French Paintings and Pastels, 1600–1945

The Collections of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art

Aimee Marcereau DeGalan, Editor

The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art

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Paul Gauguin, *Autumn in Brittany (The Willow Tree)*, 1889

Artist	Paul Gauguin, French, 1848–1903
Title	*Autumn in Brittany (The Willow Tree)*
Object Date	1889
Alternate and Variant Titles	*L'Automne en Bretagne*; *Paysage de Bretagne*; *Le saule pleurer*
Medium	Oil on canvas
Dimensions (Unframed)	36 1/4 x 28 7/8 in. (92.1 x 73.3 cm)
Signature	Signed and dated: P Gauguin 89
Credit Line	The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. Gift of Henry W. and Marion H. Bloch, 2015.13.9

doi: 10.37764/78973.5.714

Catalogue Entry

Citation

Chicago:

Elizabeth C. Childs, "Paul Gauguin, *Autumn in Brittany (The Willow Tree)*, 1889," catalogue entry in *French Paintings and Pastels, 1600–1945: The Collections of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, ed. Aimee Marcereau DeGalan (Kansas City: The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 2022), https://doi.org/10.37764/78973.5.714.5407.

MLA:

Childs, Elizabeth C. "Paul Gauguin, *Autumn in Brittany (The Willow Tree)*, 1889," catalogue entry. *French Paintings and Pastels, 1600–1945: The Collections of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, edited by Aimee Marcereau DeGalan, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 2022. doi: 10.37764/78973.5.714.5407.

Brittany, the northwesternmost province of France, was a source of lasting interest and inspiration for Paul Gauguin. After first visiting the area in the summer of 1886, he found it a pragmatic choice for an artistic base, as it was a well-established artists' colony that was extremely affordable in comparison to Paris. He was also drawn to Brittany as a remote alternative to the urban modernity of Paris (and even to the smaller city of Rouen, his residence in 1884). Further, it was attractive to him as a region that cultivated and promoted its Celtic and medieval heritage, not only in an era of competition for regional distinction in France, but also for the sake of the waves of international tourists who visited the region and supported its economy in the last decades of the nineteenth century.[1] For Gauguin, the Breton landscape offered precious solace; he wrote in 1888 that he believed that he could live there "in silent contemplation of nature, devoting myself entirely to my art."[2] In Brittany, he regarded both nature and the communities of rural workers within the broader population of the province as equally necessary to his quest for an essentialized rural experience. He wrote, "I like Brittany, I find a certain wildness and primitiveness here. When my clogs resound on this granite soil, I hear the muffled sound, dull and powerful, that I am looking for in my painting."[3] This phrase, while poetic, reveals the

romantic and archaizing ideas that underscored his perception of this rural culture as frozen in an allegedly simpler, premodern era. It is through this practice of fusing imaginatively the realms of the human and the botanical in an antimodernist vision (typical of modernist primitivism) that we can best discern his approach to the Breton landscape.[4]

In 1889, Gauguin returned to Brittany from Paris and moved to the seaside town of Le Pouldu, where he took up residence at an inn run by Marie Henry.[5] Gauguin lived there with fellow artist Meyer Isaac de Haan (Dutch, 1852–1895) and painted in the area from October 2, 1889, until early February 1890.[6] He designed works to enhance an overall decorative scheme in the inn's dining room and further pondered the powers of form and color in order to construct harmonious compositions that would engage the viewer as much through formal means as through their ostensible subject.

