

**Technique and Meaning in the Paintings of**  
**Paul Gauguin**



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 **CAMBRIDGE**  
UNIVERSITY PRESS

PUBLISHED BY THE PRESS SYNDICATE OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE  
The Pitt Building, Trumpington Street, Cambridge, United Kingdom

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 2RU, UK <http://www.cup.cam.ac.uk>  
40 West 20th Street, New York, NY 10011-4211, USA <http://www.cup.org>  
10 Stamford Road, Oakleigh, Melbourne 3166, Australia

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First published 2000

Printed in the United States of America

*Typeface* Goudy 11/15 pt. and *Display typeface* Benquiat System QuarkXPress® [BA]

*A catalog record for this book is available from  
the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

Jirat-Wasiutyński, Wojtěch.

Technique and meaning in the paintings of Paul Gauguin / Wojtěch Jirat-Wasiutyński, H.  
Travers Newton.

p. cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-521-64290-6

1. Gauguin, Paul, 1848–1903 – Criticism and interpretation. 2. Painting – Technique. I.  
Gauguin, Paul, 1848–1903. II. Newton, H. Travers. III. Title.

ND553.G27J58 1999

759.4 – dc21

99-14193

CIP

Publication of this book has been aided by a grant from  
the Millard Meiss Publication Fund of the College Art Association.



ISBN 0 521 64290 6 (hardback)

Frontispiece: *Self Portrait, 'les misérables,'* (detail), Plate VII

# Contents

List of Illustrations	ix
Acknowledgments	xiii
<b>1</b> Gauguin's Paintings and the History of Technique	1
<b>2</b> Amateur, 1873–78	17
<b>3</b> Among the Impressionists, 1879–85	34
<b>4</b> After Impressionism, 1886–88	60
<b>5</b> With Bernard in Pont-Aven, August–October 1888	91
<b>6</b> With van Gogh in Arles, October–December 1888	115
<b>7</b> Symbolic Nudes and Portraits from 1889	137
<b>8</b> Murals and Monumental Canvases at Le Pouldu, 1889	161
<b>9</b> Decoration and the Cultural Meaning of Gauguin's Primitivizing Techniques	192
Appendix A Gauguin's Orders of Paint and Other Supplies	205
Appendix B Gauguin's Instructions for the Restoration and Presentation of His Paintings	207

Notes	209
Glossary	255
Bibliography	263
Index	281

# Gauguin's Paintings and the History of Technique

**P**aul Gauguin became the vanguard artist that we know in Paris in the 1870s and 1880s. This study sets out to understand his work as a painter between 1873, when he began as an amateur, and 1891, when he was hailed as the leading exponent of “Symbolism in painting,” by reconstructing and interpreting his changing technique as part of a specific historical and cultural context. Analysis of his painting techniques gives us new insight into his evolution as an artist, his relation to the art of his age and its meaning for his contemporaries. By basing our analysis of Gauguin’s pre-Tahitian paintings on a close study of their technique, we have been able to reconstruct a fuller, more nuanced account of his development as a self-taught artist who started painting in 1873, joined the Impressionist group in 1879, and then forged an independent path after 1886. Technical analysis has made clear the continuity in approach from his earliest works to his mature practice and clarified the chronology of his development before 1886. It has documented his indebtedness to Impressionist painting techniques and identified the materials and procedures of his Symbolist paintings. Gauguin’s careful planning of his paintings has emerged as a salient characteristic from his earliest days as an amateur artist to his use of preparatory drawings and cartoons for the figure paintings of his maturity. Since he worked his images out carefully before painting them, we have not uncovered earlier “states” documenting

the hidden genesis of his paintings and only a few major changes have been found.<sup>1</sup>

Our study has brought to the fore Gauguin's interest in older techniques of painting and his concern for the soundness of his own technique, based on an awareness of the deterioration of painting materials over time. Our text is not primarily an account of the artist's stylistic development, however, nor is it a technical study in any narrow sense. Our broader aim has been to rediscover the range of meaning that the appearance of Gauguin's paintings had for their author and for viewers in the later 1880s and the early 1890s when they began to receive critical attention. Delicately textured, matte surfaces and high key color, resulting from the use of lean (medium poor) paint on absorbent chalk grounds without varnish, were seen in opposition to the chiaroscuro, illusionistic space and varnish-saturated finish of the academic tradition and Salon exhibiting practice. Gauguin's technique deliberately evoked comparison with older, non-oil media of Western art, such as wax painting, tempera, and fresco. These techniques appeared primitive both technically and culturally – they were associated with the painting of Italian artists working before Raphael, called “the Primitives” in the nineteenth century – and, could therefore, paradoxically be constructed as signs of artistic modernism by vanguard artists and critics.<sup>2</sup>

