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Vincent van Gogh and Puvis de Chavannes

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See table of contents

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produced a striking effect. People were flabbergasted to realize that his "drips" really had no thickness. In short, he challenged action painting by stopping movement, to produce only the illusion of it. This lyrical painting was therefore thoughtful, deliberate, ordered, whence arises the impression of a powerful force producing an implosion. All the energy of the picture came from the interior, and not from a stirring of the surface in an unbridled motion.

This work of organization would become very obvious in the whole series of his op or hardedge pictures, made with a stencil and showing a wholly electrical luminosity. Hurtubise would pursue this research very far on the contrasting light of coloured pigments, in geometrical forms that can appear serial, but which are most of the time subtly awry, especially in oblique compositions, so that the eye that seeks a security in the repetitive movement is overcome by vertigo before each of the tiny variations. The ultimate outcome of this research would be the production of pictures of neon tubes because, the artist would say, "I was not able to have electric paint in a pot."

Later, his pictures broke up and were organized in a much more problematical manner: he painted even on interchangeable squares with which he could set up an arrangement according to his fancy.

Then took place the slow return in 1974-1975 to a more organic lyrical expression, and which could even recall of some serigraphs of 1961. However, Hurtubise does not repeat himself. In his recent creations he uses all the virtuosity, all the strength, all the knowledge accumulated during the course of one of the most prolific careers among the painters of his generation, because Hurtubise is a relentless worker. He has an ardent relationship with painting. He told me, "I paint ten or twelve hours a day . . . often from four o'clock in the morning to four o'clock in the afternoon, seven days a week."

Furthermore, the large canvases accumulated in his immense studio at Terrebonne bear witness to this. From May 29 to July 15 he exhibited in Vancouver sixty-seven recent pictures, most of which are of large size, and which we shall eventually have the pleasure of seeing at the Musée d'Art Contemporain after they have been shown at several Canadian museums. This follows another exhibition comprising fourteen pictures and two serigraphs that took place at Long Beach, at the University of California, from February 9 to March 15, 1981, an exhibition that will be continued in the cultural centres of Canada at Paris, London and Brussels, to end at the Nova Scotia Art Museum in Halifax at the beginning of 1982.

All of this recent production is to be found in Hurtubise's great neo-lyrical trajectory. An excellent colourist, in some paintings he uses varied chromatic scales, in which pink, green and yellow predominate, in which also big trails of black move. In some cases, charcoal and pastel delineate the forms or else emphasize the movements. Elsewhere, black explodes on a red background in a kind of flight; but form is the background that the artist brings out in jagged masses and flashing lines, thanks to a process that reverses that of the stencil.

Nevertheless, one would believe one is finally in the presence of a purely action, orgasmic production, of a spontaneous writing; briefly, of signs that result from a trepidation of the artist in front of his canvas. One could imagine him with dilated eye, paintbrush extended, haphazardly squirting the lines and splashes of his action painting in an agitation similar to a dance of exorcism. But this is not at all what it is. Once again, if this lyricism is born of a passion, it is that of order or of a risk that arises from a technique forcing the artist to compose his picture, to correct it at need, to produce it according to more profound impulses.

Thus, to produce a binary picture, let us say black and red, Hurtubise begins by painting an entirely black background. Then he adds a coat of rubber glue, and in this skin he carves a jagged shape. If he next covers the whole with a layer of red acrylic, upon tearing away the glue that masked the black background, he will obtain a black surface, a drawing, a graphic, an effect of action painting, and even what could resemble drippings. His multicoloured pictures are evidently of a more complex production. At need, he will accentuate some contours with charcoal, pastel or even acrylic. This is somewhat the technique of serigraphy, with its masking, use of glue and multiple layers. Moreover, Hurtubise excels in this art: his silk-screen art is important and noteworthy. And yet, in front of his big pictures one has rather the impression that the effects were obtained by a direct intervention by the artist, as if he were drawing on a sheet of paper.

Doubtless these technical details add nothing to the strictly pictorial value of Jacques Hurtubise's works. However, they help to understand why they give us this impression of great freedom allied to great mastery. Even if his recent production establishes a break

in the ensemble of his work, it is also the result of all that went before, particularly of his slow passage from the op and hardedge periods, as also large black pictures based on the explosion of a series of squares, which produced luminous chinks. As well, the square is a shape of which Hurtubise is especially fond, even in his recent canvases which can be made up of a juxtaposition of this geometrical form, which sometimes gives the impression of a certain symmetry in an asymmetrical composition. The square also accentuates the dynamism of the movement in the canvases of the more explosive graphism.

