *Self-Portrait*

Zurich, Kunsthaus Zürich, *Pont-Aven. Gauguin und sein Kreis in der Bretagne*, 5 March-11 April 1966, no. 131, *Anbetung der Könige*



### Literature

#### Adoration of the Shepherds

- Evert van Uitert and Michael Hoyle (eds.), *The Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh*, Amsterdam 1987, no. 2.28, p. 370
- Fred Leeman, *Émile Bernard (1868-1941)*, Paris 2013, p. 122

# Figures



**Fig. 1**

Fragment of Bernard's mural *Adoration of the Shepherds* in his atelier in Saint-Briac, 1888



**Fig. 2**

Emile Bernard, *Adoration of the Shepherds*, 1888, pencil and pen and ink on paper, 22.1 × 40 cm, private collection. Inscription: 'Emile Bernard peint grandeur nature à St-Briac en 1888. Sur le mur de ma chambre. long. 5 met haut. 2 met.' ('Emile Bernard painted life-size in St-Briac in 1888. On the wall of my bedroom. Length: 5 metres, height: 2 metres.')



**Fig. 3**

*Nativity (Naissance de N.S. Jesus-Christ)*, 1841, wood engraving in black, coloured with a template, 41.7 × 64 cm, Musée de l'Image, Epinal, MUDAAC collection. Photo: musée de l'Image - Ville d'Épinal / cliché H. Rouyer



**Fig. 4**

Emile Bernard, *Adoration of the Shepherds*, 1889, woodcut in black and coloured with watercolour, 60.3 × 47.1 cm, Bibliothèque de l'Institut National d'Histoire de l'Art, Collection Jacques Doucet, Paris



**Fig. 5**

Emile Bernard, *Adoration of the Shepherds*, 1889, oil on canvas, 46 × 55 cm, private collection





Fig. 6

Emile Bernard, *Virgin with Female Saints (La Vierge aux saintes)* from the journal *L'Ymagier* (July 1895), 1895, zincograph in black on laid paper, 47.5 × 35.4 cm, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (gift of Elin and Bengt Ekström)

## Footnotes

- 01 The Van Gogh Museum holds 27 drawings by Bernard that he sent to Van Gogh in five consignments over the course of 1888.
- 02 See the entry for Bernard's *Breton Woman and Child*.
- 03 See the group entry for Bernard's *Breton Watercolours*.
- 04 Jean-Jacques Luthi's 2014 catalogue raisonné lists some religious works from before 1888. Of them, only *L'Annoiation* [*The Annunciation*] (L41) could possibly be dated to 1885 or 1886. The rest must date from after 1888.
- 05 Madeleine Bernard, letter to Emile Bernard, 3 May 1888, in Laure Harscoët-Maire, 'Lettres d'Émile Bernard (1888): de Cancale à Saint-Briac', *Le pays de Dinan* 17 (1997), p. 164: 'Have you started on your grand painting? Does it give you hope?' ('Ton grand tableau est-il commencé? Te donne-t-il de l'espoir?')
- 06 Emile Bernard, letter to his parents, 16 May 1888, in Harscoët-Maire 1997, p. 168: 'I have begun *The Procession*, it is dog work' ('J'ai commencé *La Procession* c'est un travail de chien').
- 07 Emile Bernard, letter to his parents, 4 June 1888, in Harscoët-Maire 1997, p. 172: 'A large canvas painted under the circumstances in which mine was produced is very trying all the same, the models are erratic, pose badly, are not dressed as they should be and despite their apparent willingness, show no lack of unwillingness. A dog's work.' ('C'est bien embêtant tout de même une grande toile faite dans les conditions de la mienne, les modèles sont irréguliers, posent mal, ne sont pas vêtus comme il le faudrait et quoiqu'ils témoignent de leur bonne volonté, ne manquent pas de mauvaise. Travail de chien.')
- 08 Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh, 21 June 1888 ↗ [629]: 'And he [Bernard] asks: "what's the use of working?" But he asks that *while working*; he tells himself that work's of no use whatsoever, while working - which is not at all the same thing as saying it while not working.' ('Et il demande: "à quoi bon travailler"? Seulement il demande cela lui en travaillant, il se dit que le travail ne sert absolument à rien en travaillant - ce qui n'est pas du tout la même chose que de le dire en ne travaillant pas.')
- 09 Emile Bernard, letter to his parents, 4 July 1888, in Harscoët-Maire 1997, p. 176: 'I'm up to my ears in work. [...] I've never felt so bold as since I started this.' ('J'ai du travail jusqu'au dessus des oreilles. [...] Jamais je ne me suis senti si courageux que depuis que j'ai entrepris cela.')
- 10 Emile Bernard, *L'aventure de ma vie*, unpublished manuscript, c. 1939, Bibliothèque de l'INHA, Paris, BCMN Ms 374, p. 69: 'These two compositions were composed of life-size figures, which I derived entirely from my imagination' ('Ces deux compositions étaient formées de figures de grandeur naturelle, que j'imaginai entièrement').
- 11 Emile Bernard, letter to his parents, 4 July 1888, in Harscoët-Maire 1997, p. 176: 'The colour is the colour of a building. I paint it with three, blue, white, red, and I come up with some amusing tones' ('La couleur est de la couleur à bâtiment. Je fais cela avec trois bleu, blanc, rouge et je parviens à des choses amusantes comme tons').