Traditional accounts have presented Gauguin as an artist who began as one of the Impressionists but reacted against their *plein air* practice and visual language of spontaneity as he developed an approach based on imagination and personal symbolism to produce a “Post-Impressionist” art.<sup>3</sup> Recent studies of Impressionism have questioned the extent to which the artists worked directly from nature, *en plein air*, completing their paintings rapidly in front of the motif. These studies have also redefined spontaneity in terms of its representation by brushwork in the finished paintings, thereby drawing attention to the culturally constructed meaning of Impressionist technique. This more complex understanding has emerged from technical studies, principally in the publications of Anthea Callen and in the exhibition and catalogue of *Impressionism: Art in the Making* from The National Gallery in London, and from study of the critical reception of the group's work, most notably in Richard Schiff's *Cézanne and the End of Impressionism* and in the catalogue of *The New Painting: Impressionism 1874–1886*, which accompanied an exhibition organized by Charles Mofett.<sup>4</sup> We need to rethink our understanding of vanguard painting after Impressionism in the light of this scholarship, especially those aspects which were interpreted by contemporary critics as a Symbolist rejection of Impressionist realism and naturalism.

Gauguin's painting should be addressed in terms of this revision: it played a leading role in the definition of a vanguard Symbolist aesthetic starting in 1889. He painted *plein air* landscape and from the model in the studio from the outset and would continue to do so throughout his life. Our analysis of his painting technique and preparatory procedures suggests that there is continuity in his use of motif and model throughout the 1880s, but that a major shift occurs in his representation of the relation of the image to "nature" through surface, color, and composition. This change, interpreted by contemporary critics as a move from Naturalism to Symbolism characterized by primitivism and a decorative aesthetic, took place between 1886 and 1889. Richard Field's analysis of the relation of Gauguin's technical experimentation in printmaking to his development of a Symbolist visual language pointed the way for many of our observations about the transformation of his painting technique and its meaning.<sup>5</sup> The technical evidence that we present makes it clear that the decorative and primitivizing aspects of Gauguin's paintings have their roots in 1880s Impressionist practices. However, his development of a mature style and imagery, in which these characteristics then dominate, takes place in the transformed cultural context of a reevaluation of tradition by significant parts of the artistic vanguard in the late 1880s.

Understanding of Impressionist and Post-Impressionist vanguards has also been fundamentally changed by sociohistorical and feminist studies. The publications of T.J. Clark, Robert L. Herbert, Griselda Pollock and others have placed the work of Manet, the Impressionists, van Gogh, and Gauguin in the culture of late nineteenth-century bourgeois society and interpreted the paintings as representations of specific social relations.<sup>6</sup> Feminist approaches by Tamar Garb, Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock, and Anthea Callen have stressed the social construction of sexual difference and of gender roles as they affected the careers of women artists and as they are represented in the work of both male and female artists.<sup>7</sup> Central to feminist studies has been the concept of the "gaze," the socially and psychically produced looking that differs for men and women, and by class and cultural tradition. Both feminist and social histories of nineteenth-century art attend to visual form as well as to subject matter: the look of these paintings was the product of contemporary culture.

These approaches have a particular relevance for studies of technique such as ours. Technique and style were prescribed, and their meaning was administered by a number of social institutions in nineteenth-century France, prominent among them the Ecole des Beaux-Arts responsible for art instruction, the Salon and other public exhibitions, and art criticism

published in major newspapers and periodicals. These operated within a dominant aesthetic system based on Renaissance classicism and naturalism, even if some of these voices and practices contested it. The norms and hierarchies of the dominant aesthetic were also defined in opposition to excluded, undesirable qualities, characterized more or less overtly in terms of class, race, and gender (e.g., popular illustration vs. fine art, masculine line vs. feminine color, sophisticated fine art modeling vs. primitive and decorative flatness). The vanguard drew on this other, excluded aesthetic and received negative, but ultimately also positive, reviews for it. Recently Garb writing on Berthe Morisot and Callen on Degas have shown in detail how those artists responded to the ways in which technique itself was gendered in nineteenth-century French art discourse. Gauguin's concern with the virility of his art is clear from his letters and other writings; the responsiveness of contemporaries to this concern is apparent in reviews. We note the ways in which he took up such gendered notions of technique and how that preoccupation worked itself out in his procedures, particularly in the renewed function of drawing and the emphasis on monumental decoration as the goal of his art.

