

ASPECTS OF ART LECTURE

FAUVISM AND THE SCHOOL OF CHATOU:  
POST-IMPRESSIONISM IN CRISIS

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EARLY in October 1888 a young painter staying at the Pension Gloanec in Pont Aven was ushered into the presence of Gauguin, clutching a canvas which he submitted for criticism. The following morning, in the Bois d'Amour, just outside the town, one of the most famous painting lessons in history took place. 'How do you see those trees?', Gauguin asked, 'they are yellow. Then paint them yellow. And that shadow is bluish. So render it with ultramarine. Those red leaves? Use vermilion.'<sup>1</sup>

The direct result of the lesson was not, of course, Derain's *Trois Arbres, L'Estaque* (pl. III) of the summer of 1906, but Sérusier's *Talisman* (pl. II), painted that momentous morning, a work which was to transform the art and lives of his young Nabi colleagues when he showed it to them on his return to Paris, accompanying it as he did with the verbal message from Gauguin of: 'the concept, still unknown to us of the painting as a flat surface covered in colours assembled in a certain order.'<sup>2</sup> It was this concept that was to be elaborated by Sérusier's friend and fellow Nabi, Maurice Denis, in his celebrated essay of 1890 which opened with the sentence: 'Remember that a picture before being a battle-horse, a nude woman or some anecdote or other, is essentially a flat surface covered in colours arranged in a certain order'<sup>3</sup>—a formulation which brought him instant fame. I introduce the lecture with this confrontation because I would like to suggest during the course of it that although the literature on Fauvism invariably presents it as the first of the twentieth-century

<sup>1</sup> Paul Sérusier, *ABC de la Peinture*, published together with Maurice Denis's *Paul Sérusier, sa vie, son œuvre*, Paris, 1942, p. 42.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>3</sup> Maurice Denis, *Définition du Néo-Traditionisme* in *Art et Critique*, Paris, 23 and 30 August 1890. Reprinted in *Théories—Du Symbolisme au Classicisme*, Paris, 1964, p. 33.

pictorial revolutions, the difference between these two paintings is one of degree and intensity rather than of kind, one of realization rather than of intention.

The school of Chatou was comprised of two painters, Vlaminck and Derain, and it was born on the suburban railway line that links S. Germain-en-Laye with the Gare S. Lazare in Paris. It was a journey that in those days took exactly 47 minutes; and by one of those gratifying coincidences of history Sérusier and Denis had met on the same line some ten odd years earlier. It was on a June morning in 1900 that Vlaminck and Derain climbed into the same railway compartment; they already knew each other by sight, but on this occasion Derain had a folio of drawings on his lap, and they struck up a conversation. They caught the same train back that evening; it was derailed at La Garenne, and they walked back to Chatou, striding from railway-sleeper to railway-sleeper discussing not only art, but their private and secret lives and ambitions.

The following morning they met at the ferry to La Grenouillère, and set up their easels on the island with Derain, so Vlaminck tells us, facing the more conventional view back to Chatou with its bridge and clock-tower, while he turned aside to paint a thicket of poplars.<sup>1</sup> La Grenouillère had already been immortalized by Monet and Renoir in the late 60s (and I suppose it has as fair a claim as any other place to being the birth place of Impressionism) and the territory covered by Vlaminck and Derain on their subsequent painting expeditions was one very familiar to the Impressionists; indeed the local antiquarian and historian of Chatou, M. Maurice Catinat, in a charming book entitled *L'École de Chatou*<sup>2</sup> has made a case for there being two schools of Chatou, with Monet and Renoir as representative of the first. Derain once observed that in so far as the term Fauves was apposite, Chatou was their jungle. If so, it was a bosky, willowy jungle. Vlaminck was still finishing his army service at the time of his meeting Derain, but he came out in September 1900, and during the following year the two painters shared a studio in what had been the Restaurant Levanneur, next door to the even more famous Café Fournaise, patronized by, amongst others, Flaubert and de Maupassant, and the terrace of which had been the setting for Renoir's *Déjeuner des Canotiers* of 1881. The prospect had in the meantime altered slightly—between

<sup>1</sup> Maurice Genevoix, *Vlaminck*, Paris, 1954, p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> Maurice Catinat, *Les Bords de la Seine avec Renoir et Maupassant, L'École de Chatou*, Paris, 1952.

1873 and 1903 the population of Chatou had doubled—but though threatened it was still pleasant.