With this art where chromatic stridulation is blended with spontaneous and thoughtful writing, we come back to values of space, masses and volumes, but also to fulgurations that make light burst as in so many natural phenomena (bare or leafy branches, ripples on the water, exposed roots, ice jams) the contemplation of which inspires a kind of delirious joy.

Yet Jacques Hurtubise's painting is not descriptive but evocative; it remains, like all his work, a purely plastic manifestation.

(Translated by Mildred Grand)

VINCENT VAN GOGH AND PUVIS DE CHAVANNES

By Richard WATTENMAKER

In 1975, the exhibition Puvis de Chavannes and the Modern Tradition at the Art Gallery of Ontario (See Vie des Arts, XX, 81, Winter 1975/76) explored the relationship of Vincent van Gogh to Pierre Puvis de Chavannes and sought to identify the role Puvis played in Vincent's art. Although the tendency is almost irresistable to overstress such relationships because Vincent's letters refer (repeatedly and in great detail) to Puvis, this fact does not correlate with the extent of influence exerted which is isolated rather than pervasive. Nevertheless, pertinent new documentation has come to light since 1975, hence an update of this little-known aspect of Vincent's art at the very end of his remarkable career.

Two months before his death on July 29, 1890, van Gogh wrote: I believe in the possibility that a later generation will be, and will go on being, concerned with the interesting research on the subject of colours and modern sentiment along the same lines as, and of equal value to, those of Delacroix, of Puvis de Chavannes — and that impressionism will be their source.

This statement, which we shall later place in its actual chronological context, accurately predicts the future path along which modern art developed — a profound and prophetic insight. Puvis and Delacroix: a recurring theme in Vincent's consciousness. To grasp the significance of this equation we might point out that Delacroix was an idol among the impressionist and post-impressionist painters and for Vincent to equate Puvis with Delacroix in his thoughts about the future of painting compels scrutiny. Puvis, like Delacroix, successfully sought in the past means of opening new directions. He simplified, he flattened, he discarded unessentials without losing sight of the classical shoreline of the French tradition. He redeemed the classical which had become discredited by the academics. Puvis thus provided the young intellectually-independent artists of the 1880s with access to the old masters — Poussin, the Florentines, Greece — by showing them a method of absorbing them.

In the midst of this ferment Vincent arrived in Paris in 1886. The younger generation — Gauguin, Seurat, Lautrec, Signac, Denis, Bernard, Sérusier, et al — were making a heroic attempt to integrate the discoveries of impressionism, color and light as they affect color relationships, into a renewed vision. This concentrated empirical and quasi-scientific research was an important revolution in the history of art. Fundamental to their comprehension of the great impressionist achievement was the awareness and acceptance by Vincent's generation of the decorative aspect of impressionism and its means. Vincent discerned the principles accepted by these men, that is, that the direction in which the art of painting was moving was toward simplification, a simplification which meant many things: brightness and intensity of color, prominently sinuous linear rhythms as an underlying structural motif, the two-dimensional compositional bonding of the picture surface. The concomitant of this was the

pronounced patterning achieved by such a varied network. Scale was important and with it a marked tendency toward flatness or at least reduction of perspective depth. Decoration or decorative illustration on a large scale meant Puvis de Chavannes, and the younger painters, including Vincent, paid careful attention to his work. In August, 1888, Vincent wrote from Arles to Emile Bernard:

We artists, who love order and symmetry, isolate ourselves and are working to define only one thing. Puvis knows this all right, and when he, so just and wise — forgetting his Elysian fields — was so good as to descend amiably into the intimacy of our time, he painted a fine portrait indeed: the serene old man in the clear light of his blue interior, reading a novel with a yellow cover — beside him a glass of water with a water-color brush and a rose in it. Also a fashionable lady, as the de Goncourts have depicted them.²