Apart from studies of individual paintings, only one sustained examination of Gauguin's painting techniques has appeared in print so far. Carol Christensen has recently published an essay on his painting materials and technique based on firsthand knowledge of one third of the *oeuvre* and scientific analysis of a dozen paintings in the National Gallery of Art, Washington.<sup>8</sup> She surveys the artist's technique from 1887 to the end of his life and concludes that Gauguin developed his characteristic painting techniques in Brittany and Arles, before traveling to the South Seas; that he was not as innovative as he claimed, sharing most of his techniques with other nonacademic artists of the time; and that he chose them because of their aesthetic effect rather than their durability. Christensen's study focuses on the materials and techniques of Gauguin's paintings: taking technical analysis as our starting point, we emphasize the meaning of the artist's technique.

Our study is based on a different and wider-ranging, albeit smaller, sample of paintings examined technically and analyzed scientifically. It begins earlier, with his very first paintings, and focuses on the Impressionist and Symbolist works in a series of historical moments defined by aesthetic issues and their cultural meaning. We agree that Gauguin developed the essential elements of his technique before Tahiti and that he depended on the precedent of the Impressionists, particularly Pissarro and Degas. We also show, however, that he innovated by choosing unusual supports, by using



absorbent chalk (non-oil) grounds and by imitating the effects of non-oil media, including wax painting, tempera, and fresco. Gauguin employed these and other techniques in the service of a new primitivizing and decorative aesthetic. He established a mode of painting characterized by matte, textured surfaces and decorative color areas, which influenced the Nabis and the Fauves in France and Munch and the German Expressionists abroad. Like the Impressionists Monet, Renoir, and Pissarro, he was concerned with durability, or what he perceived as sound technique. Durability cannot be separated from aesthetic issues, however; the artist rarely saw the technical choice as one between durability and aesthetics.

Paintings are physical objects resulting from purposeful activity; they are received in those terms by contemporary viewers and critics. As Pierre Bourdieu points out, the meaning and value of art is the result of a social compact, “the accord between two mutually founded aspects of the same historical institution: the cultured habitus and the artistic field.”<sup>9</sup> As a result, artistic techniques have a social history; they are signs endowed with cultural meaning by society. Clifford Geertz has argued “that to study an art form is to explore a sensibility, that such a sensibility is essentially a collective formation, and that the foundations of such a formation are as wide as social existence and as deep.” He concludes that the “central connection between art and collective life . . . lies on a semiotic [level] . . . The sign or sign elements – Matisse’s yellow, the Yoruba’s slash . . . are ideationally connected to the society in which they are found, not mechanically. They are, in a phrase of Robert Goldwater’s, primary documents.”<sup>10</sup> This is true of both traditional and modern societies; it holds for vanguard as well as official and Salon artists.

Gauguin’s paintings were produced at a certain moment in time in a specific culture for an audience with a particular sensibility. Their appearance is historical as well as having a history. They were made for a contemporary public, consisting largely of vanguard artists, art critics and writers, as well as speculative buyers from the professional and business classes. They spoke to and challenged their sensibilities through material and form as well as imagery. In a marketplace dominated by the bourgeoisie and its institutions, nineteenth-century painters worked both with and against the socially dominant meaning of forms and techniques. Following the vanguard model as an independent artist, Gauguin made of painting a formal and material search to discover those forms and techniques that would most powerfully evoke the intensified experience that would give meaning to his images. Form and technique had acquired an increasingly prominent role in the making and evaluating of art since the 1850s. Addressed by the formal and

technical qualities of the image as much as by the representation, the viewer was asked to dwell on them rather than look through them. Gauguin was well aware of this aspect of modern art. Paraphrasing Charles Baudelaire, the poet and art critic, he claimed in 1888 that the “poetry” of a painting captured the attention and imagination of viewers through its abstract colour harmony before they had been able to identify the subject represented. “The forms and colors treated harmoniously produce a poetic effect on their own.”<sup>11</sup>

While we cannot recover the artist’s intention, we can study the physical object and its reception to gain an understanding of the historical purpose and meaning of the painting.<sup>12</sup> A first step in our research has been to construct, to the extent possible, an accurate assessment of the original appearance of many of Gauguin’s major paintings of the 1880s from physical and textual evidence. We were particularly fortunate to be able to study closely the virtually unrestored paintings preserved in the van Gogh family collection at the Van Gogh Museum.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, in order to arrive at an historical understanding of what we were looking at in the paintings and reading about their appearance, to approximate for ourselves a “period eye,” in Baxandall’s useful phrase, we turned to contemporary interpretations in exhibition reviews, art criticism and the artist’s own statements, and to comparisons with the art of the day, both Impressionist and Salon paintings, since they formed a constant reference point for the artist and his public. As a result, the painting techniques used by Gauguin between 1873 and 1891 are presented here as the result of choices reflecting not only his aesthetic aims, but also a clear awareness of their functioning as cultural signs.<sup>14</sup>

