

Letters to the Editors

Henri Dorra and Vojtěch Jirat-Wasiutyński

Volume 11, Number 1-2, 1984

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1074339ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1074339ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Dorra, H. & Jirat-Wasiutyński, V. (1984). Letters to the Editors. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 11(1-2), 134–136.

<https://doi.org/10.7202/1074339ar>

Reste le problème des œuvres tardives. Après 1900, Bouguereau a 75 ans. Le tracé linéaire qui cernait si subtilement les formes se relâche, la touche devient plus libre, le modelé moins souple. Curieusement, une « évolution » qui suscite une comparaison louangeuse avec Renoir pour *Jeune prêtresse*, de 1902, amène un constat de sénilité à propos d'*Idylle enfantine* (n° 139), de 1900. Deux exemples ne suffisent évidemment pas pour conclure à une contamination tardive de l'impressionnisme, mais de là à réduire ces recherches à une affaire de mauvaises lunettes!

Dans un dernier article, abondamment illustré, Louise d'Argencourt propose une hypothèse séduisante, qu'elle voudra sans doute développer davantage, où elle applique à Bouguereau les plus récentes recherches sur les rapports entre la peinture savante et l'art populaire, essentiellement ici la carte postale: Bouguereau serait donc l'intermédiaire entre le répertoire populaire diffusé par la gravure au XIX^e siècle et la carte

postale fin de siècle. À l'instar de Béatrice Farwell⁴, elle établit une filiation, mais uniquement de Bouguereau vers ses imitateurs. Les cartes reproduites prouvent assez la dégradation des sujets, mais une dégradation telle qu'il devient difficile de la suivre dans le jeu des comparaisons et des influences. Quel lien peut-il bien exister entre les portraits Czosnowska et Porter et ces ridicules photographies thématiques offertes pour comparaison, sinon un certain rapport très courant entre la figure et la surface ou la pose conventionnelle? Les photographies commercialisées des œuvres de Bouguereau, «cadeaux de Noël», ont sans doute laissé quelque trace dans la mémoire artistique, mais la recherche des sources iconographiques des cartes postales devrait remonter directement aux chromos lithographiques ou autres des arts populaires de reproduction.

L'exposition Bouguereau nous a offert le meilleur d'un œuvre dispersé et une trop rare occasion de vérification sur pièces des idées reçues et des clichés répétés d'un auteur à l'autre à propos d'un artiste dont la fortune critique n'a pas fini de rebondir. Elle n'aura pas été, nous l'espérons, «la seule exposition à voir cette année⁵». Nous souhaitons que le public ait droit également à d'autres facettes de ce complexe XIX^e siècle et que soient rassurés tous ceux qui redoutaient une réhabilitation inconsidérée du pompiérisme aux dépens du modernisme. Le temps semble enfin venu pour la substitution d'études sereines à un manichéisme⁶ réducteur et appauvrissant.

CLAUDETTE HOULD
Université du Québec à Montréal

4 B. Farwell, «Popular Imagery and High Art in Nineteenth-Century France», *Research Reports* (Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts, Washington, D.C., 1983), 45-46. L'art populaire aurait inspiré également des artistes avant-gardistes comme Courbet, Degas, Manet, cette «élite bohémienne» à la recherche des véhicules convaincants pour le modernisme.

5 Dans un excès d'enthousiasme publicitaire, le MAM a diffusé un dépliant luxueusement illustré intitulé: «Il n'y a qu'une exposition à voir cette année, la voici».

6 En 1974, le catalogue d'une exposition sur l'art académique à la Emily Lowe Gallery, Hofstra University, était titré *Art pompier, Anti-Impressionism*.

LETTERS TO THE EDITORS

SIR,

My good friend Professor Vojtěch Jirat-Wasiutyński has just sent me an offprint of his 'Paul Gauguin's Paintings, 1886-91, Cloisonism, Synthetism and Symbolism' (RACAR IX [1982], 35-46) which is a fundamentally sound summation of the crucial developments of those years. Professor Jirat-Wasiutyński refers to my own work in that area most encouragingly on several occasions in the article, but finds 'implausible' my contention that the dejected-looking young woman in Gauguin's *Vintage at Arles: Human Miseries of 1888* should be meditating on the consequences of infanticide (p. 44, n. 40, referring to my 'Gauguin's Dramatic Arles Themes,' *Art Journal*, xxxviii, Fall 1978).