Vincent saw the Portrait of Eugène Benon3, dated 1882, when he visited the exhibition of Puvis' work at Durand-Ruel in Paris at the end of 1887, together with Bernard. The exhibition included 84 paintings, pastels and also photographs of Puvis' large mural decorations. Two years later in December, 1889, the image still fresh, Vincent recalls the portrait to Theo from Saint Rémy: "The 'Portrait of a Man' by Puvis de Chavannes has always remained the ideal in figure to me, an old man reading a yellow novel, and beside him a rose and some water-color brushes in a glass of water . . ."4 Vincent was aware of Seurat's interest in Puvis, of Lautrec's large scale "Le Bois Sacré", Parodie du Panneau de Puvis de Chavannes du Salon de 1884 (1884) and of Gauguin's profound admiration. Gauguin had visited the 1887 exhibition and during the period of his stay with Vincent in Arles in late 1888 he refers specifically to Puvis in his letters to Bernard. Indeed, he wrote to Bernard at the same time Vincent was corresponding with him: "Vincent looks to Daumier here, whereas I, on the other hand, see the influence of colorful Puvis and Japanese art."5 Although other painters in the 19th century had utilized the frieze-like disposition of figures across a surface -Courbet, Daumier and Monticelli, for example, employed it from time to time - no one employed the long horizontal formats as conspicuously as a container for their aesthetic forms as did Puvis de Chavannes. Beginning in the 1860s Puvis repeatedly adopted the frieze format as a basic geometric dimension for the complex processions and interlocking groups of figures in broad (but not deep) simplified landscapes which characterize his most typical work. A significant part of his influence was determined by how artists identified with his distinctive formats, that striking appealing novelty to which they were attracted. In the 1880s with Seurat and Lautrec in the vanguard and accelerating in the 1890s with van Gorh, Denis, Vuillard, Roussel, Gauguin, Hodler and in America Maurice Prendergast, numerous modern artists used the format as well as other pictorial devices, color, shallow space, matte tonality, borrowed in one degree or another from Puvis.

A virtually unknown example is Jakob Meyer de Haan's wall mural, Breton Women Scutching Flax of 1889, painted for the inn of Marie Henry in Le Pouldu, Brittany. De Haan (1852-1895), a Dutchman and friend of Theo van Gogh since October, 1888, was a colleague of Gauguin, who painted an adjacent mural, Joan of Arc. in vertical format.6 In this actual architectural decoration, painted directly on the plaster for the modest surroundings in this remote setting, far from the official state commissions in public buildings throughout France, de Haan pays tribute to Puvis nearly a decade before Gauguin paints his monumental canvas, Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going? in 1897. This fact is firmly underscored by the word LABO(R) on the large spouted water jug in the lower right corner of the composition, a direct reference to Puvis' mural in Amiens, entitled "Work", painted in 1867. The center portion of Puvis' mural depicts blacksmiths similarly working around an anvil, a motif very similar in conception to de Haan's two figures.

Although it was clear from inference, we can now — thanks to an unpublished document discovered by Bogomila Welsh-Ovcharov and here published for the first time — prove that Theo van Gogh was acquainted with Puvis de Chavannes. On April 28, 1890, Theo received a note from Puvis de Chavannes dated the 27th which reads as follows: "Cher Monsieur: J'ai fait un dessin — voudriezvous venir le voir demain matin lundi de 9h à 9½ — vous me direz s'il peut être utilisé — J'en doute. Cordialement à vous, P. Puvis de Chavannes Place Pigalle 11". ("Dear Sir: I did a drawing — would you like to come and see it tommorrow morning, Monday from 9 AM to 9:30 — You will tell me if it can be used — I doubt it. Cordially yours . . .") The precise meaning is not clear, but we may surmise from the friendly tone as well as the contents, that at least by that time Theo was already buying or was seeking to acquire or take on consignment works by Puvis to sell. Assuming that Theo

accepted the invitation, he would have been received by Puvis only three weeks before the critical moment when Vincent arrived in Paris on May 17, 1890. He stayed three days with his brother and sisterin-law before continuing to Auvers-sur-Oise where he had been invited by Dr. Paul Gachet. During the brief stopover in Paris Vincent went to the Salon du Champ-de-Mars where he was deeply impressed by Puvis de Chavannes' mural Inter Artes et Naturam, destined for Rouen. We know from the frequent and wholly laudatory references in the correspondence, commencing immediately after his arrival in Auvers on May 21, that Puvis was much on Vincent's mind. There can be little doubt that discussion with his brother took place as to the meaning and character of Puvis' mural, perhaps in the light of the drawing mentioned by Puvis to Theo and surely there was a description of the visit to Puvis' nearby studio. Shortly after Vincent's arrival at Auvers he wrote to Theo and Jo:

This is an almost lush country, just at the moment when a new society is developing in the old, is not at all unpleasing; there is so much well-being in the air. I see, or think I see in it a quiet like a Puvis de Chavannes, no factories, but lovely well-kept greenery in abundance.*

A short time after, van Gogh wrote a long letter to J. J. Isaacson (1859-1943), a Dutch journalist-art critic and painter:

Back in Paris I read the continuation of your articles on impressionism.⁴ . . . I believe in the possibility that a later generation will be, and will go on being, concerned with the interesting research on the subject of colors and modern sentiment along the same lines as, and of equal value to, those of Delacroix, of Puvis de Chavannes — and that impressionism will be their source . . .

I begin to feel more and more that one may look upon Puvis de Chavannes as having the same importance as Delacroix, at least that he is on a par with the fellows whose style constitutes a "hitherto, but no further," comforting for evermore.

Among other pictures his canvas, now at the Champde-Mars, seems to contain an allusion to an equivalence, strange and providential meeting of very far-off antiquities and crude modernity: His canvases of the last few years are vaguer, more prophetic if possible than even Delacroix, before them one feels an emotion as if one were present at the continuation of all kinds of things, a benevolent renaissance ordained by fate . . . he would know how to do the olive trees of the South, he the Seer . . . I feel impotent when confronted with such nature, for my Northern brains were oppressed by a nightmare in those peaceful spots, as I felt that one ought to do better things with the foliage. Yet I did not want to leave things alone entirely, without making an effort, but it is restricted to the expression of two things - the cypresses - the olive trees - let others who are better and more powerful than I reveal their symbolic language . . . Therefore I assure you that I cannot think of Puvis de Chavannes without having a presentiment that one day he or someone else will explain the olive tree to us. For myself I can see from afar the possibility of a new art of painting, but it was too much for me, and it is with pleasure that I return to the North.

Frenchman for us. But when Chavannes or someone else shows us that human being, we shall be reminded of those words, ancient but with a blissfully new significance, Blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are the pure of heart . . . However deeply convinced we may be of Rembrandt's vision, yet we must ask ourselves: And did Raphael have this in mind, and Michelangelo and da Vinci? This I do not know, but I believe that Giotto, who was less of a heathen, felt it more deeply — that great sufferer, who remains as familiar to us as a contemporary.

Van Gogh was not content to let the image of Puvis' work pass and early in June he followed this letter with another written to his younger sister, Wilhelmina, in which he dwells at length on Inter Artes et Naturam:

There is a superb picture by Puvis de Chavannes at the exhibition. The figures of the persons are dressed in bright colors, and one cannot tell whether they are costumes of today or on the other hand clothing of antiquity.

On one side, two women, dressed in simple long robes, are talking together, and on the other side men with the air of artists; in the middle of the picture, a woman with her child on her arm is picking a flower off an apple tree in bloom. One figure is forget-me-not blue, another bright

citron yellow, another of a delicate pink color, another white, another violet, Underneath their feet, a meadow dotted with little white and yellow flowers. A blue distance with a white town and a river. All humanity, all nature simplified, but as they might be if they are not like that.

This description does not tell you anything - but when one sees the picture, when one looks at it for a long time, one gets the feeling of being present at a rebirth, total but benevolent, of all the things one should have believed in, should have wished for - a strange and happy meeting of very distant antiquities and crude modernity.1

The impact of the Puvis was so strong that van Gogh repeated several phrases from his letter to Isaacson. He also included a sketch (Fig. 6) of the mural from memory. Vincent not only refers to Puvis' painting and his experience before it in the letters of his last months, but at least one concrete effect on his work itself can be determined. At Auvers Vincent painted a succession of horizontal format compositions which are also referred to in his letters and which signify an exploration of an aspect of his reaction to Inter Artes et Naturam.11 The influence of Pissarro for horizontal Dessusde-porte, composition of 1872, the Four Seasons, which Theo had in his possession at the time of Vincent's visit, is also important

Picking up the thread of van Gogh's correspondence of June-July 1890, we find him referring on the 24th of June to horizontal formats and in the following letter he wrote his brother:

I have painted MIIe Gachet's portrait . . .