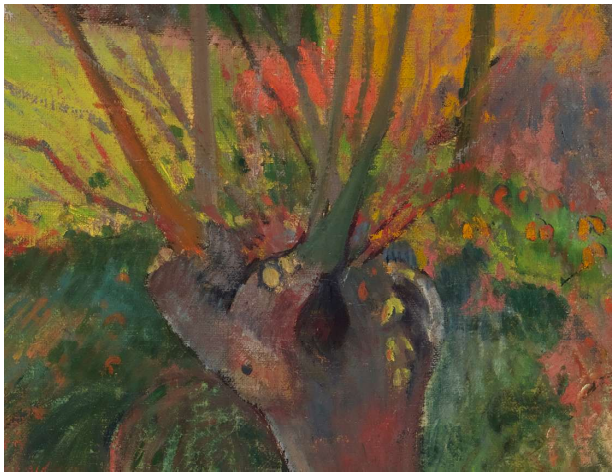

Fig. 1. Detail of Paul Gauguin, *Autumn in Brittany (The Willow Tree)*, 1889

This canvas is a progressive one, both decorative and abstract for its moment. The viewer is drawn immediately to boldly colored areas of contrasting colors that engage our attention before we fully "read" the picture's social or cultural content. While the overall composition is largely a concert of complementary greens and reds, three areas of very bright hues dominate. Noticeably, a road enters the scene at the left border only to push emphatically toward the foreground edge. Two worn parallel paths or ruts in the road, highlighted in salmon, spill into the viewer's space in a proto-Fauvist manner.[7] In the distant middle ground, glimpsed mostly through the bare branches of a majestic willow, a bright, light green field beckons. Within it stands a more muted, darker green tree and a surprisingly undeveloped orange-red mass. This may suggest dense foliage, appropriate for a fall scene, but the organic form has an independent, pulsating energy that cannot be fully ascribed to the leaves of a changing season. Finally, at the left edge of the canvas, above a brown trunk, clusters of tangerine and green vibrate, constituting the multicolored crown of yet another, smaller willow tree. Both strange and intriguing, these trees differ from one another and are intensely painted with contrasting tones. If we linger over the finer details, we may get lost, for example, in a maelstrom of complementary colors that explode (Fig. 1) on the bulbous trunk of the massive willow at right. One is reminded here of the artist's joyous play with color, verging on abstract patterning, found in some of his richly glazed and highly experimental ceramics produced in Paris the previous year (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2. Paul Gauguin, *Vase with the Portrait Mask of a Woman*, 1887–1888, partially glazed stoneware with gilded highlights, 7 1/6 x 5 15/16 x 5 15/16 in. (18 x 15 x 15 cm), Association des Amis du Petit Palais, Geneva; reproduced in Gloria Groom, ed., *Gauguin: Artist as Alchemist*, exh. cat. (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2017), no. 81, p. 156

Although the composition is a vertical one, the block of trees and vegetation that spans the scene horizontally is a dominant compositional force. The line of shrubbery

itself may be an overgrown fence, or more likely a hedgerow cultivated to mark the borders of neighboring farms. In any case, it is invaded here by diverse plants: the prolific willow trees that grow on either side of the fence, the smaller trees with feathery branches that reach toward the sky, and, at the far right, an intertwined mesh of colorful leaves that cannot be resolved, even by slow looking, into separate plants. Confronted with such a frenzy, the viewer remains engaged by the overall decorative rhythm of the painting and by small areas of abstract and resonating drops of color. It is only by stepping back that the viewer regains a more literal sense of perspectival recession and three-dimensional form.

The vertical orientation of the picture allows Gauguin to incorporate a legible receding landscape into his decorative scheme, glimpsed through the intertwined and soaring branches of the willows. Some of the branches are wiry and thin, reaching toward the sky. Some convey the more bulbous and idiosyncratic form of gnarled "air roots," a distinctive feature of the willow. One tall branch at the far right, piercing the horizon line, demands to be read as an independent form, more like the head of a bass or a cello than a tree. The detail may, in fact, reference Gauguin's abiding belief in the power of music, which he had come to appreciate as a high form of pure, non-mimetic expression.[8] Indeed, in this moment, Gauguin was developing his larger identification with the Paris-based Symbolist movement, cultivating a capacity to suggest broader and (ideally) universally accessible meanings in his art that transcend empirical form and the imitation of nature.[9]

This complex scene is inhabited, but the figures, quasi-hidden in plain sight in the foreground, are subordinate to the explosion of vegetal form and color. The four figures, clothed simply, appear as stock characters compared to the complexity and variety of the landscape they inhabit. At lower right stand two Breton women, identifiable by their regional headdresses and *sabots* (wooden shoes). Their heads bent over sloped shoulders, they are isolated from the men and, by contrast, they appear less active. One, on the left, holds a wisp of a willow branch, perhaps intended to be used for weaving baskets. Their primary role in the scene, however, is not as laborers, and certainly not as specific individuals, but rather as prominent signposts—by virtue of their costume—for the specific region depicted in the scene. They locate us geographically, just as the blue strip of sea in the opposite corner, at the upper left horizon, speaks to the probable setting of the coastal town Le Pouldu. The landscape in between these two rather standard corner motifs (the rural women, a staple of Salon painting of the time,[10] and the sea on the horizon) unfolds unpredictably with intense variety and visual interest.

In the middle foreground, one of the men leans over the ground, perhaps to move a stone. We see no face beneath the round hat, and his two hands fuse as one—all choices that make his cohesive rounded shape harmonize well with nearby forms of trunks and foliage. It is the blue of his farmer's jacket that first distinguishes him as human, not vegetal. And, most hidden of all, at far left is a dark-clad figure whose form recedes as the salmon-hued foliage he works on first pops to our attention. Unlike the women in the scene, the men reach, stretch, and pull, engaged in labor. They are inhabitants and laborers, but the promise of their own stories and dramas is thin compared to the lure of nature here, in its cacophonous hues and interlocking forms that continually invite our eye and our attention.

Between the laborer on the left and the salmon-hued road is an ambiguous tall gray form, firmly planted in the ground. It probably depicts a stone menhir, a carved ceremonial stone from the Bronze age that is particularly common, even today, in northwestern France and in Britain. This form conjures the Celtic culture of spirits that some in this era still believed to inhabit this landscape. Although much larger menhirs populate the landscape of Brittany, this relatively small one stands like a corporeal or specter-like presence, closely aligned to human scale. In its unarticulated and suggestive form, its presence may signal Gauguin's efforts to associate this rural population with an abstract sense of mysterious spirituality. We are reminded here of his essentializing perception of a "great rustic and superstitious simplicity" that he proudly discerned in his own representations of Breton peasants.[11] Other examples of his construction of a specifically Breton spirituality appear in his well-known images from these years that derived from the ubiquitous Catholic practices and material culture of the area: *Vision after the Sermon* (1888; National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh) and *The Yellow Christ* (1889; Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo), another autumnal scene, in this case inspired by late medieval Breton crosses.

