

### Three Impressionists

U3A Art Appreciation Group

27<sup>th</sup> September 2010

DVD recording by Tim Marlowe augmented by online research

#### Gauguin 7th June 1848 – 8th May 1903

He was a leading French Post-Impressionist artist, painter, sculptor, printmaker, ceramist and writer. His bold experimentation with colouring led directly to the Synthetist style of modern art while his expression of the inherent meaning of the subjects in his paintings, under the influence of the cloisonnist style, paved the way to Primitivism and the return to the pastoral. He was also an influential proponent of wood engraving and woodcuts as art forms

*synthetism - a genre of French painting characterized by bright flat shapes and symbolic treatments of abstract ideas*

*Cloisonnism is a style of post-Impressionist painting with bold and flat forms separated by dark contours. The term was coined by critic Edouard Dujardin on occasion of the Salon des Indépendants, in March 1888*



**Eugène Henri Paul Gauguin** was born in Paris, France to journalist Clovis Gauguin and Aline Maria Chazal, daughter of the half-Peruvian proto-socialist leader Flora Tristan, a feminist precursor. In 1851 the family left Paris for Peru, motivated by the political climate of the period. Clovis died on the voyage, leaving three-year old Paul, his mother and sister to fend for themselves. They lived for four years in Lima, Peru with Paul's uncle and his family. The imagery of Peru would later influence Paul in his art. At the age of seven, Paul and his family returned to France. They moved to Orléans, France to live with his grandfather. He soon learned French and excelled in his studies. At seventeen, Gauguin signed on as a pilot's assistant in the merchant marine to fulfil his required military service. Three years later, he joined the French navy where he stayed for two years. In 1871, Gauguin returned to Paris where he secured a job as a stockbroker. In 1873, he married a Danish woman, Mette-Sophie Gad. Over the next ten years, they had five children. His painting started at weekends only – then he went to evening classes before showing enough talent to be taken on as a pupil by Pizarro. 1881 he exhibited for the first time.

By 1884 Gauguin had moved with his family to Copenhagen, where he pursued a business career as a stockbroker. The stock market crash inspired him to take up art seriously as a way of supporting his wife and family and he returned to Paris in 1885, leaving his family in Denmark.

Without adequate subsistence, his wife (Mette Sophie Gadd) and their five children returned to her family. Gauguin outlived two of his children.

At age 38 Gauguin began to paint his first original works. He went to work in Brittany and after 3 months returned to Paris to try to sell his work. His work was purchased by Theo Van Gogh – brother of Vincent – who began to market his work. Gauguin became a friend of Vincent Van Gogh who begged him to go down to Arles to visit him. Ultimately he went for 9 weeks but Gauguin did not like the people there and quarrelled constantly with Vincent Van Gogh. He had been threatened by Van Gogh wielding a razor blade so checked into a hotel – only to discover in the morning – that Van Gogh had sliced half his ear off!

Like Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin experienced bouts of depression and at one time attempted suicide himself.

In 1891, Gauguin, frustrated by lack of recognition at home and financially destitute, sailed to the tropics to escape European civilization and "everything that is artificial and conventional". (Before this he had made several attempts to find a tropical paradise where he could 'live on fish and fruit' and paint in his increasingly primitive style, including short stays in Martinique and as a labourer on the Panama Canal construction; however, he was dismissed from his job after only two weeks.)

Gauguin moved rapidly away from the natural world to a style of painting dominated by the imagination. In "Les Miserables" he depicted himself (self-portrait) as Jean Valjean.

Gauguin said goodbye to his estranged family in Copenhagen and set off for Tahiti. He still continued to correspond with his wife however about how he was progressing but failed to tell her that he had "married" a 13 year old Tahitian girl called Tehamana who figures in many of his paintings.

Gauguin's art, like his lifestyle, was becoming more and more removed from Paris. He did return fleetingly to seek to sell some and his work was ridiculed.

