



Fisherman and Boat, c. 1885-1886

Collected by Theo and Vincent van Gogh

# Fisherman and Boat

Emile Bernard

The most striking feature of the earliest painting by Emile Bernard (1868–1941) in the Van Gogh Museum's collection is a composition consisting almost entirely of the depiction of water. Our only points of reference are a rowing boat and, directly behind it, the silhouette of a fisherman wearing a top hat, just within the picture frame. Even the horizon disappears from view. To the right of the waterlogged boat, we are afforded a partial glimpse of the quay on which the fisherman is sitting.

## Run-down appearance

The young Bernard must have observed such a scene on the Seine near Asnières, just northwest of Paris. Asnières had been his home since 1884 and he spent a lot of time on the riverbank there.<sup>01</sup> The river figures in many of the paintings Bernard produced during the initial stages of his career, as well as in the surviving early drawings and sketches.<sup>02</sup> The drawings frequently feature a fisherman characterized by a somewhat pitiful and run-down appearance (fig. 1). The portrayal of the fisherman's drooping shoulders and solitary presence in the painting expresses the same mood as in the sketches. While the top hat may seem chic from a contemporary viewpoint, nothing could be further from the truth. During the nineteenth century, even paupers wore hats and were depicted that way.<sup>03</sup>



Emile Bernard, Sketch of a fisherman from the album *L'enfance d'un peintre* (p. 81), c. 1885, black ink on paper, Kunsthalle Bremen - Der Kunstverein in Bremen

In his school days, Bernard had extensively copied magazine illustrations created by Honoré Daumier (1808–1879) and Gustave Doré (1832–1883), a practice that nurtured his interest in depicting types from the lower strata of society.<sup>04</sup> Accordingly, he may have adopted the topos of the fisherman as a transient from Daumier. For instance, Daumier's *The Desperate Fisherman, or There is no Accounting for Taste* (fig. 2) presents the fisherman as a pauper who, in the face of adversity, nevertheless resolutely continues fishing. Moreover, from a young age, Bernard developed a deep appreciation for the naturalist literature of notable authors such as Victor Hugo (1802–1885) and Emile Zola (1840–1902), among others.<sup>05</sup> Their books, like the work of Doré and Daumier, may have inspired Bernard to draw socially engaged subjects. In his album *L'enfance d'un peintre*, Bernard, later in life, assembled a large number of sketches from the period 1882–89, including many depictions of impoverished and lonely individuals wandering aimlessly in the streets.<sup>06</sup> Bernard frequently drew them as black silhouettes (fig. 3 and fig. 4), reminiscent of the figure depicted in his painting, a practice that could have been influenced by the popular shadow plays performed in the Chat Noir cabaret.<sup>07</sup> These sketches, in which Bernard combined his observations from Asnières with a certain naturalist engagement, likely formed the basis for the subject of this painting.

## A new artistic milieu

However, Bernard's social stance is unrelated to the painting's radical composition, its impressionist, loose facture and modern use of colour. The influence behind these elements can be attributed to the avant-garde milieu that Bernard became immersed in from October 1884. At the age of sixteen, he gained admission to the atelier of Fernand Cormon (1845–1924), where aspiring painters practised drawing in the academic manner from models and casts of ancient sculptures.<sup>08</sup> However, during that time, an avant-garde 'wind of revolution' was blowing through the atelier, as Bernard himself later described it.<sup>09</sup> He encountered 'revolutionaries' such as Louis Anquetin (1861–1932), Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec (1864–1901) and Charles Tampier (1855–1908), all of whom were keen to initiate a new chapter in the development of modern painting. Their objective was to master the methods of impressionism in order subsequently to renew it. Outside the atelier, these artists introduced Bernard to the nightlife of Montmartre, soirées where art was discussed and venues that exhibited impressionist art, such as the gallery of Paul Durand-Ruel (1831–1922).<sup>10</sup>