Fig. 3. Paul Gauguin, *Landscape in Brittany*, 1889, oil on canvas, 36 1/2 x 28 3/4 in. (92 x 73 cm), National Museum of Art, Architecture and Design, Oslo, NG.M.01006

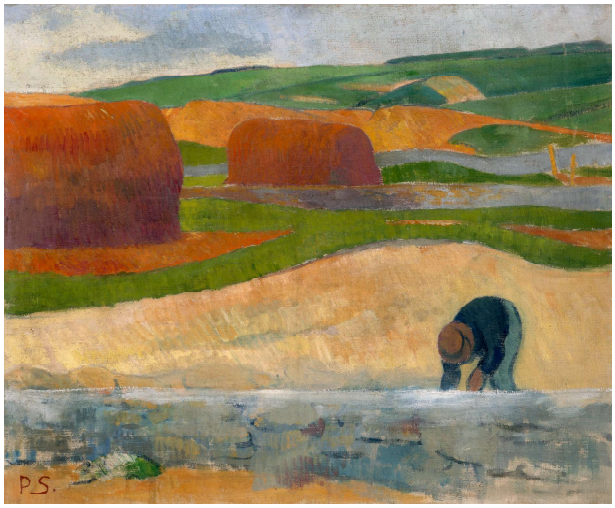

Fig. 4. Paul Sérusier, *The Seaweed Gatherer*, 1889, oil on canvas, 18 1/8 x 21 11/16 in. (46 x 55 cm), Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields, Collection Josefowitz, 1998.181.

As Richard Brettell has demonstrated, the scale and subject of this work comes from one of the most prolific periods in Gauguin's career. In both 1888 and 1889, he completed about seventy paintings a year. The size of the Nelson-Atkins canvas is typical of his work from this time: he made twenty vertical landscapes of this size in 1888 and 1889,[12] an indication of his confidence in both his evolving landscape art and the critical interest he felt sure awaited him. The willow tree was an alluring theme for Gauguin, given its aesthetic potential; this tree combines gracefully thin and elegant branches with fibrous roots that often appear aboveground and can run in curious horizontal and vertical directions—combining both the beautiful and the quasi-grotesque in one plant form. In *Landscape in Brittany* (Fig. 3) of 1889, another vertical canvas of the same size, a prominent line of willow trunks, aflame with the orange hue of fall foliage, stands behind a group of Breton women seated at the lower right. Here we see a repetition of the Breton motifs that populate the Nelson-Atkins painting; one of the women even holds a branch similar to that in the hand of the woman in green in *Autumn in Brittany*. Gauguin may well have exchanged stock figures with fellow painter Paul Sérusier (1864–1927), whose *The Seaweed Gatherer* features an identically posed man in a rounded hat, reaching over to harvest kelp (Fig. 4).

Fig. 5. Paul Gauguin, *In Brittany*, 1889, watercolor, paint (gold) and gouache on paper, 14 13/16 x 10 5/8 in. (37.7 x 27 cm), The Whitworth Art Gallery, University of Manchester, England, D1926.20. Image © The Whitworth, The University of Manchester

A watercolor and gouache study of three Breton figures from the same year (Fig. 5) includes a standing blonde woman who is nearly identical to the one in *Willows*: featured in profile at lower right, her head covered in a pale blue and dark-hued cap, her chest wrapped in a crisscross white band, holding a bag or pouch at her waist.[13] For Gauguin, the affiliation of this landscape with a traditional Breton woman who observes nature, or rests quietly within it, was a formula worth repeating, one that spoke to a larger antimodernist impulse of those who preferred the country to the city in this era. These staffage figures establish a feminized landscape in which rural women appear to be naturally immersed in the slow pace of a world that the artist envisioned reductively as static, and isolated from all impacts of industrialization and modernization. He thus invokes the Symbolist impetus to move away from the banalities of urban modernity, as showcased by Impressionism, to a notion of a timelessness and the changeless countryside, one that he found to be more in tune with the rhythms of nature than the march of modernity, industrialization, and the tourist economy—even though all of these forces were indeed present, and growing in importance, in the Breton world of the 1880s.

It is above all the force and the ambiguity of nature, in all its variety and unpredictability, that engaged Gauguin's imagination in this painting. This work may render a specific landscape scene near Le Pouldu in Brittany, but the resulting image foregrounds experimentation, variety, unpredictability, the intense sensations of the visual world, and the constantly shifting capacities of the imagination. Certain geographic referents to Brittany are clear and specific: sabots, willow trees, perhaps a stone menhir. But this picture is at once a constructed recollection of that provincial world ("wild and primitive," in Gauguin's terms) and a celebration of the powers of creative sight and the imagination of the artist himself, who prefers to dream before nature rather than to copy what lies before him.[14] It is no surprise that this painting was produced just over a year before G.-Albert Aurier (1865–1892) publicly celebrated Gauguin as the consummate Symbolist artist.[15]

Elizabeth C. Childs
March 2022

Notes

1. A classic reference on this mythology as it informs Gauguin's practice is Griselda Pollock and Fred Orton, "Les Donées Bretonnantes/La Prairie de la Répresentation," *Art History* 3, no. 3 (September 1980): 314–44.

2. "Je me laisse vivre dans la muette contemplation de la nature, tout entier à mon art." Gauguin to Emile Schuffenecker (1851–1934), Pont-Aven, late February 1888, translated and quoted in Belinda Thomson, ed., *Gauguin by Himself* (London: Time Warner Books, 2004), 62.