This is a study of one artist and his passage from amateur to independent professional, from Impressionism to Symbolism. Artist’s intention and developmental narrative are unavoidable explanatory structures in the case of a nineteenth-century vanguard artist such as Gauguin, who internalized that model and commented on his own work and life. We have, however, deliberately made that developmental model problematic.<sup>15</sup> There is no simple narrative of “progress” in our account; rather, we analyze a succession of “moments.” Although the appearance of the paintings changes very visibly between 1873 and 1889, Gauguin’s temperament and his approach to generating an image, as reflected in his technical preferences, do not alter fundamentally from the outset of his painting practice. Impressionist technique, discovered starting in 1879, remained a determining model for him long after 1886; yet, he was never an Impressionist in the sense of painting a “momentary perception.” Gauguin’s responses to the painting techniques of Pissarro, Degas, Bernard and van Gogh in 1879, the

early 1880s, 1886, and 1888 are other “moments” of our study. The most basic ways in which we have resisted the developmental narrative is by stopping the diachronic flow: to concentrate on individual paintings in their technical specificity, to link Gauguin’s technique with that of other artists and with other aesthetic positions synchronically, and by reconstructing the cultural meanings of the techniques that he used and the appearance that he sought at a given historical moment.

The last brings us back to the issue of artist’s intention. Callen has recently argued that the unvarnished surfaces of Impressionist and Fauve paintings signified primitivism and modernity. In like manner, the historical significance of Gauguin’s choice of matte, textured surfaces for his paintings can be recovered by finding evidence for its contemporary interpretation in the late 1880s. The artist’s letters and writings provide some; so does contemporary criticism. The former are, of course, documents of the artist’s intention; they can be historicized by being given a context in contemporary documents, other letters and statements, as well as in the reception of contemporary art criticism.<sup>16</sup> It is clear from such historical evidence that technical choices carried cultural meaning in the 1880s, as they still do. More specifically, technique had become a principal signifier of originality and self-expression for the vanguard artist in the second half of the nineteenth century. Particularly susceptible to such development were brushwork, seen as embodying the artist’s touch and as a form of handwriting; the artist’s palette or color choices, seen as reflecting the artist’s temperament; and the degree of finish given to a painting, which positioned the artist aesthetically.

The 1880s were a critical decade for the Parisian vanguard. Impressionism was transformed and disappeared as a group movement, assimilated on the one hand to much contemporary naturalistic painting in the Salon and scattered on the other in the individual development of its leading practitioners. Other groups formed and characterized themselves by new techniques, notably the Neo-Impressionists who adopted a uniform brushwork (pointillism) and scientific color notation (divisionism). Gauguin participated in this competitive forum, first hailing then rejecting the new Neo-Impressionist vanguard around Georges Seurat. Synthesis and then primitivism would be recognized as the stylistic and technical hallmarks of his new painting. These traits were defined by both artist and critics starting in 1889; by 1891 the critic Aurier had subsumed them into the general concept of the decorative as characteristic of “Symbolism in Painting.” It became clear to us, therefore, that reconstructing Gauguin’s technical choices would allow us to recover, in a new and revealing way, aspects of

the contemporary cultural debate and of the meaning of his paintings in the late 1880s, as well as to understand his relation to the art of the Impressionists and his development of an art practice after Impressionism.

In Chapter 2 we examine Gauguin's first significant choice, to begin painting in 1873 as a self-taught amateur in the tradition of *plein air* landscape painting, a modern practice identified with the Barbizon school and reflected in artist's manuals that Gauguin may have consulted. This is not a surprising choice, given the young artist's social milieu: he was vacationing at the country house of his patron, the banker Gustave Arosa, who collected such painting. By looking closely at the technique of his earliest paintings, rather than just noting their resemblance to certain models, we have been able to establish Gauguin's commitment to particular painting practices and artistic traditions. One of the revelations of our analysis of his early, pre-Impressionist work has been the systematic nature of his self-education, its scope and development. By 1876, he was painting works that resemble Edouard Manet's visually and technically. Technique grounded our understanding of the artist's aims, documenting Gauguin's sophistication and ambition in relation to the most talked about, "advanced" painting in Paris. Clearly he had already become fully involved with his painting hobby at this early date, even though he only had time for it on Sundays and during his holidays.