Anquetin in particular played an important role in exposing Bernard to the world of avant-garde art around 1885. In later articles, Bernard wrote that his friend had then been an ardent admirer of Claude Monet (1840–1926), even visiting the older master in his hometown of Giverny and attempting to emulate his style in his own paintings.<sup>11</sup> Among them is *The Kiosk: Boulevard de Clichy, Winter* (fig. 5), which Anquetin gave to Bernard. It depicts a view from the floor above a café on the boulevard de Clichy and showcases an impressionist painting style, along with a striking composition with a pronounced bird's-eye view. The perspective is reminiscent of works by Gustave Caillebotte (1848–1894) and the Japanese ukiyo-e prints that were hugely popular at the time.<sup>12</sup>



Louis Anquetin, *The Kiosk: Boulevard de Clichy, Winter*, 1885–86, oil on canvas, 42.2 × 35.5 cm, private collection

Anquetin's fervour for impressionism had a profound influence on Bernard, evident in the paintings that the aspiring avant-garde artist produced in 1885 and early 1886. One example is his *Little Evening Effect on the Seine, Asnières* (fig. 6), characterized by an impressionist painting style and contrasting complementary colours. Another work, *Street Scene* (fig. 7), shares a similar composition and brushwork with *The Kiosk: Boulevard de Clichy, Winter* (see fig. 5), the painting Anquetin had given Bernard. *Fisherman and Boat* also belongs to this series of early experiments. As with *Street Scene*, Bernard adopted a radical approach to composition, employing the same bird's-eye perspective but replacing the street with the river and the street side with a boat. The impact of Japanese printmaking is obvious, although Bernard, in his later autobiographical writings, only associated this inspiration with his later cloissonist paintings. However, it is likely that his avant-garde friends introduced him to Japanese prints during this early phase as well.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, *Fisherman and Boat* evokes the paintings of Georges Seurat (1859–1891) and Charles Angrand (1854–1926) (fig. 8 and fig. 9), who were also actively working along the banks of the Seine near Asnières at the time.<sup>14</sup> Following *Fisherman and Boat*, Bernard's interest in experimenting with the bird's-eye view persisted, as demonstrated in *Boy Sitting in the Grass*, which he painted soon thereafter.

## Use of colour and painting technique

In *Fisherman and Boat*, Bernard predominantly used various shades of blue and green to depict the water. He applied the scene onto a thin, irregular ground on paper, which was pasted onto a lined canvas at an unknown date.<sup>15</sup> When painting the lighter shades, Bernard employed long, wavy brushstrokes alternated with shorter touches. This technique may have been influenced by Monet, who often depicted his surfaces of water in a similar manner. For example, in Monet's painting *Cabin of the Customs Watch* (fig. 10), he introduced movement to the water by applying light colours in undulating brushstrokes on a dark ground.<sup>16</sup> In May 1885, Bernard, along with Anquetin, Lautrec and Tampier, would have had the opportunity to see that work at the Exposition Internationale de Peinture organized by Georges Petit (1856–1920).<sup>17</sup> The use of complementary colours, specifically blue and orange, in Bernard's paintings must also have been inspired by the work of the impressionists or Anquetin's paintings based on them.<sup>18</sup> According to Bernard's friend Tampier, he excelled in harnessing the contrast between blue and orange, proclaiming him 'the first known master' ('le premier maitre connu') of these colours.<sup>19</sup>

As in other of his early paintings, in *Fisherman and Boat* Bernard synthesized an impressionist painting style and radical composition with a raw mood reminiscent of Daumier. This combination was mainly limited to the early period of his career and reveals that as a young artist he was actively seeking a unique synergy of different strategies to distinguish himself as an avant-garde artist.