3. "J'aime la Bretagne, j'y trouve le sauvage, le primitif. Quand mes sabots résonnent sur ce sol de granit, j'entends le ton sourd, mat et puissant que je cherche en peinture." Gauguin to Schuffenecker, late February 1988, translated and quoted in Thomson, *Gauguin by Himself*, 62.

4. Two essential sources on "modernist primitivism" are Priyanka Basu, "Primitivism," in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Modernism* (Oxfordshire: Taylor and Francis, 2016), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781135000356-REM1108-1; and Frances S. Connelly, *The Sleep of Reason: Primitivism in Modern European Art and Aesthetics, 1725–1907* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).

5. Gloria Groom, ed., *Gauguin: Artist as Alchemist*, exh. cat. (Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 2017), 15.

6. Richard Brettell, "The Willow Tree" (catalogue entry), in Richard R. Brettell and Joachim Pissarro, *Manet to Matisse: Impressionist Masters from the Marion and Henry Bloch Collection*, exh. cat. (Kansas City, MO: Nelson-Atkins Museum, 2007), 119.

7. See for example, André Derain (1880–1954), *Hyde Park*, ca. 1906, oil on canvas, 26 x 39 in. (66 x 99 cm), Musée d'Art Moderne, Troyes, France, MNPL56.

8. The literature on French Symbolism and music is vast. One excellent starting place is Peter Palmer, "Lost Paradises: Music and the Aesthetics of Symbolism," *Musical Times* 148, no. 1899 (Summer 2007): 37–50.

9. On Gauguin and Symbolism, one of many useful studies is Henry Dorra, *The Symbolism of Paul Gauguin: Erotica, Exotica and the Great Dilemmas of Humanity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

10. Breton women were common in French academic painting, from the work of Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot (1796–1875) in the 1830s to the popular academic images shown in the Salon by (for example) Jules Breton (1827–1906) and Léon-Augustin Lhermitte (1844–1925) in the 1880s.

11. Dario Gamboni, *Paul Gauguin: The Mysterious Centre of Thought*, trans. Chris Miller (London: Reaktion Books, 2015), 92–95.

12. Bretell, "The Willow Tree," 116.

13. The authenticity of this watercolor, accepted by the late Richard Brettell and by the present author, has been questioned in the past. See "In Brittany (En Bretagne)," website of The Whitworth, University of Manchester, accessed March 29, 2022, http://gallerysearch.ds.man.ac.uk/Detail/3701, esp. "Collection Exhibitions: Fakes and Mistakes: Object Label: D.1926.20."

14. Gauguin wrote to Schuffenecker on August 14, 1888: "Some advice: do not paint too much after nature. Art is an abstraction; derive this abstraction from nature while dreaming before it, and think more of the creation which will result than of nature" (Un conseil, ne copiez pas trop d'après nature. L'art est une abstraction: tirez-la de la nature en rêvant devant et pensez plus à la création qu'au résultat). In Victor Merlhès, *Correspondance de Paul Gauguin: Documents, Témoignages* (Paris: Foundation Singer-Polignac, 1984), 172, letter 159.

15. See G.-Albert Aurier, "Le Symbolisme en peinture: Paul Gauguin," *Mercure de France* 2, no. 15 (March 1891): 155–56.

Technical Entry

Citation

Chicago:

Mary Schafer, "Paul Gauguin, *Autumn in Brittany (The Willow Tree)*, 1889," technical entry in *French Paintings and Pastels, 1600–1945: The Collections of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, ed. Aimee Marcereau DeGalan (Kansas City: The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 2022), https://doi.org/10.37764/78973.5.714.2088.

MLA:

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Autumn in Brittany (The Willow Tree) was executed on a medium-weight, plain-weave canvas that is close in size to a no. 30 *figure* standard-format support,[1] although no supplier stamp is evident on the reverse of the unlined canvas. Gauguin appears to have primed the canvas himself, as the thin white ground does not continue to the tacking margins.[2] By 1887, Gauguin was preparing his own canvases with some regularity, preferring to paint upon an absorbent, glue-chalk ground.[3]

Fig. 6. Photomicrograph of several opaque black lines that correspond to the painted sketch, located at the base of the left figure's foot, *Autumn in Brittany (The Willow Tree)* (1889)

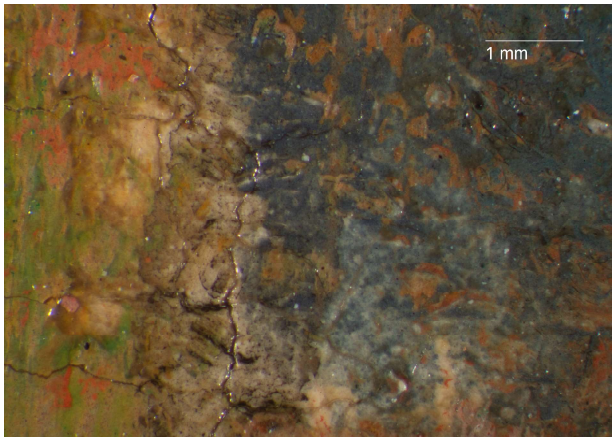

Fig. 7. Photomicrograph of a dilute black stroke associated with the painted sketch, located at the edge of the central figure's proper right hand, *Autumn in Brittany (The Willow Tree)* (1889)