Professor Jirat-Wasiutyński had objected to my interpretation when I first presented it at a College Art Association meeting. I did not have to answer; an eloquent member of the audience, whom I did not know at the time, did it for me by praising my stylistic-iconographic argument and pointing, in particular, to the symbolic value of gesture to 19th-century audiences (the woman's gesture in the *Vintage* picture is closely related to that of the principal figure in a print by Rops which unmistakably refers to infanticide). Since the debate is now being re-opened, I should like to draw your readers' attention to the pioneering work done by Professor William L. Langer on population control

throughout the ages. His many remarkable articles have shown conclusively that foundling hospitals, which first appeared in the mid-18th century, were primarily built in cities. Through most of the 19th-century, the inhabitants of remote villages had to dispose much more brutally of unwanted children (usually through the time-honored expedient of placing them in a basket outside a church in the hope that someone would take pity on them, or at worst, that exposure to the elements would cut short their suffering). The pressures for disposing of unwanted children were very great indeed, as peasants were constantly haunted by the possibility of famine. One might gather that a female farm hand, such as Gauguin showed in his picture, would have been under strong pressure to dispose of an illegitimate child, and would ultimately have had to choose between a meagre livelihood on the farm – at the cost of a horrible crime and eternal damnation – and being kicked out to face unsurmountable odds as an unwed mother. Gauguin, incidentally, his private life notwithstanding, would have been somewhat attuned to the conditions of underprivileged women as he was familiar with the devastating book his grandmother, Flora Tristan, had written on the mores of London, and specifically on the exploitation of young women (he referred to the book in a letter to a friend).

Professor Jirat-Wasiutyński has been partly misled by the fact that he follows in the footsteps of Professor Wayne Andersen when he attempted to interpret the symbolic meaning of the woman in the picture: she is 'tempted by the "consolation of the earth" ' (whatever that means) he writes on p. 44, and, a little later, 'Gauguin linked the girl specifically with sexual temptation.' The notion that the figure denotes 'a state of temptation' stems from Andersen's use of these very words in his *Gauguin's Paradise Lost* (New York, 1971, p. 88). Andersen based his deduction on the fact that he saw temptation in the Cafe Volpini Eve (*Eve Bretonne*) of 1889, whose pose is somewhat similar. 'Her hands pressed against her ears to shut out the urgings of the serpent which writhes menacingly behind the trunk,' he wrote of the latter (p. 84). Actually, the hands of the *Eve Bretonne* are not placed against her ears, but against her cheeks, suggesting much more a sense of distress than a determination not to hear the serpent. The serpent, for its part, is less than menacing: it turns away from the woman, as if to indicate that its mission was successful. The woman, in other words, has been seduced and abandoned, and is now overcome by a sense of solitude, regret, and fear of divine punishment. Even Andersen's misspelling of Gauguin's caption in pidgin French is misleading: it is '*Pas écouter* (not *écoutez*) *li li menteur*.' The verb is not an imperative, but the infinitive of tenseless pidgin grammar. The usual translation: 'Do not listen to the liar' is too specific. The statement is not so much an admonishment not to listen in the future, as it is a somewhat philosophical conclusion, applicable at all times: 'Best not to listen to the liar.' Further along in the text, Professor Andersen became remarkably ambivalent about his own deduction, for on the one hand he

saw in the woman 'an implicit ... condemnation of Eve's conduct after the Fall' – the most plausible symbolic meaning of the work – while on the other he saw in her the prototype of the 'unadulterated Eve' (pp. 87, 90). Unaware, it seems, of this contradiction, Professor Jirat-Wasiutyński has accepted the last meaning, and consequently associated the distraught woman of *Vintage at Arles* with temptation rather than with sin and its consequences – indeed, even more specifically, the consequences of sin in a backward, relatively isolated and poor peasant community, the traditions of which the artist had set out to study. One last point: why is it that Gauguin, in a passage quoted by Professor Jirat-Wasiutyński which obviously refers to the woman in black behind the distressed girl of the *Vintage*, wrote: 'black expresses mourning'? Who is being, or will be, mourned?

Henri Dorra

10 April 1983

SIR,

Professor Dorra's letter raises two issues: first, is Gauguin's *Vintage at Arles: Human Misery* dependent on Rops' print *In the Ardenne – Now that Stupid Marie-Josèphe Thinks of a Child That Has Been Buried* and, therefore, an image of remorse provoked by infanticide; and, second, if not, is it an image of temptation. I will deal with the two in turn.

My reasons for referring to Professor Dorra's 1978 interpretation of the *Vintage at Arles* as 'implausible' are straight-forward; I now regret not having spelled them out in my original note (RACAR, IX [1982], p. 44, n. 40). That the brooding young woman should be meditating on the consequences of infanticide makes no sense in the context of Gauguin's contemporary or, for that matter, later work. The existence of Rops' print, which Gauguin may or may not have seen, does not justify such a reading. Professor Dorra is very probably right in seeing Rops' print as a comment on infanticide in rural France. But there is no evidence for a parallel reading visible in Gauguin's painting.