Joost van der Hoeven  
November 2023

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**Object details**

Fisherman and Boat

**Artist**

Emile Bernard (1868 - 1941)

**Date**

c. 1885-1886

**Medium**

oil on canvas

**Dimensions**

39.0 cm x 51.5 cm

**Inventory Number**

s0367V1994

**Credits**

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)



## Fisherman and Boat

### Front & Back



### Provenance

#### Fisherman and Boat

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; after the death of Vincent Willem van Gogh on 28 January 1978, bequeathed to his heirs; transferred by the heirs of Vincent Willem van Gogh to the Vincent van Gogh Foundation, Amsterdam, 2 September 1994; since then on permanent loan to the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.





## Exhibitions

### Fisherman and Boat

Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh, *Neo-impressionisten: Seurat tot Struycken*, 28 May-7 August 1988, no. 37, *Vissende voddenraper*

Gothenburg, Göteborgs Konstmuseum, *Friction of Ideas: Gauguin, Van Gogh, Bernard*, 19 July-19 October 2014, no. 89, *Ragpicker Fishing*

Den Bosch, Noordbrabants Museum, *Van Goghs intimi. Vrienden, familie, modellen*, 21 September 2019-12 January 2020, no. 51, *Vissende voddenman*

Chicago, Art Institute of Chicago, *Van Gogh and the Avant-Garde. The Modern Landscape*, 14 May-4 September 2023

Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *Van Gogh aan de Seine*, 13 October 2023-14 January 2024



## Literature

### Fisherman and Boat

- Bogomila Welsh-Ovcharov, *Vincent van Gogh and the Birth of Cloisonism*, exh. cat., Toronto (Art Gallery of Ontario) / Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum), Toronto 1981, pp. 286–87
- Evert van Uitert and Michael Hoyle (eds.), *The Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh*, Amsterdam 1987, no. I.22, p. 309
- Ellen Wardwell Lee et al. (eds.), *Neo-Impressionisten: Seurat tot Struycken*, exh. cat., Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum), Zwolle & Amsterdam 1988, no. 37, p. 86
- Ronald de Leeuw, *The Van Gogh Museum: Paintings and Pastels*, Zwolle 1994, p. 113
- Aukje Vergeest, *The French Collection: Nineteenth-Century French Paintings in Dutch Public Collections*, Amsterdam 2000, no. 77, p. 70
- 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, pp. 41, 44
- Marije Vellekoop et al. (eds.), *Van Gogh's Studio Practice*, Amsterdam & Brussels 2013, pp. 266, p. 383 n. 99
- Anne-Birgitte Fonsmark, *Van Gogh, Gauguin, Bernard: Friction of Ideas*, exh. cat., Charlottenlund (Ordrupgaard Museum) 2014, pp. 98–99, 199

- 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. 36, p. 143
- Sjaar van Heugten and Helewise Berger, *Van Goghs intimi: Vrienden, familie, modellen*, exh. cat., 's Hertogenbosch (Noordbrabants Museum), Zwolle 2019, no. 51, pp. 73-74, 212



### Letters

#### Fisherman and Boat

- Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh, Arles, 15 July 1888, [↗ 640](#)

# Figures



**Fig. 1**

Emile Bernard, Sketch of a fisherman from the album *L'enfance d'un peintre* (p. 81), c. 1885, black ink on paper, Kunsthalle Bremen - Der Kunstverein in Bremen



**Fig. 2**

Honoré Daumier, 'The Desperate Fisherman, or There is no Accounting for Taste', reproduced in *La Caricature 2*, no. 31, August 1, 1840, Davison Art Center, Wesleyan University. Purchase funds, 1964. Photo: M. Johnston



**Fig. 3**  
Emile Bernard, Sketch of a figure in a landscape from the album *L'enfance d'un peintre*, c. 1885, charcoal on paper, Kunsthalle Bremen - Der Kunstverein in Bremen



**Fig. 4**  
Emile Bernard, Sketch of figures along the Seine from the album *L'enfance d'un peintre*, c. 1885, black ink on paper, Kunsthalle Bremen - Der Kunstverein in Bremen