Few wives would have enjoyed their husbands describing life with a teenage concubine; and when he refused to send the hardworking Mette any money for the children it was the last straw, Furiously she wrote to a mutual friend: 'He never thinks of anything but himself and his welfare.' Once again, Gauguin thought longingly of Tahiti, where people just winked at his irregularities. In September 1895 he landed in Papeete again and within two months was building a large house ten miles away. His young wife Tehamana refused to have any more to do with him and despite being ill with syphilis, he took another wife – this time aged 14. She stayed with Gauguin for the five years he lived in his house and was pregnant twice (the descendants of her second child by him still live in the area), but the casual and sometimes sarcastic tone he used in his references to her suggest that she was more servant than lover.

In 1901 he moved to Papeete. His financial situation was worsening: his health was deteriorating, necessitating expensive stays in hospital (although he tried to save money by seldom paying bills).

Sores erupted up and down his legs, characteristic of syphilis - some observers took them for leprosy - and he began to have heart attacks. He quarrelled with everyone, making even the friendly, admiring Tahitians dislike and resent him. He even tried to have Pahura sent to jail when she entertained her family at his house.

In 1901 he left for the Marquesas islands. His appearance was shocking, since the sores on his legs were now so noxious he could no longer keep them covered, but he still managed to acquire a 14-year-old 'wife', Vaeoho (by whom he had another of his numerous children). He persuaded her parents to take her from the mission school to share his life with the magnificent present of a sewing machine, 41 yards of various cloths, three dozen ribbons and 12 pieces of lace.

AGAIN, he was soon at odds with local authority, filling his house with pornographic images, arguing in favour of allowing sexual freedom to young children and letting the islanders (on whom alcohol had a particularly bad effect) drink freely.

He also managed to get published, in his memoir *Avant Et Apres*, an attack on the long-suffering Mette, now 52 and headmistress of a girls' school, to pre-empt the criticisms of his appalling treatment of her now beginning to swirl round Paris.

But his life of sexual abandon had reached its final chapter. In the last stages of tertiary syphilis, hardly able to drag himself about and in constant pain from his abscessed legs, he died of a massive heart attack on May 8, 1903.

Mette's legacy was a small financial bequest and, so successful had his attacks on her been, a lasting reputation as the villain in the Paul Gauguin story. But at least it was better than the words that appeared on his Tahitian death certificate: 'He was married and a father but the name of his wife is unknown'.

He died aged 54 on 8th May 1903 having been refused a Christian burial as he had fallen out with the local Christian priest.

**Van Gogh** 30<sup>th</sup> March 1853 – 29<sup>th</sup> July 1890



Vincent Willem Van Gogh is in many ways the most celebrated of the Impressionists though he sold only one painting in his lifetime. He had a tragically short, intense and disturbed life.

Little appreciated during his lifetime, his fame grew in the years after his death. Today, he is widely regarded as one of history's greatest painters and an important contributor to the foundations of modern art. Van Gogh did not begin painting until his late twenties, and most of his best-known works were produced during his final two years. He produced more than 2,000 artworks, consisting of around 900 paintings and 1,100 drawings and sketches.

Although he was little known during his lifetime, his work was a strong influence on the modernist art that followed. Today many of his pieces—including his numerous self portraits, landscapes, portraits and sunflowers—are among the world's most recognizable and expensive works of art.

Van Gogh spent his early adulthood working for a firm of art dealers and travelled between The Hague, London and Paris, after which he taught in England.

An early vocational aspiration was to become a pastor and preach the gospel. In January 1879, he took a temporary post as a missionary in the village of Petit Wasmes in the coal-mining district of Borinage in Belgium.

Taking Christianity to what he saw as its logical conclusion, Van Gogh opted to live like those he preached to—sharing their hardships to the extent of sleeping on straw in a small hut at the back of the baker's house where he was billeted.

The baker's wife reported hearing Van Gogh sobbing all night in the hut. His choice of squalid living conditions did not endear him to the appalled church authorities, who dismissed him for "undermining the dignity of the priesthood."

He then walked to Brussels, returned briefly to the village of Cuesmes in the Borinage but gave in to pressure from his parents to return home to Etten. He stayed there until around March the following year, a cause of increasing concern and frustration for his parents.