In Chapter 3 we study Gauguin's responses to Impressionist practice. Technical examination has made it clear that it was only after he was invited to exhibit with the Impressionists in April 1879 that Gauguin looked closely at their work and began to study their technique. Almost immediately he adopted Camille Pissarro's systematic broken brushwork and the palette of high-key, pure colors: the bright greens and oranges, in particular, stand out. Like the older artist, Gauguin prepared his paintings carefully, rarely making any major changes during their execution; he shared his preference for densely woven, matte paint surfaces. To achieve them, he began to paint on chalk grounds, which would enhance the matte appearance of the paint layer by absorbing oil; to preserve them, he avoided varnish, which would saturate the colors, even out the paint surface, and yellow with age. These matte, delicately textured surfaces were a rejection of the dominant Salon aesthetic of illusionistic oil painting and struck contemporaries as decorative and primitivizing, reminding them of older, non-oil media such as tempera or fresco.

Gauguin joined the Impressionist group as an independent and advanced, although not yet experienced and skilled, painter with definite preferences and ideas. He shared their arguments and divisions in the 1880s,

at a moment that has been called the “crisis of Impressionism.”<sup>17</sup> He engaged actively in the debate about the relation of *plein air* and studio work, the importance of thought-out compositions, and the role of drawing. This debate and Gauguin’s siding with Pissarro’s practice, as well as his admiration for Degas’s work and, somewhat later, Cézanne’s, are clearly reflected in the technique of the paintings of the 1880s. Gauguin did produce *plein air* studies to develop his skill at the new notation that he was learning and to gather information for more complex paintings. At the same time, however, he was committed to painting finished *tableaux* in the studio from the start of his association with the Impressionists, thus consciously competing with “old masters” such as Raphael, Rubens, and Delacroix in producing figure paintings.

Gauguin’s interaction with the Impressionists was critical to the formation of his professional artistic personality and in giving him a repertoire and range of techniques. After the summer of 1886, his painting changed deliberately and progressively as he sought to establish an independent position in the wake of the last Impressionist exhibition and the success of the Neo-Impressionists there. In Chapter 4 we examine several carefully prepared and executed pictures of country women from Brittany and Martinique painted between 1886 and 1888. These images of rural life reflect the artist’s disenchantment with the modern city and imply a critique of the work ethic sustaining its capitalist economy. The relatively large scale and dominant role of the figures in compositions such as *Four Breton Women* (1886) and *Fruit Picking, Martinique* (1887) make them appear monumental. Their careful design on the canvas necessitated studio drawings prepared for transfer, either squared for enlargement or drawn full-size like cartoons. Following the lead of Pissarro and Degas, and competing with Seurat, Gauguin was adopting a traditional studio method with clear links to the practice of Western artists since the Renaissance and to contemporary instruction at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. At the same time, he rejected this academic tradition, as represented by artists such as Jean-Léon Gérôme and William Bouguereau, by refusing to lay out the image as a unified spatial whole in a compositional study; by opting instead for an additive order in the final painting, he ensured that, in contrast to academic and Salon painting, his work was perceived as naively decorative by contemporaries.

The most intense period of technical innovation in Gauguin’s painting occurred in the autumn of 1888 as a result of a sustained exchange with Emile Bernard and Vincent van Gogh. Chapters 5 and 6 concentrate on this rich period. In order to emphasize the mood and imagery of his paintings, Gauguin had begun to develop new primitivizing techniques that

summer in Pont-Aven; then, in mid-August Bernard arrived, stimulating a burst of innovation. Gauguin tried out new media and unprimed canvas supports, different grounds, and new methods of applying paint – all in order to achieve subtly expressive surfaces and resonant color in paintings such as *Vision of the Sermon* and *Self-Portrait Dedicated to Vincent Van Gogh*. We argue that there is a strong parallel between the new emphasis on symbolism and Gauguin's adoption of experimental techniques. He left Brittany and joined van Gogh at Arles in Provence on October 23. Despite important artistic disagreements, the two artists engaged in a technical and aesthetic dialogue with visible results in Gauguin's works, for example, *Vintage at Arles* and *Portrait of Vincent van Gogh Painting Sunflowers*. Accounts of these months are bedeviled by the issue of priority and originality. By comparing the painting techniques of Bernard and van Gogh with Gauguin's, we have been able to clarify Gauguin's interaction with his colleagues while they were together or in close contact by letter in Paris, Pont-Aven, and Arles. There was a competitive collaboration typical of vanguard art in late nineteenth-century Paris. Their technical innovations can be linked to contemporary aesthetic debate of such key concepts as synthesis, abstraction, and working from memory, and reflect the search for a Post-Impressionist painting "far from the decadence of the cities," in van Gogh's words.

