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# Sérusier, (Louis) Paul (Henri)

(b Paris, Nov 9, 1864; d Morlaix, Oct 6, 1927).

Belinda Thomson

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French painter and theorist. Son of a wealthy perfume and glove manufacturer, he was a star pupil at the Lycée Condorcet in Paris, early on showing a bent towards philosophy. Having little inclination for business, Sérusier was eventually allowed to follow his chosen career of art. He studied at the Académie Julian (1885–90), where his popularity and wide-ranging intellectual gifts led to his election as chief student monitor (*massier*). This position gave him a certain authority, which was increased when his painting of a *Breton Weaver* (1888; Senlis, Mus. A. & Archéol.) won an honourable mention at the Salon of 1888.

Sérusier's encounter with Gauguin in Pont-Aven that year proved decisive in changing his stylistic direction away from a dark-toned naturalism towards a more arbitrary, anti-naturalistic use of colour and simplification of form. Under Gauguin's direction he started to paint a small landscape from nature, the *Bois d'Amour at Pont-Aven* ('*The Talisman*', 1888; Paris, Mus. d'Orsay). Gauguin encouraged him to use colours 'straight from the tube' in order to render with simple and exaggerated force his subjective view of nature. The result of the hasty lesson was left by Sérusier in its embryonic state, a bold pattern of flat colour shapes, scarcely recognizable as a landscape and considerably more abstract than Gauguin's own work. At the Académie Julian, Sérusier used it to demonstrate and spread Gauguin's message on Synthetism to fellow students such as Maurice Denis (his first convert), Pierre Bonnard, Paul Ranson, Ker-Xavier Roussel, Henri-Gabriel Ibels and Edouard Vuillard. Among them the painting came to be known as '*The Talisman*' because of its iconic importance. Sérusier was thus the leading force in the formation of a group known as the Nabis. His quasi-religious commitment to the idea of an artistic brotherhood was not fully shared by the other members. He wrote to Denis in 1889, 'I dream for the future of a purified fraternity, made up only of committed artists, lovers of beauty and truth, who combine in their works and their lives that indefinable quality I translate by Nabi.'

Sérusier was a keen student of Neo-Platonist philosophy and of theosophy, and he introduced Gauguin, among others, to Edouard Schuré's *Les Grands Initiés* (1889), a study of comparative religions. During the summers of 1889 and 1890 Sérusier worked closely with Gauguin in Brittany, and on Gauguin's departure for Tahiti in 1891 Sérusier was left in the position of trustee of the Pont-Aven aesthetic. In the early 1890s he took part with the other Nabis in group exhibitions in Paris. He was fully involved with the Nabis' theatrical work (his brother was an actor), designing sets, costumes and programmes for the Théâtre d'Art and the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre. In 1896 he made masks and painted sets for the riotous first performance of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*. However, unlike most of the other Nabis, Sérusier made Brittany his main base for painting, forsaking the increasingly popular Pont-Aven for the less altered hinterland. He established studios first in Huelgoat (1891), then in Châteauneuf-du-Faou (1893), and he concentrated on Breton subject-matter, particularly on the traditional labours performed by women—fetching water, carrying laundry, spinning—in an attempt to capture the image of the rituals associated with Brittany's Celtic past before they disappeared from memory. Typical of such themes, *Women Waiting at the Fountain* (1896; Geneva, Petit Pal.) was originally part of a decorative scheme painted for Georges Lacombe, the Nabi sculptor, in which the hieratic stances and

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costumes of the women were to some extent derived from Egyptian art. In later paintings such as *The Spinners* (c. 1918; Paris, Mus. d'Orsay), Sérusier's stylistic debt to Gauguin had given way to a stiff decorative manner reminiscent of medieval tapestry. Like other Nabis, he was attracted to mural painting and decorated the walls of the house he built at Châteauneuf-du-Faou with frescoes. He cultivated a harsh, rustic awkwardness in his drawing style and in his handling of paint eschewed slick or sensual effects in favour of the dry, matt surfaces of Egyptian encaustic or quattrocento fresco, examples of which he had studied in museums and on frequent trips to Italy.

From the first Sérusier had been preoccupied by developing a coherent theoretical system out of the somewhat random recommendations of Gauguin. Although Sérusier had no religious vocation, the conversion to Catholicism of his Nabi friends Jan Verkade and Mogens Ballin, and their decision to join the Beuron monastery in Germany, had considerable repercussions for him. Verkade brought Sérusier into contact with the aesthetic teachings of the Benedictine painter-monk Didier [Desiderius] Lenz (1832–1928). The Beuron aesthetic gave new impetus to Sérusier's philosophical and aesthetic theorizing at a time when he was growing disenchanted with the increasingly untheoretical individualism of some of his Nabi brothers, but his renewed attempts to proselytize fell on deaf ears. Following his visits to Beuron he gradually evolved a complicated theory of colour use based on the rigid separation of the warm from the cold tones of the palette in order to avoid the 'cacochromie' (jarring colour mixtures) so rampant and detrimental in modern painting and decoration. He believed in art as a 'universal language expressed through symbols' and was fascinated by the concept of geometrical laws governing beauty. He set out these rules in his painter's manual, *A B C de la peinture*, the writing of which was prompted by his work from 1909 as a voluntary professor at the Académie Ranson.

For many commentators, Sérusier's theoretical obsessions inhibited his development as a painter, and the influence of Lenz's theories brought an uncomfortable stiffness to much of his work. He himself seems to have realized this in later life. His major importance was as a catalyst for the Nabi movement; as a theorist his ideas bridged the gap between the naturalist aesthetic of the late 19th century and the more theoretical, geometrical preoccupations of artists in the 20th century.

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## See also

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