The pose of poor Marie-Josèphe is a common one, frequently used in western art to signify dejection or brooding thoughts. In itself it does not carry the message that the woman is meditating on the consequences of infanticide. It is the added *remarque* of the Rops' print, showing the grief-struck mother before the child's coffin, which acts as a commentary on the main image and spells out the cause of Marie-Josèphe's dejection. Although there is no such *remarque*, nor any related work by Gauguin which would comment in similar fashion on the *Vintage at Arles*, Professor Dorra would like to see the woman dressed in black at the extreme left of the painting, 'who looks on in sympathy,' as offering such a gloss. He identifies her as a figure of death in the 1978 article and suggests in the above letter, by a rhetorical question, that she is mourning the infanticide because she is dressed in black. In fact, the 'black expresses

mourning' in Gauguin's letter of 1888 about *The Vintage*, may not refer specifically to the *bretonne* for Gauguin has moved on (the statement occurs a paragraph later) to a general discussion of 'suggestive colour and form' and conventional symbolism. To paraphrase the artist in a later letter, Gauguin wishes to suggest sympathy and sadness in general not to specify which kind, 'to express a general state rather than a single thought' (RACAR, IX [1982], p. 45).

Much of the second portion of Professor Dorra's letter seems to be addressed to Professor Wayne Andersen rather than to me. I must insist, however, that I was not 'misled' into reading the brooding young woman in *Vintage at Arles* as being tempted by Andersen's argument in *Gauguin's Paradise Lost*; I worked out my own interpretation and argument. The article in RACAR clearly sets out the visual precedents for the image and the specific symbolism of temptation in the *Vintage at Arles* (pp. 43-44). That the temptation is a physical, sensual 'consolation of this earth' and that it has a (largely) sexual meaning for Gauguin emerges from his use of the red triangle (the vines in the background) in the painting, one of the oldest symbols of female sexuality. Such a reading is reinforced by the context of Gauguin's contemporary works. *Woman in the Hay with Pigs*, 1888 (Stavros Niarchos Collection, Paris), a pendant to *The Vintage*, shows woman as a sexual creature. Gauguin referred to the painting as *In Full Heat* and *The Pigs* (see Bogomila Welsh-Ovcharov, *Vincent van Gogh and The Birth of Cloisonism*, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, 1981, p. 192), thereby underlining the imagery of woman succumbing to animal sexuality.

Professor Dorra also involves the *Breton Eve*, 1889 (Marion Koogler McNay Art Institute, San Antonio) in the discussion. Granted, her pose is related to that of the brooding young woman in *Vintage at Arles*, but there are crucial differences. Her withdrawn and anguished pose derives as Andersen has shown, from a Peruvian mummy in the Trocadéro, whereas that of the *Vintage* figure does not. The *Breton Eve* definitely *does* place her hands over her ears – as a close look at the original or any good reproduction makes clear – to shut out the words of the serpent temptor: 'no listen him him liar.' The symbolism of the *Breton Eve* is too complex to explain fully here. In it and its pendant, the *Woman in the Waves*, 1889 (Cleveland Museum of Art), Gauguin expressed a radical critique of European morality. I refer Professor Dorra and those readers interested in a full analysis, to my *Paul Gauguin in The Context of Symbolism*, Garland Press, New York, 1978, pp. 166-170.

Vojtěch Jirat-Wasiutyński

SIR,

My discussion with Professor Jirat-Wasiutyński points to the difficulty of analysing the meaning (I should say meanings) of works of art of the Symbolist Period. I am perfectly willing to accept symbolic devices developed by well-known earlier artists to refer to specific, well-documented social and personal conditions; he relies on structures of meaning established by him, and by others he respects, disregarding the fact that these structures may occasionally be based on faulty observations and occasionally on allegedly 'long-standing' symbolic traditions (the red triangle, for instance, is 'one of the oldest symbols of female sexuality!')

I do not deny that there is an element of 'sexuality' in the distressed figure in the *Red Vineyard*, but it is obvious to me that the elements of guilt and distress are overwhelming. These must have to do with the *consequences* of sin, including the problem of how to cope with eventual childbirth. The problem of 'temptation' is already irrelevant. And as for the notion that 'temptation' can be 'a physical, sensual 'consolation of this earth', it simply does not make sense. Consolation from what? from the wages of sin, obviously.

And the *Breton Eve* is not closing off her ears to the admonishments of the serpent. Her palms are below the ears, and the fingers, which are over the ear-holes, are loosely placed and somewhat spread out. At most, with her head tilted as it is, she is wailing something like 'Mamma mia!' or, even more appropriately, the Breton equivalent of 'Seigneur, Jésus!'

According to Professor Jirat-Wasiutyński, Gauguin's generalization 'black expresses mourning' *may* (my italics) not refer specifically to the *bretonne* mentioned in the previous paragraph. That *bretonne*, I should like to point out, is described by Gauguin as a 'figure dressed in black, looking at [the distressed figure in the *Red Vineyard*] like a sister.' Until such time as Professor Jirat-Wasiutyński demonstrates conclusively that Gauguin was making a mental reservation about the *bretonne* in black when he made the generalization I shall accept the latter at face value. Gauguin, as he was to do so often in relation to other works, was giving a clue as to one of the meanings of the picture.

The one lesson to be drawn from this discussion is that any interpretative structure imposed upon a symbolist work can be as constraining and confining as the anecdotes that the academic artists and their friendly critics so loved, and against which the Symbolists themselves fought so hard. What is more, it can be plain wrong!

Henri Dorra
7 July 1983