In the summer of 1889, Gauguin and his colleagues Bernard and Emile Schuffenecker organized an exhibition of the "Groupe Impressionniste et Synthétiste" on the grounds of the Exposition Universelle. This improvised presentation at the Café des Arts spurred Gauguin to produce a number of major symbolic images for the exhibition. Opposed to contemporary bourgeois society, he summed up his critique in three images of female nudes that question traditional gender roles and morality. These sexually charged works are couched in the coarse technique and bold visual style that he had developed in Pont-Aven and Arles in late 1888 and that contemporary critics saw as lusty and virile. The year 1889 also marked a watershed in critical reception for the artist, with two exhibitions (Paris and Brussels) and his introduction to the critic Albert Aurier. The rich production of 1889 is studied in two sections.

In Chapter 7 we document technically the artist's fully established preparatory procedure for figure paintings in such major symbolic works as *In the Waves*. We examine his reuse of preparatory drawings as independent decorative pieces, worked over in pastel and gouache, and the related impact of gouache and pastel on his handling of oil paint. Gauguin experimented with the quicker, less expensive medium of gouache on paper and cloth to achieve new effects. These works are particularly revealing of his



interest in non-Western art; stimulated by the Exposition Universelle in Paris, he emulated the techniques of so-called Persian miniatures, for instance. In 1889 Gauguin produced his best known images of Brittany, which he presented as a remote, rustic and religious region of France; in the latter part of the year, he moved from Pont-Aven to the smaller, poorer, and more isolated Le Pouldu in pursuit of this primitivizing vision. Chapter 8 focuses on his development there of such monumental images as *Seaweed Gatherers*. With his colleague Jacob Meijer de Haan, Gauguin became a primitivizing decorator and painted on the walls and windows of a small inn at Le Pouldu. The two artists produced a little-known set of paintings emulating fresco and stained glass. This was the only time in his life that he was given the walls that the critic Aurier would demand for him as Symbolist artist and primordial decorator.

In concluding, we argue in Chapter 9 that Gauguin's painting technique can best be understood historically through the concept of decoration. At first used as a negative term to designate Impressionism as an art based on color and surface rather than tonal modeling and depth, the concept of decoration came to occupy an increasingly positive role in criticism in the 1880s. Reference to a decorative aesthetic by the vanguard in the 1880s and 1890s was part of a primitivizing strategy in opposition to naturalism; it became central to the acceptance of the art of many Impressionists and Post-Impressionists after 1886. Gauguin showed a strong interest in the decorative arts from his earliest association with the Impressionists; he also absorbed their use of decorative brushwork, color, and surface treatment into his painting of the early 1880s. Impressionist decorative or applied art was intended for domestic display and was, therefore, largely associated with the feminine realm of the bourgeois home. In the later 1880s Gauguin reacted to this aesthetic and its success under the Third Republic and realigned his painting with monumental decoration, seeking a public role for his primitivizing, anti-bourgeois art. The critic Aurier argued that Gauguin was using a decorative aesthetic to produce monumental images that could claim the status of history painting and religious art. This was also a gendered shift in technique and style that transformed those aspects of Impressionism interpreted as feminine by contemporary critics into a newly masculine practice and representation.

Modern study of the history of technique begins with the historicist desire to reconstruct traditional painting techniques at the very moment that craft traditions anchored in the artist's studio were being replaced by academic training and self-teaching with the aid of manuals. Among the best known

early histories of technique are J.-F.-L. Mérimée, *De la peinture à l'huile* (Paris 1830) and Charles Eastlake, *Materials for a History of Oil Painting* (London, 1847 followed by a second volume in 1869). Nineteenth-century artist's manuals typically included synoptic histories of technique and often basic advice on restoration. In France, the Louvre conservator Horsin Déon published *De la conservation et de la restauration des tableaux* (Paris, 1851) and, at the very end of the century, the painter Jehan-Georges Vibert, the authoritative *La Science de la Peinture* (Paris, 1891). At first written by artists turned historians, subsequent manuals became increasingly scientific in keeping with the dominant scholarly paradigm of the age. These authors sought the advice of scientists as well as practicing artists and art historians. It was in the 1930s at the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, that a historic collaboration between a conservator, George L. Stout, and a scientist, Rutherford J. Gettens, produced the research that was the basis for their *Painter's Materials. A Short Encyclopedia* (New York, 1942). It has set the standard for contemporary publications on materials and techniques such as the recent series of volumes on artists' pigments.<sup>18</sup>