There was particular conflict between Vincent and his father; Theodorus made inquiries about having his son committed to the lunatic asylum at Geel.

Van Gogh began to sketch people from the local community and in 1885 painted his first major work "**The Potato Eaters**". His palette at the time consisted mainly of sombre earth tones and showed no sign of the vivid coloration that distinguished his later work.

He left the ministry to concentrate on art full time having fallen into poverty. In March 1886 Vincent arrived in Paris and met up with his brother Theo who had established himself as an Art Dealer. His brother introduced him to many of the leading figures in the Parisian art world and he became especially friendly with Gauguin. He discovered the French Impressionists.

Van Gogh was supported by his brother but moved in with a prostitute who had one child and was heavily pregnant with another. These became his family but eventually he fell out with her (Christine – who figured greatly in his paintings).

Later he moved to the south of France and was taken by the strong sunlight he found there. His work grew brighter in colour and he developed the unique and highly recognizable style which became fully realized during his stay in Arles in 1888. He painted so extensively that his outwork was almost unparalleled in the world of art. The postman became one of his few friends in Arles. He became enraptured by Arles and the surrounding Provence region.

1888 he painted one of his most celebrated paintings – depicting his house in Arles – which had become extremely important to him. In that year, also, he painted a scene within his house “Vincent’s bedroom”.



1889 The Sunflowers – he painted 10 versions throughout his life and one, more than 100 years afterwards, fetched 25 million pounds! His first 3 versions in this year though were painted for his friend Gauguin when he visited him after much pleading that year. He signed his work “Vincent” now “as people cannot pronounce Van Gogh”. This visit gave rise to the razor incident with Gauguin and his return to his house only to cut off his ear, go out and present it to a prostitute and then almost die of loss of blood before the police encountered him the next morning.

After the self mutilation he was hospitalised for a while in 1889 but the local people petitioned that the “Mad Dutchman” should be removed permanently. He was self-admitted to another hospital and painted prolifically at the time.

In 1890, beside himself with grief and boredom, he returned to Paris where Gachet, a friend of his brother Theo, tried to cure him – but was ultimately unsuccessful. His disturbed mental state lead to him producing some of the bleakest paintings ever made.

**Wheatfields and crows** shows his isolation and desperation and symbolisation of foreboding. He shot himself in fact in the very wheatfield he had painted and staggered back to his room. There he died aged only 37 having produced some 900 paintings.

**Edgar Degas** 19th July 1834 – 27th September 1917



Born Hilaire-Germain-Edgar De Gas, he was a prominent member of the impressionist group but refused to paint out of doors at all! He experimented with a greater range of media than anyone else.

His family were upper middle class bankers and he was born in Paris into a comfortable, even privileged childhood.

He was encouraged by his father to take up a career in law but spent his time in the Louvre feverishly copying the old masters.

Early in his career, his ambition was to be a history painter, a calling for which he was well prepared by his rigorous academic training and close study of classic art. In his early thirties, he changed course, and by bringing the traditional methods of a history painter to bear on contemporary subject matter, he became a classical painter of modern life.

Fired up with classical fervour and anxious to meet his extended family (his father was Italian) Degas headed to Italy

aged 22 and painted his Aunt Laura and family.

Upon his return to France in 1859, Degas moved into a Paris studio large enough to permit him to begin painting *The Bellelli Family*—an imposing canvas he intended for exhibition in the Salon, although it remained unfinished until 1867. He also began work on several history paintings: *Alexander and Bucephalus* and *The Daughter of Jephthah* in 1859–60; *Sémiramis Building Babylon* in 1860; and *Young Spartans* around 1860.

In 1861, Degas visited his childhood friend Paul Valpinçon in Normandy, and made the earliest of his many studies of horses.

He exhibited at the Salon for the first time in 1865, when the jury accepted his painting *Scene of War in the Middle Ages*, which attracted little attention.

Although he exhibited annually in the Salon during the next five years, he submitted no more history paintings, and his *Steeplechase—The Fallen Jockey* (Salon of 1866) signalled his growing commitment to contemporary subject matter.