Above the white ground, Gauguin first established the principal forms of the landscape with an underdrawing of loose, painterly strokes that range in width between one to three millimeters. The black contour lines, which are readily apparent with infrared reflectography (IRR), vary from opaque to fluid and transparent (Figs. 6 and 7). IRR reveals a few sweeping lines of paint that demarcate the distant rolling hills and the top and bottom of the foreground bushes, roughly marking the major horizontal bands of the composition.[4]

Fig. 8. Photomicrograph of *Autumn in Brittany (The Willow Tree)* (1889), revealing a bright red layer beneath the gray-purple paint of the upper-right foliage

Gauguin blocked in the design with thin layers of color, many of which remain visible at the edge of forms and between subsequent paint strokes.[5] In select passages, the bright color of this preliminary layer is subdued by later additions of paint, an aspect of the artist's technique that has been documented on other works from this period.[6] For instance, a vivid red lies beneath the muted gray-purple strokes of the foliage on the upper right edge (Fig. 8), and the bright teal wash of the central bushes was toned down by overlying strokes of dark green (Fig. 9).

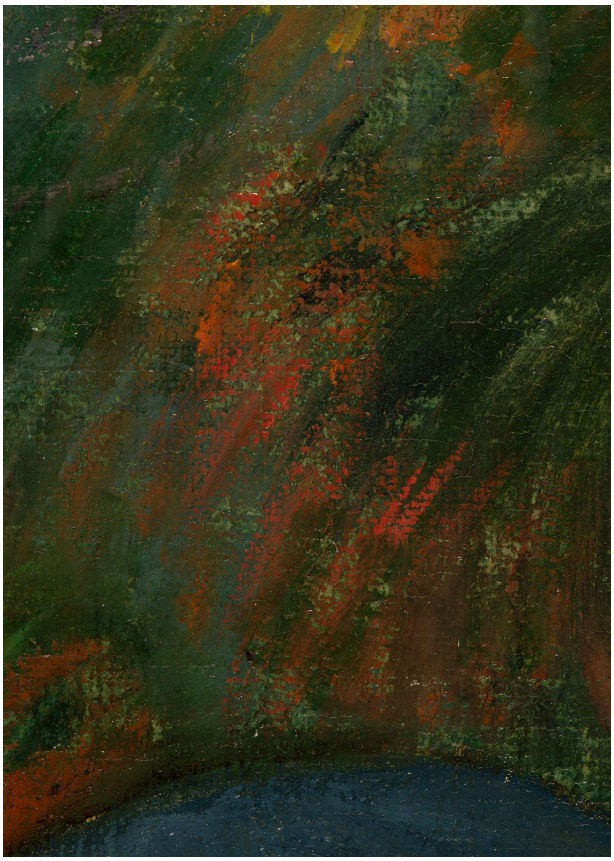

Fig. 9. Detail of *Autumn in Brittany (The Willow Tree)* (1889), revealing a teal-colored wash beneath the central bushes

With the painted sketch and underpainting in place, Gauguin built up the composition with thin, opaque paint that closely followed and only partially covered the underdrawing. Many compositional elements, particularly the features near the horizon and the vegetation at the center right, have visible dark edges that relate to these exposed sketch lines. Groupings of parallel strokes block in the foreground, bushes, treetops, and left sky, and directional strokes create movement within the landscape. Wet-over-dry brushwork produces textural effects, formed as the brush skipped across the underlying paint and canvas weave textures (Fig. 10).

Fig. 10. Photomicrograph of the red and gray tree branches, applied wet-over-dry across the pale blue sky of *Autumn in Brittany (The Willow Tree)* (1889)

Sky paint overlaps the blue water and trees at the horizon, confirming that Gauguin rendered the lower landscape first. The brushwork of the upper left sky is made up of diagonal, hatching strokes of pale blue, purple, and white, with some light blending of the brush to soften the diagonal edge of purple clouds. Horizontal strokes and short dashes of peach and yellow paint are scattered across the sky. Contrasting the paint application on the left, the right sky consists of loose, open brushwork that allows a pink underpainting to permeate. The tree trunks and branches were applied with wet-over-dry brushwork, and pale blue paint was deposited around many of these elements to construct the sky. Short, curving dashes of paint create the flickering effect of the leaves.

Gauguin made use of complementary color contrasts throughout *Autumn in Brittany (The Willow Tree)*, and, in doing so, heightened the vibrancy of the individual colors. Examples of these color juxtapositions include the bright red paint strokes that accent the dark green, central bushes and the dashes of purple scattered across the bright yellow-green field (Figs. 9 and 11). In the foreground, groupings of vertical paint strokes consist of bright, complementary colors—red-orange placed alongside various shades of green—as well as mixtures of these colors (i.e. broken tones) that formed muted tones that range from pink-brown to orange-green (Fig. 12). Collectively, Gauguin's brushwork and color choices produce a vibrating, striped effect that enlivens the foreground.

Fig. 11. Photomicrograph of *Autumn in Brittany (The Willow Tree)* (1889), showing the purple dashes of paint applied on top of the bright yellow-green field

Fig. 12. Detail of the foreground of *Autumn in Brittany (The Willow Tree)*, comprised of vertical paint strokes of red-orange and green as well as varying mixtures of these two complementary colors

The two female figures at the lower right appear to have been added to the composition at an advanced stage. Preliminary sketch lines, like those found in other parts of the composition, are absent, and paint colors connected to the underlying landscape continue beneath these figures. IRR reveals a vertical branch associated with the upper left tree that was covered by paint, and the pentimento associated with this artist change is faintly visible in Figure 13. Apart from the figures and branch, only minor adjustments to the composition are evident.

