

Paul Gauguin, *The Writings of a Savage*, edited by Daniel Guérin, with an introduction by Wayne Andersen, translated by Eleanor Levieux. New York, Viking Press, 1978. \$21.95

Vojtěch Jirat-Wasiutyński

Volume 6, numéro 2, 1979–1980

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1076942ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1076942ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

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

ISSN

0315-9906 (imprimé)

1918-4778 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Jirat-Wasiutyński, V. (1979). Compte rendu de [Paul Gauguin, *The Writings of a Savage*, edited by Daniel Guérin, with an introduction by Wayne Andersen, translated by Eleanor Levieux. New York, Viking Press, 1978. \$21.95]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 6(2), 142–145.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1076942ar>

Storia dell'arte » et l'éditeur Longo d'avoir offert aux archéologues et historiens de l'art des instruments de travail de qualité et au public intéressé des ouvrages bien illustrés, de consultation facile et à prix abordable.

TRAM TAN TINH
Université Laval
Québec

ZDENKA VOLAVKA *The Bowdoin Sculpture of St. John Nepomuk*. Brunswick, Maine, Bowdoin College Museum of Art, 1975. 32 pp., 21 illus.

The author approaches the subject matter with the verve and systematic analysis which characterizes her work in general. Although the topic is confined to a single wooden sculpture (Fig. 6) by Ferdinand Maximilian Brokov (baptized 1688—died 1731), the well known Bohemian sculptor of the early eighteenth century, the reader of this densely written essay of thirty-two pages gains an interesting insight into the complicated problems of Bohemian sculpture during the last decades of the seventeenth and the first decades of the eighteenth centuries.

One of the first problems which the author had to solve was the attribution of St. John Nepomuk's statue to F.M. Brokov and its dating; both his father and his brother were sculptors too and had worked with him for most of his life in the same workshop. In order to demonstrate the difficulties of attribution it would suffice to mention that 'the complex situation in the Brokov workshop has been revealed through the patient analysis of Brokov works by three generations of Czech art historians' (pp. 7-8). Professor Volavka, aided only by scanty records, succeeds through her fine iconographic and formal analysis in demonstrating that the St. John Nepomuk statue should be attributed to F.M. Brokov (pp. 8-21). In the next chapter (pp. 21-24) the results of this formal analysis are used to throw new light on some problems concerning the apprenticeship of the artist, whose work, in the past, has been related to the Prague sculptor F.O. Quitainer or to the Studl workshop



FIGURE 6. F.M. Brokov, *St. John Nepomuk*. Volavka, fig. 1.

in Vienna. The author points out evidence linking the work of the young F.M. Brokov to the Prague workshop of F. Preiss (1660-1712), mainly on the similarity of the pattern of structure of the figure in the work of both artists.

In the last chapter (pp. 24-27) Volavka discusses an interesting question which could have important ramifications on the understanding of F.M. Brokov's quiet 'classical' style. As has been pointed out repeatedly in the past, F.M. Brokov does not use the garment in his sculptures as a means of activation of the figure, the major structural and expressive element being the body of the figure. 'Brokov's sculptures are constructed with a dramatic yet balanced distribution of mass. The fervour of Brokov's figures is introverted. They are serene and worldly; not ecstatic, yet suggesting activity. The basic Brokov form is round and convex, the volume bulgy' (p. 6). Totally different from this style are the passionate figures of Braun and his followers, members of a Prague school who played a certain role in

the development of the European Baroque, a school even more dramatic than Bernini's in form and content. Their turbulent figures with extremely animated garments reflect the Catholic effort to convert heretics, i.e. the Protestants.