The change in his art was influenced primarily by the example of Édouard Manet, whom Degas had met in 1864 (while both were copying the same Velázquez portrait in the Louvre, according to a story that may be apocryphal).

Degas once said that there was nothing spontaneous about his Art.

He met up with other impressionists, including Manet, in the café at Mon Matre.

1866 He painted a ***Gentleman's Day at the Races***. He made huge numbers of sketches for this and for other examples of his work. He also modelled horses in clay in this connection.

At the outbreak of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870, Degas enlisted in the National Guard, where his defence of Paris left him little time for painting. During rifle training his eyesight was found to be defective, and for the rest of his life his eye problems were a constant worry to him.

After the war, in 1872, Degas began an extended stay in New Orleans, Louisiana, where his brother René and a number of other relatives lived. Staying in a house on Esplanade Avenue, Degas produced a number of works, many depicting family members. One of Degas's New Orleans works, depicting a scene at ***The Cotton Exchange at New Orleans***, received favourable attention back in France, and was his only work purchased by a museum (that of Pau) during his lifetime.

Degas returned to Paris in 1873. That year he painted ***the Laundress*** for a friend, then borrowed it back and over-worked it also producing another version and exhibited it in 1876.

The following year his father died, and in the subsequent settling of the estate it was discovered that Degas's brother René had amassed enormous business debts. To preserve the family name, Degas was forced to sell his house and a collection of art he had inherited. Dependent for the first time in his life on sales of his artwork for income, he produced much of his greatest work during the decade beginning in 1874.

By now thoroughly disenchanted with the Salon, Degas joined forces with a group of young artists who were intent upon organizing an independent exhibiting society. The first of their exhibitions, which were quickly dubbed Impressionist Exhibitions, was in 1874 when he exhibited ***The Dance Class*** – tightly conceived with dancers in a whole range of different poses. Degas rehearsed his own techniques in these dancer paintings which were the pretext for him experimenting with the painting of fabric, movement, etc.

The Impressionists subsequently held seven additional shows, the last in 1886. Degas took a leading role in organizing the exhibitions, and showed his work in all but one of them, despite his persistent conflicts with others in the group. He had little in common with Monet and the other landscape painters, whom he mocked for painting outdoors. Conservative in his social attitudes, he abhorred the scandal created by the exhibitions, as well as the publicity and advertising that his colleagues sought. He bitterly rejected the label Impressionist that the press had created and popularized, and his insistence on including non-Impressionist artists such as Jean-Louis Forain and Jean-François Raffaëlli in their exhibitions created rancour within the group, contributing to their eventual disbanding in 1886.

As his financial situation improved through sales of his own work, he was able to indulge his passion for collecting works by artists he admired: old masters such as El Greco and such contemporaries as Manet, Pissarro, Cézanne, Gauguin, and Van Gogh. Three artists he idolized, Ingres, Delacroix, and Daumier, were especially well represented in his collection.

In the late 1880s, Degas also developed a passion for photography. He photographed many of his friends, often by lamplight, as in his double portrait of ***Renoir and Mallarmé***. Other photographs, depicting dancers and nudes, were used for reference in some of Degas's drawings and paintings.

He explored the idea of different view points and different perspectives – as in the painting of the flowers and woman to the right – who is partly off canvas and where the table seems to slope although the jug of water perched on it does not reflect this in the level of the water.

Over half the total number of works he produced were concerned with the Ballet. He remained interested in public spectacle as well as private – vis Miss Lala at the circus

He caused a real stir at the 8<sup>th</sup> and final Impressionist Exhibition in 1886 with his portrait of female bathers which was rendered in pastel over a charcoal sketch. He liked the dry medium which could be re-worked more easily than oil paint.

1890 – ***Combing the Hair*** – where colour takes over with a predominant red.

In the 1890s as his sight got worse, his images of women became more and more radical elevating pastel painting to a major art form. His line work and sense of experimentation were predominant. He died in 1917 aged 83.