- 12 Ibid.: 'My intention is to have it photographed so that I will thus have a reproduction on hand in case of destruction.' ('Mon intention est de le faire photographier de sorte que j'aurai ainsi en main la reproduction en cas de destruction.')
- 13 At a later date, Bernard inscribed the study in ink: 'Painted life-size in St-Briac in 1888. On the wall of my bedroom. Length: 5 metres; height: 2 metres ('Peint grandeur nature à St Briac en 1888. Sur le mur de ma chambre, long. 5 met.; haut 2 met').
- 14 He also mentioned these columns in his memoirs of 1939. See Bernard 1939, p. 69: 'It winds through columns entwined with vines, with which I designed the ensemble's architectural theme' ('Elle se déroulait à travers des colonnes enlacées de vigne, dont j'avais fait le thème architectural de l'ensemble').
- 15 Fred Leeman, *Émile Bernard (1868-1941)*, Paris 2013, pp. 120-23.
- 16 Bernard 1939: 'This door [the mural suggested a door] afforded me the acquaintance of a poet attracted by the decorations. His name was Albert Aurier and he lived in St Enogat with his mother and sister.' ('Cette porte me valut la connaissance d'un poète attiré par la décorations. Il se nommait Albert Aurier et habitait alors à St Enogat avec sa mère et sa sœur.')
- 17 Ibid.: 'I went on great excursions with Aurier' ('Je fis de grands excursions avec Aurier').
- 18 See G.-Albert Aurier, 'Le symbolisme en peinture: Paul Gauguin', *Mercur de France 2* (March 1891), pp. 155-64.
- 19 Leeman 2013, pp. 120-23.
- 20 Bernard 1939, p. 84: 'Little by little I became once again a man of the Middle Ages; all I loved was Brittany' ('Je redevins peu à peu un homme du Moyen Âge; je n'aimais plus que la Bretagne').
- 21 Vincent van Gogh, letter to Emile Bernard, around 5 August 1888 [↗ \[655\]](#): 'At present..... you're examining primitive Italian and German techniques, the symbolic meaning that the Italians' abstract and mystical drawing may contain. DO SO.' ('Actuellement..... tu es en train de scruter les procédés italiens et allemands primitifs, la signification symbolique que peut contenir le dessin abstrait et mystique des italiens. - Faites.')
- 22 See Jacquelynn Baas and Richard S. Field, 'Emile Bernard's *Adoration of the Shepherds*: New Light on Bernard Chronology', *The Art Bulletin* 66 (1984), no. 2, pp. 321-24.
- 23 Mary Anne Stevens (ed.), *Emile Bernard, 1868-1941: A Pioneer of Modern Art / Ein Wegbereiter der Moderne*, exh. cat., Mannheim (Städtische Kunsthalle Mannheim) / Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum), Zwolle 1990, pp. 300-301.
- 24 Leeman 2013, p. 28.
- 25 Bernard 1939, p. 83: 'La Bretagne avait refait de moi un catholique prêt à lutter pour l'église.'