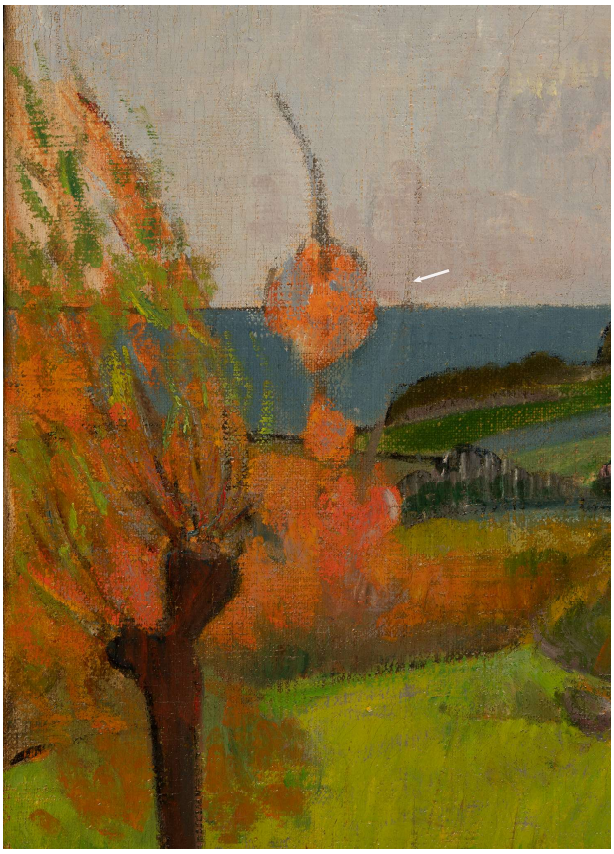

Fig. 13. Detail of an overpainted tree branch, *Autumn in Brittany (The Willow Tree)* (1889)

Fig. 14. Photomicrograph of the date, lower right corner of *Autumn in Brittany (The Willow Tree)* (1889). Black lines mark the outer edges of lavender and blue-gray paint associated with the final digit.

When the paint surface is examined under the stereomicroscope, the signature and date, in particular the final digit of the date, become more legible: “P Gauguin 89” (Fig. 14). Richard Brettell referred to the signature as a rather subdued color choice for an artist “who made the act of signing almost a fetish in the late 1880s.”[7] With ultraviolet (UV) radiation, the faintly pink

UV-induced visible fluorescence of the signature suggests the presence of red lake (Fig. 15),[8] and it is possible that fading has altered its color and vibrancy. While other areas of the Nelson-Atkins painting (trees and path) produce a fluorescence comparable to that of the signature, no analysis has been completed to determine whether any significant color shifts to the landscape have occurred (Fig. 16).[9]

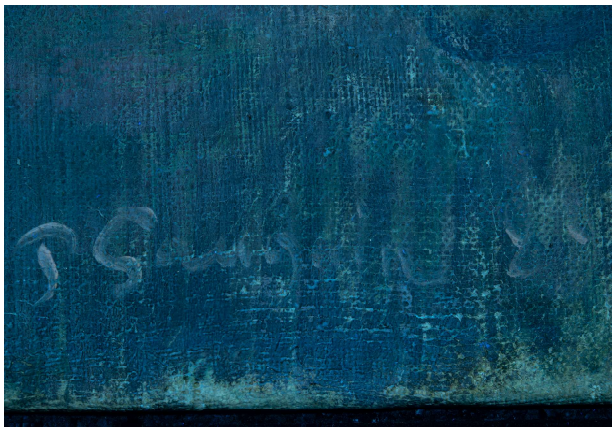

Fig. 15. UV-induced visible fluorescence detail photograph of the signature, *Autumn in Brittany (The Willow Tree)* (1889)

Fig. 16. UV-induced visible fluorescence photograph of *Autumn in Brittany (The Willow Tree)* (1889). Photo courtesy of Diana M. Jaskierny.

A second set of tack holes at the tacking margin does not have corresponding holes in the stretcher, suggesting that the current secondary support is not original. A diagonal scratch (2.8 centimeters) on the top edge is covered by retouching. Paint abrasion that disrupts the left man's blue shirt and exposes the teal underpainting beneath the bushes (adjacent to the large willow tree) signals that the paint was sensitive to a past solvent cleaning. This vulnerability has been encountered on other works by the artist and may relate to his practice of leaching oil medium from the paint (*peinture à l'essence*), which he used to produce quick-drying paint and matte surface effects.[10] The thick synthetic varnish, applied prior to the painting's 2015 acquisition, is discolored and glossy, concealing any matte paint or sheen variation among the individual colors.[11]

Mary Schafer
December 2021

Notes

1. David Bomford, Jo Kirby, John Leighton, and Ashok Roy, *Art in the Making: Impressionism* (London: Yale University Press, 1991), 45.

2. A selvedge is present on the top and bottom tacking margins, and cusping corresponds to the former tack locations, which were placed approximately six to eight centimeters apart.