I have noticed that this canvas goes very well with another horizontal one of wheat, as one canvas is vertical and in pink tones, the other pale green and greenish yellow, the complementary of pink; but we are still far from the time when people will understand the curious relation between one fragment of nature and another, which all the same explain each other and enhance each other. But some certainly feel it, and that's something,

And then there is this improvement, that in clothes you see combinations of very pretty light colors; if you could make the people you see walking past pose and do their portraits, it would be as pretty as any period whatever in the past, and I even think that often in nature there is actually all the grace of a picture by Puvis, between art and nature.12

"Between art and nature" sums up van Gogh's feeling that somehow in Inter Artes et Naturam Puvis had begun to accomplish the task of stopping people in the normal course of their activity and making of them a new artistic entity - retaining the direct impression of nature but imbuing it with a new and personal vision.

On June 30th, Vincent sent his brother and sister-in-law sketches of a "horizontal landscape with fields . . . the undergrowth around poplars, violet trunks running across the landscape, perpendicular like columns . . . "13 In a work such as Undergrowth with Two Figures we can understand the attempts to absorb effects observed by van Gogh in Puvis and which in their embryonic state were being worked out at the time of his death.

Dr. Price has shown that Puvis' Portrait of Eugène Benon, so feelingly described in Vincent's earlier letters, played a rôle in determining the pose and character of his two painted portraits of Dr. Paul Gachet. While there is reason to accept this proposal and force to the hypothesis that a reverberation or recollection of Benon is found in Gachet, I should like to propose and examine several alternative or at least additional sources of inspiration for these two variations on the same theme.

Dr. Gachet, born in Lille in 1828, was a somewhat bizarre individual, a man who had befriended many artists including Daumier, Manet, Monticelli, Cézanne and Pissarro and who was himself an amateur etcher. He was of Flemish descent, signing his prints Paul van Ryssel and he perhaps even spoke Flemish with Vincent. By early June van Gogh was painting the doctor's portrait which he describes in letters to his sister Wilhelmina, his brother and also to Gauguin. On June 3rd or 4th, to Theo: "I am working at his portrait . . . He has now got so far as to understand the last portrait of the Arlésienne . . ."14 Vincent had painted four versions of L'Arlésienne (Madame Ginoux), several versions of which he had been studying in Paris at Theo's. This composition, dating from January-February of 1890, was inspired by a drawing of the same subject by Gauguin done in November, 1888, as well as Gauguin's Night Café of the same time. Not only is the motif a familiar one in his own work but in the very same letter to his sister about Puvis' Inter Artes et Naturam (also early 3rd-8th June from Auvers) Vincent made a sketch of L'Arlésienne for her and wrote as follows: "I painted his [Gachet's] portrait the other day and I am also going to paint a portrait of his daughter . . . [Theo and Jo] have a new portrait of the Arlésienne in their apartment, My friend Dr. Gachet is decidedly enthusiastic about the latter portrait of the Arlésienne..."15 He then goes on to describe the sketch of the version of the Arlésienne in Theo's possession and there follows the description of the Puvis mural quoted above.

So the illustrative facts of the pose itself and the intertwined narration on the Arlésienne are also a significant factor in the portrait situation of Dr. Gachet. Still further sources are hinted at: In his subsequent — and last — letter to his sister in mid-July (10th-14th). Vincent writes: "I painted a portrait of Dr. Gachet with an expression of melancholy..."16 And a few days later (June 16-23) Vincent reiterates this mood to Gauguin: "I have a portrait of Dr. Gachet with the heart-broken expression of our time"17. These descriptions lead us to note that Dr. Gachet, a homeopathic specialist in nervous disorders, had written his medical thesis on the subject of melancholia while a student in Montpellier. Durer's Melancholia I of 1514 is surely an alternate source for the pose of Dr. Gachet.