- 26 Annie Bongher-van der Linden, letter to her parents-in-law, 9 November 1891 (Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, inv. no. b1865V1970). Quoted in Fred Leeman (ed.), *Odilon Redon and Emile Bernard: Masterpieces from the Andries Bongher Collection*, exh. cat., Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum), Amsterdam & Zwolle 2009, p. 31: 'Gisteren is Bernard bij ons geweest. [...] Hij kwam binnen, kalm en statig, zijn haar langer dan ooit, ook shabbier dan ooit, met oude veel te groote glacé handschoenen, die een oud, overoud misboek op zijn borst droegen. Hij ging naar de mis in de Notre-Dame. Ik hoop dat deze religieuze manie niet lang zal duren.'
- 27 Vincent van Gogh, letter to Emile Bernard, 26 June 1888 [↗ \[632\]](#): 'Tu fais très bien de lire la bible.'
- 28 Ibid.: 'When reading your many quotations from Moses, from St Luke, etc., I can't help saying to myself - well, well - that's all he needed. There it is now, full-blown - - - ... the artist's neurosis. Because the study of Christ inevitably brings it on [...]. But the consolation of this so saddening Bible, which stirs up our despair and our indignation - thoroughly upsets us, completely outraged by its pettiness and its contagious folly - the consolation it contains, like a kernel inside a hard husk, a bitter pulp - is of Christ.' ('Involontairement en lisant tes citations multiples de Moïse, de st. Luc &c., tiens - me dis je - il ne lui manquait plus que ça, ça y est maintenant en plein - - - ... la névrose artistique. Car l'étude du christ la donne inévitablement [...]. Mais la consolation de cette bible si attristante, qui soulève notre désespoir et notre indignation - nous navre pour de bon, tout outré par sa petitesse et sa folie contagieuse - la consolation qu'elle contient comme un noyau dans une ecorce dure, une pulpe amère - c'est le christ.')
- 29 Ibid.
- 30 Vincent van Gogh, letter to Emile Bernard, 29 July 1888 [↗ \[649\]](#): 'Ces Hollandais-là n'avaient guère de l'imagination ni de la fantaisie, mais énormément du gout et la science d'arrangement, ils n'ont pas peint des Jesus christ, bon dieu et autres.'
- 31 Vincent van Gogh, letter to Emile Bernard, around 5 August 1888 [↗ \[655\]](#): 'l'étude profonde de la premiere chôse tombant sous la main, de la première personne venue, suffisait pour créer réellement.'
- 32 Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh, 21 September 1888 [↗ \[685\]](#): 'For the second time I've scraped off a study of a Christ with the angel in the Garden of Olives. Because here I see real olive trees.' ('J'ai pour la deuxième fois gratté une étude d'un Christ avec l'ange dans le jardin des oliviers. - Parceque ici je vois les oliviers vrais.')
- See also Louis van Tilborgh, 'Van Gogh, Olive Trees, and His Search for What Turned Out to Be a Modern Pastoral', in Nienke Bakker and Nicole R. Myers (eds.), *Van Gogh and the Olive Groves*, exh. cat., Dallas (Dallas Museum of Art) / Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum), Dallas 2021, pp. 49-60.
- 33 Gauguin painted this picture in Pont-Aven, after Bernard joined him there in August 1888. By then, Bernard had completed his murals and had stories about and possibly even photographs of his new artistic direction.

- 34 The number of works can be deduced from Vincent van Gogh, letter to Willemien van Gogh, 9 or 10 December 1889 [↗ \[827\]](#). About the *Adoration of the Shepherds*, Van Gogh wrote to Bernard: 'Look, in the adoration of the shepherds, the landscape charms me too much for me to dare to criticize, and nevertheless, it's too great an impossibility to imagine a birth like that, on the very road, the mother who starts praying instead of giving suck, the fat ecclesiastical bigwigs, kneeling as if in an epileptic fit, God knows how or why they're there, but I myself don't find it healthy' ('Tenez, dans l'adoration des bergers le paysage me charme trop pour oser critiquer et néanmoins, c'est trop fort comme impossibilité de supposer un enfantement comme ça sur la route même, la mère qui se met à prier au lieu de donner à têter, les grosses grenouilles ecclésiastiques agenouillés comme dans une crise d'épileptiques sont là dieu sait comment et pourquoi, mais je ne trouve pas ça sain moi'). Vincent van Gogh, letter to Emile Bernard, around 26 November 1889 [↗ \[822\]](#).
- 35 Vincent van Gogh, letter to Willemien van Gogh, 9 or 10 December 1889 [↗ \[827\]](#): 'He has just sent me 6 photographs based on paintings he did this year, and in contrast they are bizarre biblical subjects that are highly open to criticism' ('Il vient de m'envoyer 6 photographies d'après des tableaux de lui de cette année et par contraste ce sont des sujets bibliques bizarres et fort critiquables').
- 36 Vincent van Gogh, letter to Emile Bernard, around 26 November 1889 [↗ \[822\]](#): 'Donc, c'est un échec mon brave, tes tableaux bibliques mais ... il y en a peu qui se trompent comme ça et c'est une erreur mais le retour de cela sera j'ose croire épatant.'