**Fig. 5**

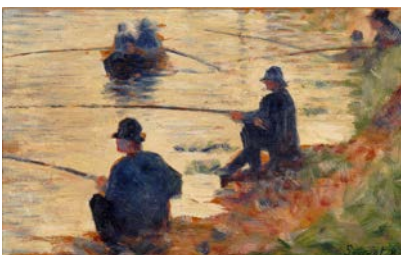
Louis Anquetin, *The Kiosk: Boulevard de Clichy, Winter*, 1885–86, oil on canvas, 42.2 × 35.5 cm, private collection

**Fig. 6**

Emile Bernard, *Little Evening Effect on the Seine, Asnières*, 1886, oil on canvas, 37 × 54 cm, private collection

**Fig. 7**

Emile Bernard, *Street Scene*, 1885, oil on canvas, 37.9 × 31.1 cm, private collection

**Fig. 8**

Georges Seurat, *The Anglers, Study for La Grande Jatte*, 1883, oil on canvas, 16 × 25 cm, Musée d'art moderne, Troyes. Photo: RMN-Grand Palais / Gérard Blot





**Fig. 9**

Charles Angrand, *The Seine at Saint-Ouen, Morning*, 1886, oil on canvas, 46 × 55.4 cm, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (purchased with support from the VriendenLoterij)



**Fig. 10**

Claude Monet, *Cabin of the Customs Watch*, 1882, oil on canvas, 61 × 81.9 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Bequest of Julia B. Engel, 1984. Photo: copyright The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource/Scala, Florence

## Footnotes

- 01 Fred Leeman, *Émile Bernard (1868-1941)*, Paris 2013, p. 40.
- 02 Many of these sketches are found in the album *L'enfance d'un peintre*, Kunsthalle Bremen.
- 03 For example, see the paintings of ragpickers by Jean-Francois Raffaelli, such as *The Rag Picker*, Sotheby's New York, 18 April 2008, no. 116.
- 04 Mary Anne Stevens, 'Introduction: Emile Bernard and his Artistic and Literary Context', in 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, p. 16.
- 05 Ibid.
- 06 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, p. 8.
- 07 Artist friends Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Louis Anquetin were regulars at Le Chat Noir and it is quite possible that they took Bernard there. See Frederic Destremeau, *Louis Anquetin et Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec: amitié, environnement, rencontre et résonance* (diss., Université de Paris IV – Sorbonne, 1994), pp. 85-87.
- 08 Madeleine Bernard, letter to Emile Bernard, 25 September 1884: 'You will join Cormon's atelier' ('Tu vas entrer chez Cormon'). Fonds van Bogaert, Bibliothèque Royale, Brussels, quoted in Neil McWilliam (ed.), *Émile Bernard: les lettres d'un artiste (1884-1941)*, Dijon 2012, no. 1, n. 6.
- 09 Emile Bernard, 'Louis Anquetin: artiste peintre', *Mercure de France* (1 November 1932), pp. 590-607, in Anne Rivière (ed.), *Émile Bernard, propos sur l'art*, 2 vols., Paris 1994, vol. 1, p. 261: 'Ever since I joined the atelier, a wind of revolution had been blowing through the theories it espoused. It came, they said, "from Durand Ruel's shop", to which Anquetin and Lautrec made frequent visits' ('Justement, dès mon entrée à l'atelier, un vent de révolte avait soufflé sur les théories du lieu. Il venait, disait-on, de "la boutique à Durand Ruel" où Anquetin et Lautrec faisaient de fréquentes visites').
- 10 Bernard 1932, in Rivière 1994, vol. 1, p. 261: 'My new friends made a point of taking me to rue Lafitte, and I became acquainted with the works of the impressionists' ('Mes nouveaux amis n'avaient pas manqué de me conduire rue Lafitte, et j'avais fait connaissance avec les œuvres impressionnistes').
- 11 Emile Bernard, 'Louis Anquetin', *Gazette de beaux-arts*, first half of 1934, in Rivière 1994, vol. 1, p. 273: 'The visit to Claude Monet was therefore motivated by the belief, still held at that time, that the colour theories held dear by Delacroix had become those of the impressionists, and that it would only be through the impressionists that it would be possible to know them. Anquetin had therefore gone to Vétheuil [*sic*: Giverny], and stayed there, in order to better acquire what he desired.' ('La visite à Claude Monet fut donc motivée par la croyance, où l'on restait alors, que les théories de couleurs chères à Delacroix étaient devenues celles des impressionnistes, et que ce serait seulement par eux qu'on parviendrait à les connaître. Anquetin était donc allé à Vétheuil [*sic*. Giverny], et s'y était fixé. pour mieux acquérir ce qu'il convoitait.')