It is known that Brokov's father Jan was, in his young years, a staunch Protestant. His conversion to Catholicism occurred later in his life, and it is probable that his Catholic wedding in 1686 was the re-enactment of an earlier Protestant one. His children were baptized later. Both F.M. Brokov and his brother remained single, and they seemed to avoid contacts with the Catholic authorities. By comparing these indications with the substantial changes F.M. Brokov introduced in the iconography of the sculpture of St. John Nepomuk (pp. 12-13), representing him as a figure full of energy and activity (like Jan Hus) instead of the traditional passive, resigned martyr, Volavka raises an extremely interesting question: 'Do F.M. Brokov's interpretive deviations from the norm say anything about the artist's personal attitude and intention, or do they merely indicate the approach of a great artist who only reluctantly accepts an iconographic stereotype?' (p. 26). One might also point out the possibility that F.M. Brokov's quiet 'anti-Berninesque' style could be seen as the artistic manifestation of an attitude very different from the prevailing official artistic and religious ideas of this period in Bohemia.

One can only wish that Volavka would pursue further the exciting new aspects she has revealed in this excellent study.

RIGAS N. BERTOS
McGill University
Montreal

PAUL GAUGUIN *The Writings of a Savage*, edited by Daniel Guérin, with an introduction by Wayne Andersen, translated by Eleanor Levieux. New York, Viking Press, 1978. \$21.95.

Gauguin wrote a great deal; to a greater extent than the Impressionists and Realists before him, he

felt the need to analyze and explain his works in writing. The artists of the 1880s and 1890s – Van Gogh, Seurat, Signac, Redon, Denis, Sérusier, as well as Gauguin – were extremely self-conscious about their art. Their theoretical statements, private or public, were attempts to explain and prescribe a new art, to justify it, and ultimately, to create an audience for it.

Gauguin's theorizing grew out of a personal, artistic search, but quickly became polemical, i.e. addressed to an audience usually thought to be hostile. His letters contain many theoretical discussions and much art criticism. He turned to writing essays as early as 1884-85, with 'Notes Synthétiques', and, then, to art criticism with several articles for Symbolist periodicals in 1889 and 1894. Gauguin's artistic career had begun with a head-on collision between his art and bourgeois culture; proudly and bitterly he rejected that western culture between 1885 and 1890. Paradoxically, Gauguin felt the need to defend and justify his artistic approach to this hostile public. He began to appear publicly in his writings in the roles of art critic, religious prophet, and critic of society.

Gauguin's letters and writings are a mixture of art criticism, art theory, and personal mythology. They have value as biographical documents and as theory, but they are part, first and foremost, of the total work of art to which Gauguin aspired, the creation of a new mythical world with Gauguin the artist at the centre. The finest of Gauguin's writings, from this point of view, are *Noa Noa* and *Avant et Après*. It is all too easy to overemphasize one aspect, the documentary or the polemical, for instance, and to destroy the whole impression by excerpting the texts. As a result, Gauguin's texts are best read whole and in their original format. That is, however, a privilege and luxury available only to the scholar.

A representative anthology of Gauguin's correspondence, articles, and major writings, for use by the interested general reader as well as the student of art history, has been needed for some time. In 1974 Gallimard published *Oviri: Écrits d'un Sauvage*, edited by Daniel Guérin, to fill that need. The vol-

ume under review is an English translation of that anthology, with an added introductory essay by Wayne Andersen. Although its appearance should be a very welcome event, it proves to be a rather mixed blessing.

The anthology is intended as 'a work of vulgarization in the best sense of the word,' according to the editor. The general reader will find the volume a revelation, but will also be frustrated by the unhelpful way in which the material is presented. Eager to discover Gauguin the artist, the man, the thinker, he or she will not find the biographical and art historical information necessary to make sense of the writings. The art history student and the Gauguin scholar too will find the anthology exciting and frustrating in equal measure. Although 'no available text has been omitted,' and several important ones which have never been published extensively before are included in Guérin's volume, there are critical omissions in the correspondence. Moreover, Guérin's practice of excerpting all texts and letters is frustrating in the long run; Gauguin is being processed for the reader. Unfortunately, much vital information is omitted and distorted in the process. The reader will find no bibliography nor any list of published sources to turn to for the full texts of the original letters, articles, and longer manuscripts. Furthermore, there is no adequate chronology nor any indication where additional biographical and art historical material about Gauguin can be found.

