
Bernard, Emile

(b Lille, April 28, 1868; d Paris, April 15, 1941).

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French painter and writer. He was the son of a cloth merchant. Relations with his parents were never harmonious, and in 1884, against his father's wishes, he enrolled as a student at the Atelier Cormon in Paris. There he became a close friend of Louis Anquetin and Toulouse-Lautrec. In suburban views of Asnières, where his parents lived, Bernard experimented with Impressionist and then Pointillist colour theory, in direct opposition to his master's academic teaching; an argument with Fernand Cormon led to his expulsion from the studio in 1886. He made a walking tour of Normandy and Brittany that year, drawn to Gothic architecture and the simplicity of the carved Breton calvaries. In Concarneau he struck up a friendship with Claude-Emile Schuffenecker and met Gauguin briefly in Pont-Aven. During the winter Bernard met van Gogh and frequented the shop of the colour merchant Julien-François Tanguy, where he gained access to the little-known work of Cézanne.

In collaboration with Anquetin, in 1887–8 Bernard devised a manner of painting using strong black contours and flat colour areas. Their new works, mostly on Parisian themes, were first exhibited in a joint exhibition with van Gogh and Toulouse-Lautrec at the Grand Restaurant-Bouillon in the Boulevard de Clichy in November 1887. Anquetin also took part in the Salon des Indépendants in March 1888, where the critic Edouard Dujardin (1861–1949) dubbed this new post- or anti-Impressionist style Cloisonnism. The style reflected the influence of Cézanne as well as the impact of Japanese woodcuts, popular *images d'Epinal*, enamels and stained glass. Bernard's second meeting with Gauguin in Pont-Aven that summer was more fruitful on both sides. Bernard's ideas fired Gauguin's enthusiasm, and Bernard's important painting *Breton Women in the Meadow* (1888; France, priv. col.), a starkly drawn and crudely painted composition depicting a Breton Pardon, enabled Gauguin to go on to produce his own revolutionary painting *Vision after the Sermon: Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* (1888; Edinburgh, N.G.) in a similar style and composition. Bernard exhibited Cloisonnist paintings and prints of Breton inspiration alongside Gauguin and other artists at the Exposition Universelle of 1889, at the Café Volpini. This exhibition acted as a catalyst on the Nabi group and drew a number of new adherents to the Pont-Aven school.

In 1892 Bernard organized the first French retrospective of the work of van Gogh, who had died in 1890, and in the same year he exhibited works of a Symbolist and religious character at the first Salon de la Rose + Croix. His close association with Gauguin had ended bitterly in 1891 when the latter was hailed by Georges-Albert Aurier as the leader of Symbolism and initiator of the Synthetist manner, an honour Bernard felt by rights should be his own. In subsequent years Bernard wrote a number of articles attempting to set the record straight, but his integrity as a historian remains questionable. In particular he was guilty of ante-dating some of his early paintings.

Having abandoned plans to travel abroad with Gauguin, Bernard went instead to Italy in 1893 and thence to Egypt, where he lived until 1903, concentrating mainly on painting scenes of street life in Cairo. His conscientious studies of the Old Masters of the Renaissance, particularly the Venetians, progressively drew him away from the primitive flatness of Cloisonnism towards a more realistic

representation of volumes. A prolonged period in Venice in 1903 enabled Bernard to follow through his interest in monumental figure compositions: nudes and brothel scenes, such as the *Prostitutes of Cairo* (1898; priv. col., see Luthi, no. 569), were recurrent themes.

On his return to France in 1904 Bernard set up home in Tonnerre. Having already published a selection of his letters from van Gogh in the mid-1890s, Bernard resumed his art historical work: he visited his revered hero Cézanne, by then an old man, in Aix-en-Provence, and their carefully structured conversations and correspondence (see Doran) constitute an important first-hand account of Cézanne's ideas on art and working methods. In 1905 Bernard founded a new art journal, *Rénovation Esthétique*, which he edited until 1910. Some of his writings were published under pseudonyms, including Jean Dorsal, Francis Lepeseur and H. Lebreton.

Bernard had a complex and anxious personality, and his stylistic shifts and equivocations have been taken as signs of weakness. After World War I he produced innumerable female portraits and nudes in a slick, highly finished manner that belied his avant-garde origins. The ambitious series of monumental figure paintings, the *Human Cycle*, on which he worked in Venice from 1922 to 1925, second versions being produced in Paris (Venice, Guggenheim), were a major but consciously retrogressive undertaking. Conceived in the spirit of Michelangelo (to whose work Bernard dedicated his book *Le Grand et Admirable Michel-Ange*, 1925), these four compositions were also intended to evoke the grandeur of Homeric and Wagnerian epics.

Writings

L'Esthétique fondamentale et traditionnelle d'après les maîtres de tous les temps (Paris, 1910)

Sur l'art et sur les maîtres (Paris, 1922)

Le Grand et Admirable Michel-Ange (Tonnerre, 1925)

Sur Paul Cézanne (Paris, 1925)

La Connaissance de l'art (Paris, 1935)

'L'Aventure de ma vie', intro. to *Lettres de Paul Gauguin à Emile Bernard* ed. P. Cailler (Geneva, 1954)

Many articles on Cézanne, Gauguin, van Gogh, Redon and others in *Amour A.*, *Mercure France*, *Nouv. Rev. Egypte Occident* etc

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Emile Bernard (rétrospective) (exh. cat., Lille, Mus. B.-A., 1967)

P. M. Doran, ed.: *Conversations avec Cézanne* (Paris, 1978), pp. 23-5, 30-42, 49-80, 162-5

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J.-J. Luthi: *Emile Bernard: Catalogue raisonné de l'oeuvre peint* (Paris, 1982)

See also

Gauguin, Paul

Gauguin, Paul, §1(iii): 1888: Pont-Aven and Emile Bernard

Le Barc de Boutteville, Louis

Tapestry, §II, 5: 1801-1914

External resources

Toulouse-Lautrec, Henri de: Emile Bernard, 1885, Tate (London) [_<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/toulouse-lautrec-emile-bernard-t00465>](http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/toulouse-lautrec-emile-bernard-t00465)

Bernard, Emile: Yellow Tree, c. 1892, Muse des Beaux-Arts (Rennes) [_<http://www.mbar.org/collections/catalogue/19-20/136-137.htm>](http://www.mbar.org/collections/catalogue/19-20/136-137.htm)

Bernard, Emile: Self-portrait with Portrait of Gauguin, 1888, Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh (Amsterdam) [_<http://www3.vangoghmuseum.nl/vgm/index.jsp?page=4739&collection=454&lang=en>](http://www3.vangoghmuseum.nl/vgm/index.jsp?page=4739&collection=454&lang=en)

Bernard, Emile: Bernard's Grandmother, 1887, Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh (Amsterdam) [_<http://www3.vangoghmuseum.nl/vgm/index.jsp?page=4113&collection=454&lang=en>](http://www3.vangoghmuseum.nl/vgm/index.jsp?page=4113&collection=454&lang=en)

Bernard, Emile: Iron Bridges at Asnieres, 1887, Museum of Modern Art (New York) [_<http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A511&page_number=1&template_id=6&sort_order=1>](http://www.moma.org/collection/browse_results.php?criteria=O%3AAD%3AE%3A511&page_number=1&template_id=6&sort_order=1)