3. Carol Christensen, "The Painting Materials and Techniques of Paul Gauguin," *Studies in the History of Art* 41 (1993): 71–73.

4. Although Gauguin occasionally used reference lines to transfer drawn imagery onto the primed canvas, he does not appear to have used this particular method for the Nelson-Atkins painting. For a description of the artist's various transfer techniques, see Morgan Wylder, "Re-examination and Contextualization of Paintings by Paul Gauguin in the Courtauld Gallery" (Third Year Project, The Courtauld Institute of Art, 2015), 11–12, 29, Fig. I.13.

5. A similar construction is evident beneath the paint layers of *Faaturuma (Melancholic)* (1891) and *Landscape in Le Pouldu* (1894). See the technical entries by Mary Schafer for "Paul Gauguin, *Faaturuma (Melancholic)*, 1891" and "Paul Gauguin, *Landscape in Le Pouldu*, 1894" in this catalogue,

https://doi.org/10.37764/78973.5.716.2088 and https://doi.org/10.37764/78973.5.718.2088.

6. See H. Travers Newton, “Observations on Gauguin’s Painting Techniques and Materials,” in *A Closer Look: Technical and Art-Historical Studies on Works by Van Gogh and Gauguin*, ed. Cornelia Peres, Michael Hoyle, and Louis van Tilborgh (Zwolle: Waanders, 1991), 108–09.

7. Richard Brettell, “The Willow Tree” (catalogue entry), in Richard R. Brettell and Joachim Pissarro, *Manet to Matisse: Impressionist Masters from the Marion and Henry Bloch Collection* (Kansas City: Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 2007), 119. “Oddly, the signature and date in the lower right, painted in a pale warm gray shot with pink and blue, are abraded and hence almost invisible, which, for Gauguin, who made the act of signing almost a fetish in the late 1880s, is highly unusual.” With the aid of a stereomicroscope, it is possible to confirm that the final stroke of the “9” is dryly applied, skipping across the upper points of the canvas weave, rather than abraded.

8. Helmut Schweppe and John Winter, “Madder and Alizarin,” in *Artists’ Pigments: A Handbook of Their History and Characteristics*, ed. Elisabeth West FitzHugh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3:124.

9. Color shifts associated with red lake have been identified on other works by the artist. Technical study of *Among the Lilacs* (1889; private collection), painted by Gauguin in the same year as *Autumn in Brittany*, verified that a fugitive red lake had caused the foreground colors to shift from pink and violet to white, gray, and blue. See Paolo Cadorin, “Colour Fading in Van Gogh and Gauguin,” in *A Closer Look: Technical and Art-Historical Studies on Works by Van Gogh and Gauguin*, 16, figs. III, IV, IX, X. The background of *Portrait of Vaïte (Jeanne) Goupil* (1896; Ordrupgaard Collection, Copenhagen) has faded, and a more intense pink color is visible at the outer edge of the painting, where the frame protected the paint from light exposure. See Christensen, “The Paintings Materials and Technique of Paul Gauguin,” 83–86. A salmon-pink UV-induced fluorescence is evident on the upper left path of *Arlésiennes (Mistral)* (1888; Art Institute of Chicago), and analysis has confirmed the presence of a now-faded red lake that originally depicted a path with a stronger, deep pink color. Kristin Hoermann Lister, “Gauguin, Cat. 10, Arlésiennes (1934.391): Technical Study,” in *Gauguin Paintings, Sculpture, and Graphic Works at the Art Institute of Chicago*, ed. Gloria Groom and Genevieve Westerby (Art Institute of Chicago, 2016), para 82–83.

10. Christensen, “The Painting Materials and Technique of Paul Gauguin,” 81–82.

11. “Because of his efforts to create a matte paint surface (draining his oil paints, painting on an absorbent ground, and washing his painting to degrease them), Gauguin was adamant that his paintings not be varnished with the glossy natural resin varnishes common during his time. He occasionally recommended that his paintings be protected with a piece of glass when framed, but more often he made reference to using wax as a protective surface coating.” See Christensen, “The Painting Materials and Technique of Paul Gauguin,” 92.

Documentation

Citation

Chicago:

Glynnis Stevenson, “Paul Gauguin, *Autumn in Brittany (The Willow Tree)*, 1889,” documentation in *French Paintings and Pastels, 1600–1945: The Collections of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, ed. Aimee Marcereau DeGalan (Kansas City: The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 2022), https://doi.org/10.37764/78973.5.714.4033.

MLA:

Stevenson, Glynnis. “Paul Gauguin, *Autumn in Brittany (The Willow Tree)*, 1889,” documentation. *French Paintings and Pastels, 1600–1945: The Collections of The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art*, edited by Aimee Marcereau DeGalan, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, 2022. doi: 10.37764/78973.5.714.4033.