Further, Gachet's passion for etching and his northern heritage lead naturally to Rembrandt. For the fact that Vincent had also consistently maintained his interest in Rembrandt throughout this period there is abundant data. At the end of March, 1890, Theo sent Vincent reproductions of Rembrandt etchings and in early May Vincent wrote to Theo to thank him for these, mentioning several of his favorites. He also speaks of Charles Blanc, author of a catalogue raisonné of the etchings published in 1880. He then continues that he wants to work from Rembrandt. A print such as Old Woman Sleeping of c. 1635-37 represents the type of portrait which may well have been on Vincent's mind as artist and sophisticated model decided on a pose for the portrait18. So, to conclude our discussion of the sources of the Gachet portraits, we tend toward a conflation or sequence of sources, including the Portrait of Eugène Benon by Puvis de Chavannes, rather than one exclusive point of departure¹⁹. This assimilative process is a notable example of Vincent's range of knowledge, visual retention and the complexity of his inquiring mind and penetrating vision.

In conclusion, we may say that Vincent van Gogh limited his absorption of Puvis de Chavannes' classicism, but at the same time he closely studied other aspects of the older artist's images, formats and pictorial means. Perhaps it would be reasonable to speculate that he chose to postpone or that he simply never lived to take it any further. Whether Vincent would have experimented with the grand scale as his friends did, Signac in 1894 and Gauguin in 1897, is moot. All we can say with assurance is that Puvis de Chavannes exerted a presence during the richest four years of Vincent's career and was especially taken into account in the ultimate period of Vincent's brief but intense creative life.20

1. The Complete Letters of Vincent van Gogh, Vol. III, Greenwich, 1959, no. 614a.

 Complete Letters, III, B14(9).
 See A. Brown Price, "Two Portraits by Vincent van Gogh and Two Portraits by Pierre Puvis de Chavannes", The Burlington Magazine, CXVII, November, 1975, pp. 714-18. See also Puvis de Chavannes, exhibition catalogue, Ottawa: The National Gallery of Canada and Paris: Musée du Louvre, no. 159, p. 176, entry by Louise d'Argencourt.

4. Complete Letters, III, no. 617. For further discussion of the influence of this portrait on Vincent see Bogomila Welsh-Ovcharov, Vincent van Gogh and the Birth of Cloisonism, Toronto: Art Gallery of Ontario, 1981, pp. 163-164.

5. Lettres de Gauguin à sa temme et à ses amis, ed. Maurice Malingue, Paris:

Grasset, 1946, no. LXXV.

- See Welsh-Ovcharov, op. cit., cat, nos. 126 and 63, pp. 350 and 210-211. The de Haan mural, although known from a photograph of the interior of the inn. is discussed in depth for the first time by Bogomila Welsh-Ovcharov. See also Roger Mesley, "Vincent van Gogh and the Birth of Cloisonism", review, Roger Mesley, "Vincent van Gogh and the Birth of Cloisonism", review, artmagazine, XII, no. 53/54, June, 1981, 12-19.

 7. See d'Argencourt, op. cit., pp. 66-67, nos. 41 and 42 (ill. p. 73). Note especially that the original oil sketch is entitled "LABOR".
- Complete Letters, III, no. 637.

9. Ibid., no. 614a. 10. Ibid., no. W22.

11. Cf. Automne with Vincent's Field under Thunderclouds (F. 778) and Crows in the Wheatfield (F. 779) and Hiver with Farms near Auvers (F. 793). See J. Rewald, "Theo van Gogh, Goupil and the Impressionnists", Gazette des Beaux-Arts, LXXXI, Jan.-Feb., 1973, pp. 53-56.

12. Complete Letters, III, no. 645.

13. Ibid., no. 646. 14. Ibid., no. 638.

- 15. Ibid., no. W22 (original in French)
- 16. Ibid., no. W23 (original in French)

17. Ibid., no. 643.

18. See A. M. Hind, A Catalogue of Rembrandt's Etchings, New York, 1967, no. 129, p. 76. See also A. Bredius, Rembrandt (rev. by H. Gerson), New York, 1969, no. 41 (Cincinnati, Taft Museum) formerly attributed to Rembrandt and which type also stands for a possible generalized source.

19. See Welsh-Ovcharov, op. cit., cat. no. 63, pp. 163-166 for a full discussion of the

Portrait of Dr. Paul Gachet, including additional sources.

20. Adapted from a lecture at the Art Gallery of Ontario, February, 1981, in conjunction with the exhibition Vincent van Gogh and the Birth of Cloisonism.