The anthology is organized chronologically with a mixture of letters, articles, and texts combined in each section. This gives the anthology a biographical and documentary 'cast,' which, however, is not supported by adequate editorial commentary. The letters are the primary source for our knowledge of Gauguin's mental and physical life. Insofar as they are intrinsically incomplete or have been excerpted by the editor to comply with the single-volume format, the letters must be supplemented by biographical and historical information. The letters should have been woven together into a coherent and informative narrative. Why are we not told

when Gauguin first set out for Brittany? For Panama and Martinique, for Tahiti and the Marquesas? When did he return from these various trips? And so on.

The reader should also beware that much of the scant biographical information (especially dates) is incorrect. It should be verified in Merete Bodelsen's 'Gauguin: The Collector,' *Burlington Magazine*, cxii (September 1970), pp. 590-601, and *Gauguin's Ceramics* (London, 1964) and in Bengt Danielsson's *Gauguin in the South Seas* (London, 1965). Even the myth of Gauguin's having voluntarily given up a lucrative career at the Stock Exchange for painting survives here!

The letters contain a great deal of information essential for the dating and interpretation of Gauguin's paintings and, as a result, for understanding his evolution as an artist. From this point of view there are critical omissions: Gauguin's letters to Camille Pissaro, partly published in John Rewald's *Post-Impressionism: From Van Gogh to Gauguin* (New York, 1962) are not represented, nor are those to Vincent Van Gogh, with the exception of one brief excerpt (on p. 24). Most of the letters that Guérin publishes are a selection from those that appeared in Malingue's *Lettres de Gauguin à sa femme et à ses amis* (Paris, 1946) and Joly-Ségalen's *Lettres de Gauguin à Daniel de Monfreid* (Paris, 1950). The letters to Gauguin's wife, Mette, to Schuffenecker, and to Bernard, both painter friends, which Malingue transcribed so unreliably, have been corrected in many instances; however, Malingue's inaccurate dating of the letters, corrected in Bodelsen's publications and in Mark Roskill's *Van Gogh, Gauguin and the Impressionist Circle* (Greenwich, Conn., 1970) is taken over wholesale, as are a number of unacknowledged footnotes. Several important letters to Schuffenecker are missing, perhaps because they appeared only in Arsène Alexandre's 1930 monograph.

Despite the omission of some important letters, the anthology contains a vast number of them. Guérin has represented most of the letters in the Malingue and Joly-Ségalen volumes, as well as many from other sources, albeit at the cost of drastically excerpting them.

It is this procedure that most seriously limits the usefulness of the correspondence in the Guérin volume. The articles and texts have received a similar, though usually less drastic, treatment, as we shall see. A comparison between the fragments of an important letter to Schuffenecker of 14 January 1885 and the full text, published in English translation by Linda Nochlin in *Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, 1874-1904, Sources and Documents* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1966), reveals quite clearly the loss to the reader that uninformed excerpting can entail. Obscured and largely lost in this case is Gauguin's earliest expression of a Symbolist aesthetic based on the notion of a correspondence between certain feelings and certain lines, shapes, and colours, and on the translation of ideas in painting by means analogous to the parable rather than those of literary illustration. In many other letters the context has been destroyed by similar omissions and Gauguin's intended meaning lost.

Guérin would have been better advised to limit his selection of letters and to reproduce the most important ones in full. The reader cannot trust his excerpting any more than his biographical data. Guérin is not an historian of the art of the period and he simply has not informed himself sufficiently about the period and the artist to do the excerpting.

Guérin's anthology is most valuable for the longer texts it makes available. Almost all of Gauguin's writings from the 'Notes Synthétiques' of 1884-85 to his *Avant et Après* of 1902-03 are generously represented. They, however, suffer the same process of excerpting and omission as did the letters; the longer texts are also internally rearranged in an order that Guérin found more logical and often whole sections are transposed, with only partial identification, into the body of another text where a similar subject is discussed. The rearrangements and transfers are done without indication of the original order or precise context of the wandering sections. Providing cross-references would have been a more orthodox and less confusing manner of dealing with the admittedly repetitious later writings of Gauguin.