The starting point of our study has been a solid technical knowledge of the paintings and drawings of the artist. However, this book is not a technical study of historical materials and procedures, but a study of the art historical, aesthetic, and cultural meaning of the historical techniques of one artist, Paul Gauguin. One of our models in recent scholarship has been Leonetto Tintori and Millard Meiss, *The Painting of the Life of St. Francis in Assisi* (New York, 1967, originally published in 1962). Collaborative research and publication by conservators and art historians on the history of technique is all too rare. It should, however, be as fundamental to the study and interpretation of works of art as textual criticism and archival research in the other historical disciplines. The restoration theorist Cesare Brandi argued the need for "a profound understanding of the material aspect" in any dealing with a work of art, while insisting that aesthetic understanding must come before scientific analysis: since, "from a phenomenological point of view . . . the material appears only insofar as it serves to reveal the image."<sup>19</sup> In fact, aesthetic understanding and scientific analysis must proceed hand in hand in the historical investigation of the work of art. We have argued above that reconstruction and interpretation of artistic techniques is a firm basis for achieving historical understanding of works of art.

As preservers and interpreters of works of art, conservators and historians, including curators, share a serious responsibility toward the object: for, in Gerry Hedley's words, "its very meaning may be at stake."<sup>20</sup> There is no one meaning of the work of art that they can identify and preserve, how-



ever; there are only choices to be made. The meanings of the work of art have changed over time along with its physical condition; an “original meaning” is no more recoverable than an “original condition.”<sup>21</sup> Both conservator and historian are concerned with the appearance of the work and its interpretation; each needs the other in order to achieve the best understanding possible of the work as a physical and cultural object. But there are real difficulties, as well as tremendous advantages, associated with such collaboration because the aims of the historian and the conservator differ. Moreover, styles of communication and degrees of interpretation differ between the disciplines and, at times, access to technical information can be restricted and the scientific bases for its interpretation difficult to evaluate. “While scientific examination may yield significant new data on a painter’s technique, it is virtually never undertaken in the interest of pure research,” Marcia B. Hall noted in a recent study.<sup>22</sup> Conservators usually examine paintings only when they are being treated for a problem, although there are signs that this is changing as non-interventive and preventive approaches become more widespread. “One problem for the historian, with the present pragmatic basis for examination,” Hall continues, “is that there is little comparative material.” And, of course, the technical material available about the paintings of any one artist is not necessarily representative and certainly not complete.

There are a number of different models represented in the published scholarship on the history of painting technique. The most common, in articles, exhibition catalogues, and books, is still the separate presentation of technical information and historical interpretation.<sup>23</sup> While both conservator and historian incorporate aspects of the other’s discipline in their accounts, typically the technical “information” is presented as factual and the historian uses this material to build an “interpretation,” a stereotype deliberately reflected in the two value-laden terms used above. As John Shearman has pointed out, “‘technical evidence’ is invested too often by the historian with the finality of a scientific demonstration.”<sup>24</sup> We should recognize that scientific examination is directed by specific expectations and choices. As a result, the technical information produced is the result of interpretation and it is always presented selectively and as part of an argument. In a word, both conservator and historian interpret: the results are best presented with that critical perspective clearly acknowledged. For this to occur effectively, conservators should become familiar with historical methods and writing on art theory and art history in their area of research and historians, with close looking at works of art, the scientific instrumentation and methods of analysis, and interpretation of technical data.

There are signs that conservators may, in future, spend more time documenting works, as opposed to treating them for problems, as non-interventive and preventive approaches become more widespread. Conservators and scientists are increasingly participating in the publication of historical accounts of painting techniques based on the technical documentation which they have produced. This is long overdue and holds great promise for our understanding of works of art. It is particularly important that, in undertaking this task, they use the most sophisticated historical methodologies available and that the historians and curators associated with them be stimulated by the new evidence to rethink interpretations rather than being content to apply old paradigms. In the field of nineteenth-century French painting, the London National Gallery's exhibition catalogue *Impressionism*, third in a series on "art in the making," was an ambitious recent example of the presentation of technical analysis as a resource for writing history. The fundamental and invaluable contribution of the National Gallery's conservators and scientists to the material and technical history of Impressionism had, in large part, been previously published in the *Technical Bulletin*. In the 1990 exhibition catalogue this information was framed by an introductory text that rejects the myth of Impressionist spontaneity and direct painting outdoors but then constructs an autonomous history of painting technique and practice with a technological bias. The authors emphasize the response to materials developed and marketed in the nineteenth century as a major source of the Impressionists' technique and style. The catalogue's art historical narrative has been criticized as "privileging fact over meaning" and presenting history "with an air of objective neutrality."<sup>25</sup> Art historians, for their part, are making more and more use of technical information about works of art, especially in exhibition catalogues. They too need to draw on new historical methods, otherwise the new data will only serve to support attributions or reinforce formal analysis. Our goal as art conservator and art historian working together has been to use new technical information about Gauguin's paintings to demonstrate the rich potential that such evidence has, when framed by a conceptualization of technique as cultural signifier, to enhance our historical understanding of works of art, the artists that produced them, and the culture in which they were given meaning.