- 12 Bernard 1932, in Rivière 1994, vol. 1, p. 262: 'From the first floor of a café on the Boulevard de Clichy, where the pupils of Cormon's atelier had founded a circle, he painted an advertising kiosk in the light reflected by the road. I kept this study that he gave me as a gift [...] for this experiment he had conformed to impressionist theory in every aspect.' ('Du premier étage d'un café du boulevard de Clichy, où les élèves de l'atelier Cormon avaient fondé un cercle, il peignit un kiosque à affiches dans la lumière reflétée par la chaussée. J'ai conservé cette étude dont il me gratifia [...] il s'était conformé en tout, pour cette expérience, à la théorie impressionniste.') In his unpublished memoirs *L'aventure de ma vie*, Bernard noted that Anquetin's 'mistress' owned several works by Caillebotte, which could explain his experiments with composition. See Emile Bernard, *L'aventure de ma vie*, unpublished manuscript, c. 1939, Bibliothèque de l'INHA, Paris, BCMN Ms 374, p. 67: 'She loved the impressionists and had a few paintings by Caillebotte at home' ('Elle aimait les impressionnistes et avait chez elle quelques toiles de Caillebotte').
- 13 Emile Bernard, 'Notes sur l'école dite de "Pont-Aven"', *Mercure de France* 48 (1903), p. 678, in Rivière 1994, vol. 1, p. 63: 'Cloisonnism: The study of Japanese *crépons* [woodblock prints] led us towards simplicity, we created cloisonnism (1886)' ('Le Cloisonnisme: L'étude des crépons japonais nous mène vers la simplicité, nous créons le cloisonnisme [1886]').
- 14 Leeman 2013, p. 44.
- 15 This primer consists of a mixture of calcium carbonate (natural or synthetic chalk) and lead white. In a cross-section taken at the lower right edge can be seen some black particles on the paper, which could indicate the presence of an underdrawing. Due to the irregularity of the ground, that underdrawing partly ended up on an ungrounded area of the paper. However, an underdrawing has not been discerned either with the naked eye or with infrared reflectography. With thanks to René Boitelle, paintings conservator, 17 July 2023.
- 16 Daniel Wildenstein. *Monet: catalogue raisonné*, 4 vols., Cologne 1996, vol. 2, p. 273, no. 731.
- 17 Galerie Georges Petit, *Exposition internationale de peinture: quatrième année*, 15 May - ? 1885.
- 18 Underlying the impressionists' colour theories was Charles Blanc's *Grammaire des arts du dessin, Livre troisième: Peinture* (Paris 1867). However, there is no indication that Bernard was familiar with this book at this stage of his career.
- 19 Emile Bernard, letter to his parents, 22 May 1886, in McWilliam, no. 7: 'I indulge with passion and rage in all the horrors of sky blue and orange. I am the first known master of them, as Tampier says.' ('Je me livre à une passion et une rage à toutes les horreurs du bleu céleste et de l'orangé. J'en suis du reste le premier maître connu comme dit Tampier.')