Gauguin began writing theoretical and critical essays about art in 1884-85 with the 'Notes Synthétiques.' Guérin's selection from the text eliminates the introductory *paragone*, or traditional comparison among the arts, and with it Gauguin's crucial comparison of painting to music because of its instantaneous impact on the feelings of the viewer, an idea derived from Delacroix's writings. In 1889 Gauguin met the Symbolist critic Albert Aurier, through Émile Bernard, and began writing articles, many of which were published in *Le Moderniste illustré*; he published again in the Symbolist periodicals in 1894. These somewhat ephemeral yet revealing texts are well represented in Guérin's anthology.

Noa Noa was composed in 1893-94 in order to create a narrative and descriptive context for Gauguin's Tahitian paintings. *Noa Noa* exists in three versions: the original draft narrative of 1893-94; the text rewritten by Charles Morice in 1894-95 in collaboration with Gauguin and copied by the latter into a *cahier*, now in the Louvre, which he took with him to Tahiti in 1895; and the version published by Morice in *La Revue Blanche* in 1897 and in book form in 1901. Guérin rightly chooses the first draft and gives the text largely intact; however, his dismissal of Morice as an 'evildoer' who 'mangled' the original text is misleading since Gauguin himself felt differently and copied out Morice's text in 1895, as Andersen points out (pp. xi-xii). In the first version of *Noa Noa* Gauguin planned to insert Tahitian legends at various intervals; these were to be taken from *Ancient Maori Religion*, a selection of legends which Gauguin copied from J.A. Moerenhout's *Voyage aux Îles du Grand Océan* (Paris, 1837), since the native cult had disappeared long before Gauguin's arrival. Guérin reproduces only those sections of *Ancient Maori Religion* which 'complete' *Noa Noa*; left out, as a result, are two legends crucial for understanding the imagery of some of Gauguin's most important Tahitian painting and sculpture. Neither the story of Vairaumati and the founding of the Areoi society, nor Hina and Tefatou's dialogue on life and death appear in the anthology.

In 1896 and 1897 Gauguin filled in the balance of the Louvre *Noa*

Noa manuscript with a scrapbook of ideas and images called 'Miscellaneous Things.' It is wonderful to have this important text in print and largely intact. But why not give us the whole text? Why leave out important passages about Baudelaire, Poe, Wagner, Swedenborg, Péladan, Delacroix, and Verlaine, so crucial, as Andersen points out (pp. xxiv-v), to the formulation of Gauguin's Symbolist aesthetic? All too often Guérin leaves out passages with important aesthetic and art historical implications in both texts and letters. On the rare occasions when he adds an art-historical footnote, he can be quite wrong: e.g. the painting of the *Exotic Eve* was not done in Tahiti and Gauguin's own date of 1890 is not a mistake, as Guérin suggests on p. 137, note 15. That Gauguin was capable of painting the *Exotic Eve* as a prediction of the 'Earthy Paradise' (its original title) which he believed he would find in Tahiti, has been demonstrated in Henri Dorra's 'The First Eves in Gauguin's Eden,' *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, xli (1953), pp. 187-202 and Bengt Danielsson's *Gauguin in the South Seas*.

At the end of 'Miscellaneous Things' Gauguin introduced a diatribe against the Catholic Church, 'The Catholic Church and Modern Times,' which includes his most important statements about religion and philosophy. Late in 1897 he painted the mural-size *Where Do We Come From? Who Are We? Where Are We Going?* (Boston, Museum of Fine Arts) on a theme discussed in that 'philosophical treatise' as a testament, and attempted, but failed, to commit suicide. The critical passages from 'The Catholic Church and Modern Times' (1896-97), as well as its later version 'Catholicism and the Modern Spirit' (1902), are reproduced by Guérin with one important omission: a long passage dealing with the concept of Christ as a model or ideal type of the progressive perfectability of the human being. This concept sheds light on Gauguin's long-standing identification with Christ in his art, as Ziva Amishai-Maisels has pointed out in her thesis (Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1970).

Gauguin's last writings, *Raccontars de Rapin* (1902) and *Avant et Après* (1902-03), are 'scattered notes,' the recollections and musings of an

artist often too ill to paint or carve. They appear largely complete in the anthology, but the latter has been so thoroughly rearranged to introduce 'a more coherent order' that the 'scattered notes' threaten to become a book, despite Gauguin's repeated warning 'ceci n'est pas un livre.'