Provenance

Deposited by the artist with Claude-Émile Schuffenecker (1851–1934), Paris, probably by December 1890–1893 [1];

Purchased from the artist, through Schuffenecker, by George-Daniel de Monfreid (1856–1929), Paris, by August 3, 1893 [2];

Purchased from de Monfreid by Ernest Cros (1857–1946), Paris, 1893–no later than 1938;

To his daughter Dr. Lucile-Marie-Jeanne Ménard (née Cros, 1888–1951), Paris, by 1938–1951 [3];

By descent to her niece, Colette-Marie-Christine Andrieu (née May, 1912–2016), Paris, 1951–December 1981 [4];

Purchased from Andrieu by the Galerie Robert Schmit, Paris, December 1981 [5];

Purchased from Galerie Robert Schmit by Alex Reid and Lefèvre Ltd., London, by June 16, 1983–1984 [6];

Purchased from Alex Reid and Lefèvre Ltd., through Susan L. Brody Associates, New York, by Marion (née Helzberg, 1931–2013) and Henry (1922–2019) Bloch, Shawnee Mission, KS, June 12, 1984–June 15, 2015;

Given by Henry and Marion Bloch to The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, MO, 2015.

Notes

[1] Gauguin stayed with Schuffenecker in Paris from December 1890 until he left for Tahiti in April 1891. Jean de Rotonchamp describes Gauguin's latest paintings stacked up in Schuffenecker's home "turned to face the wall, sitting directly on the floor" as of December 1890. It is probable that this 1889 picture was amongst those that Gauguin stored in Schuffenecker's home. Jean de Rotonchamp, *Paul Gauguin, 1848–1903* (Paris: Éditions G. Crès et Cie, 1925), 77. A letter from George-Daniel de Monfreid to Ernest Cros, ca. 1893, NAMA curatorial files, states that Cros saw the painting at the home of Émile Schuffenecker in 1892.

[2] Because de Monfreid was born in New York, he wanted his first name to be spelled the American way without the "S": "George." See also letter from George-Daniel de Monfreid to Ernest Cros, ca. 1893, NAMA curatorial files. This letter specifies that de Monfreid purchased the work from Gauguin sometime before Gauguin returned to Paris from his first trip to Tahiti in August 1893.

[3] Raymond Cogniat lists Ménard as the owner of the painting for the first time in 1938. See Raymond Cogniat, *Gauguin* (Paris: Éditions Braun et Cie, 1938), unpaginated. Ménard had no children and left her Gauguin to her niece, Colette-Marie-Christine Andrieu. See email from Daniel Andrieu, son of Colette Andrieu, to Glynnis Stevenson, NAMA, January 4, 2019, NAMA curatorial files.

[4] See email from Daniel Andrieu, son of Colette Andrieu, to Glynnis Stevenson, NAMA, January 4, 2019, NAMA curatorial files.

[5] See email from Manuel Schmit, Galerie Schmit, Paris, to Brigid Boyle, NAMA, May 4, 2015, NAMA curatorial files.

[6] See email from Alex Corcoran, Lefevre Fine Art, to MacKenzie Mallon, NAMA, March 18, 2019. The painting was featured in a Lefèvre exhibition in the summer of 1983. See *Important XIX and XX Century Works of Art*, Lefèvre Gallery, London, June 16–July 22, 1983, no. 6, as *Le Saule*.

Related Works

Paul Gauguin, *The Willows*, 1889, oil on canvas, 36 1/4 x 29 5/16 in. (92.0 x 74.5 cm), Nasjonalgalleriet, Oslo.

Paul Gauguin, *Study of Willow Heads*, 1890, gouache on grayish brown cardboard, 15 1/4 x 11 3/4 in. (38.8 x 29.8 cm), private collection.

Paul Gauguin, *Two Breton Women*, 1894, watercolor monotype, 9 13/16 x 8 1/4 in. (25.0 x 21.0 cm), location unknown, illustrated in Richard S. Field, *Paul Gauguin: Monotypes*, exh. cat. (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Museum of Art, 1973), 69.

Preparatory Works

Paul Gauguin, *Late Winter, Pont-Aven, Breton and Calf*, 1888, oil on canvas, 35 3/5 x 27 9/10 in. (90.5 x 71 cm), Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen.

Paul Gauguin, *Little Breton Boy Adjusting His Clog*, ca. 1888, charcoal enhanced with dry pastel on blue-gray laid paper, sheet: 12 5/8 x 18 3/4 in. (32 x 47.6 cm), Musée de Quai Branly, Paris.

Paul Gauguin, *Childhood of Brittany*, 1889, pastel and watercolor on paper, 10 1/16 x 14 3/4 in. (25.5 x 37.5 cm), Fukushima Prefectural Museum of Art, Aizuwakamatsu, Japan.

Paul Gauguin, *In Brittany*, 1889, watercolor, 14 15/16 x 10 5/8 in. (37.9 x 27 cm), The Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester.

Copies

George-Daniel de Monfreid (1856–1929), after Paul Gauguin, *Two Breton Women*, ca. 1893, oil on cardboard, 13 19/50 x 10 7/20 in. (34 x 26.3 cm), collection of Daniel Andrieu.

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Salon d'Automne: 4me exposition; Œuvres de Gauguin, Grand Palais, Paris, October 6–November 15, 1906, no. 215, as *L'Automne en Bretagne*.

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Possibly *La Vie Ardente de Gauguin*, Gazette des Beaux-Arts, Paris, November 1936, no. 77, as *Paysage de Bretagne*.

Gauguin: Exposition du centenaire, Musée de l'Orangerie des Tuileries, Paris, July 1949, no. 17, as *Paysage de Bretagne: le Saule*.

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Important XIX and XX Century Works of Art, Lefèvre Gallery, London, June 16–July 22, 1983, no. 6, as *Le Saule*.

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