We chose to work as collaboratively as possible, sharing most of the technical examination and research and, finally, the writing of the text. As mentioned above, our model in this respect was Leonetto Tintori and Millard Meiss's *The Painting of the Life of St. Francis in Assisi*. We had first joined forces to research Vincent van Gogh's *Self-Portrait Dedicated to Paul Gauguin* (1888) at the Fogg Art Museum in 1979 and decided to continue our

collaboration, having found it highly rewarding.<sup>26</sup> Our initial Gauguin research project crystallized at the time of the Princeton “Raphael Symposium” in 1983, where we were able to see the tremendous advantages resulting from a systematic and sustained dialogue between art historians and conservators. While we initially set out to study the role of preparatory drawings and underdrawing in Gauguin’s development of monumental figure painting, we quickly became convinced that a more comprehensive approach would be necessary in order to achieve an understanding of Gauguin’s development and the historical meaning of his technique. Thus we set out to produce a comprehensive account of the artist’s painting procedures before his departure for Tahiti in 1891.

Neither of us is attached to an institution or collection that gives access to Gauguin’s works; nor did we have the authority and support that come with preparing an exhibition for a major museum. We were unaware for a long time, in fact, that a large exhibition of Gauguin’s art was being planned by the Musée d’Orsay in Paris, the National Gallery of Art in Washington and the Art Institute of Chicago.<sup>27</sup> Ours was a scholarly research project. Studying the paintings free from the pressures of a restoration program or the preparation of an exhibition was invaluable. We are very grateful for the financial support of granting agencies and for the assistance and hospitality of family and friends that made this approach possible. It is a remarkable and heartening fact that, as independent researchers, we were able to examine a great many paintings in conservation facilities in Europe and North America. Information from numerous conservation and curatorial files was also shared generously, and we have learned much from painting conservators and conservation scientists in many countries with long experience in examining the paintings of Gauguin. Commercial galleries and private collectors have also welcomed us.

In our study, we have drawn on the standard range of scientific techniques, examining paintings with the microscope and in infrared and ultraviolet light, and studying x-rays of them. Paint samples and cross-sections were, however, rarely available to us. In all cases, scientific examination was used as an extension of viewing paintings with the unaided eye in good light. It was correlated with the evidence of preparatory studies and the historical record of seeing Gauguin’s paintings found in art criticism, letters and memoirs. In the introduction to a recent collaborative study of the paintings of Velázquez by an art historian, a conservator, a scientist, and a photographer, the authors noted that: “Technical examination forces a return of attention to the visual object. Simultaneously, it demands that the object be seen in new ways. X-radiographs and infrared photographs

reveal hidden forms, cross-sections uncover concealed structures, and pigment analyses force the viewer to pay attention to color. All this new information challenges the art historian to construct new critical structures, to find new ways to perceive and describe the physical qualities of a painting. By attempting to identify the historical and theoretical questions that might be brought to bear on the discussion of Velázquez's brushwork, technique and color, we suggest that technical information can extend the parameters of the historical cognition of Velázquez's paintings."<sup>28</sup> The historical work of art is not available physically or culturally to our unmediated gaze: an act of historical imagination is necessary. The physical condition of what we are looking at has changed since it was made. Looking itself is a historically and culturally conditioned activity. Thus, recuperating and reconstructing the historical meanings of works of art requires a complex act of interpretation.

Technical study and historical research are two approaches that can be combined to give a highly rewarding interpretative method. Despite the incomplete and somewhat accidental nature of our sample of Gauguin's paintings, stimulated by new technical information, we have found new, historically grounded ways to describe and to see them. This, in turn, has led us to raise historical and theoretical questions about his work and to rethink its relation to vanguard French painting after Impressionism, to Salon naturalism, and to the academic tradition. Our study reinforces the image of Gauguin as a resolutely vanguard artist, in fact stressing the early date of his emulation of Manet and the Impressionists. However, we have also repositioned his painting at the center of a neo-traditionist current, associated more readily with the work of Maurice Denis than Gauguin, through its reference to traditional techniques such as wax painting and fresco.<sup>29</sup> In the end, our reconstruction of Gauguin's painting techniques and recuperation of the cultural meaning of his work has practical implications. We believe it will enrich the viewer's enjoyment of the paintings and be the basis for their preservation and appropriate conservation treatment in the future.