The anthology of Gauguin's writings was translated into English by Eleanor Levieux; the translations are generally good, retaining the spirited and colloquial flavour of much of Gauguin's writings. Levieux tends, however, to be rather free with equivalent words and phrases, and often the choices prove to be troublesome, occasionally inaccurate. A few examples follow. The fox was for Gauguin a symbol of 'perversity,' not 'perversion' (p. 33); the original French of the letter to Bernard (late August or early September 1889) is 'perversité' not 'perversion.' In another letter to Bernard (late November or early December 1889), Gauguin commented that, despite his efforts to become 'absolutely insensitive,' 'la nature première revient sans cesse.' To translate this as 'my innermost nature constantly gets the upper hand' (p. 36) is to obscure a crucial reference contained in the phrase 'the first nature.' Gauguin is here referring to a specific person-

ality myth first expressed in a letter to his wife Mette in February 1888: 'There are two natures [Levieux renders this as "types of temperament"] within me: the Indian and the sensitive. The sensitive has disappeared, and this allows the Indian to walk resolutely straight ahead' (p. 21). (The Indian referred to here and throughout Gauguin's correspondence is the North American Indian, popularly known in the nineteenth century for his impassive countenance and resistance to pain under torture. 'Indien' is distinguished from 'Hindou,' i.e. inhabitant of India, in French.) For the sake of consistency and clarity the phrase in the later letter should be translated as 'my first nature re-emerges again and again.'

Translation of historical material is extremely tricky and demands profound familiarity with the thought of the period and the author. Aesthetic terminology needs close attention. For example, 'symbolique' means 'symbolic' and not 'Symbolist' in Gauguin's letter (8 October 1888) explaining his *Self-Portrait 'Les Misérables à l'ami Vincent'*. Gauguin is referring to the fact that his features in the portrait have a symbolic meaning, i.e. another suggestive level of meaning, because they are abstracted

into flower-like patterns; this additional meaning is based on the analogy of the flower-like shapes in the face with the flowers of the wallpaper background, which suggest the innocence of the artist through the setting of a 'bedroom of a pure young girl,' according to Gauguin. Gauguin did not, at this time, refer to himself or his art as Symbolist; in fact, in the next line of the letter he refers to himself as an Impressionist.

Wayne Andersen's introduction, written especially for the English-language edition of Guérin's anthology, is an extensive study of the aims, style, and sources of Gauguin's writings starting with *Noa Noa*. Andersen does not dwell, however, on the history of the texts, nor does he analyze their meaning systematically; he uses the texts selectively to paint a personal image of Gauguin. A more factual, objective account of Gauguin's writings, their genesis, their relationship to his art and his life, and their place in the history of art, would have been more helpful to the reader looking for guidance before reading in this extremely important, yet flawed, anthology.

VOJTĚCH JIRAT-WASIUTYŃSKI
Queen's University
Kingston

Director

CENTRE CANADIEN D'ARCHITECTURE / CANADIAN CENTRE FOR ARCHITECTURE

Montréal, Québec

The cca is a growing collection of books, drawings, photographs and other materials relating to European and American architecture, the built environment and its conservation.

The duties of the director include: 1) supervision and development of the collections; 2) initiation, implementation and coordination of imaginative exhibition, publication, education and research programs; 3) administration: the selection and supervision of curatorial/research/library staff; preparation and implementation of a budget; the development of institutional policy in consultation with an advisory committee; regular reporting to a Board of Trustees; 4) outreach: establish and maintain professional relationships with other institutions devoted to study of architecture; liaison with private and public sources of funding.

Qualifications: strong academic and museum background in architectural history or related areas. At least five years' experience in organizing and administering academic/museum/library/architectural conservation programs. Fluency in French and English. Salary: commensurate with experience.

Applications, with c.v., bibliography, and the names of three referees should be sent to: Search Committee, cca, 420 rue Bonsecours, Montréal, Québec H2Y 3C4, as soon as possible.