The inhabitants of Chatou still talk of the ‘bras vif’ and the ‘bras mort’ of the river as it stands divided by the island, and in 1901, Vlaminck, appropriately enough in view of his rumbustious life style and his stormy pronouncements on art, moved to Reuil, on the noisy bank (although Chatou was still his station) while Derain remained in Chatou itself on the quiet side until the autumn of 1906 when he took a studio in Paris. A splendid apocryphal story has it that one day the artists were painting on the banks of the Seine. Derain called across ‘today I am painting all in blues’, and Vlaminck shouted back ‘And I all in reds’; and there is a sense in which Vlaminck is the red Fauve and Derain the blue. The two men work-marvellously well as complementary characters: Vlaminck passionate, emotive, somewhat violent and purely instinctual; Derain much colder, more self-questioning, very much the intellectual.

Vlaminck complained about his time in the army, but he seems nevertheless to have extracted a certain amount of profit from it. He educated himself by reading French nineteenth-century classics—the writers, above all Zola, who were to influence his own style as a writer—and it was also at this time that he made contact with the writings of Max Stirner and Nietzsche, the thinkers who more than any others fostered his anarchist propensities. He began publishing in the anarchist press, and he tended to see Fauvism very much in terms of anarchy: ‘I wanted to revolutionize habits and contemporary life, to liberate nature, to free it from the authority of old theories and classicism which I hated as much as I hated the general or the colonel of my regiment . . . I heightened all my tonal values and transposed into an orchestration of pure colour every single thing I felt. I was a tender barbarian filled with violence.’<sup>1</sup> He had had no real training as an artist, and he always made a great point of the fact that he never went to museums, although he once remarked, more significantly than he realized: ‘I lie when I say that “I never go to museums.” I lie for the same reasons which make me say I never go to a brothel.’<sup>2</sup> In fact we find the hero of his *Tout pour ça* (1903), who bears a strong resemblance to both himself and Derain, visiting the Louvre, and studying Mantegna, Ghirlandaio, Holbein, and Rembrandt. At the same time, with the exception of his excursions

<sup>1</sup> Vlaminck, *Dangerous Corner*, London 1961 (translated by Michael Ross, introduction by Denys Sutton), p. 74.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 74.

into the territories of Van Gogh and Cézanne, I believe that he consciously tried to avoid being influenced by other artists; and this was to give his work during the Fauve years its peculiar ebullience and aggressiveness, and ultimately, of course, to prove a source of tremendous weakness to his art.

The discovery of Van Gogh came early in 1901, when he visited the great Van Gogh retrospective at Bernheim Jeune's. It was on this occasion that the nucleus of the Fauve movement first came together, for it was here that Derain introduced Vlaminck to Matisse. Of the exhibition he said: 'I wanted to cry with joy and despair. On that day I loved Van Gogh more than my father.'<sup>1</sup> The picture known as *l'Homme à la pipe* or *Le Père Bouju* (pl. Ia) is signed and dated 1900, and this date has always been accepted. However, Vlaminck made a point of later buying back the few early works which he had sold, including this one, and these were almost all subsequently redated. This one I would readily accept as a work of 1901: it doesn't look much like Van Gogh, but it looks exactly like the way in which an untutored young artist would look at Van Gogh; and the thick impasto and the whirling, emotive brush strokes probably reflect the 'joy and despair' experienced on that first encounter. The identity of Père Bouju has to my knowledge never been disclosed, but Vlaminck allowed the painting to be shown as a self-portrait at an exhibition entitled *L'École de Chatou* organized by the Galerie Bing in 1947, to which he contributed a preface, and I suspect that it was almost certainly a nickname used during the famous escapades which he and Derain got up to during the early years of their association.

Derain was in turn conscripted in September 1901, and we can keep track of his movements and his ideas through his letters to Vlaminck, although these are mostly undated and the sequence is at times unclear.<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, Vlaminck's side of the correspondence has not been preserved, but the one-sided exchange remains one of the most important existing set of documents for an understanding of the intellectual and aesthetic currents informing young painting in the early years of the century. Almost from the start we find Derain writing about his desire to produce a synthetic art (synthesis is a recurrent word), valid for all time, not just the present. He distinguishes between 'feeling' and 'expressing',<sup>3</sup> anticipating Matisse's better-known writings on the

<sup>1</sup> Vlaminck, *Dangerous Corner*, London 1961 (translated by Michael Ross, introduction by Denys Sutton), p. 147.

<sup>2</sup> Derain, *Lettres à Vlaminck*, Paris, 1955.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

subject, and presumably in a vein of slight attack on Vlaminck he insists that expression is not the result of the desire to convey simple sensations, but is the synthesis of a sum of experiences and sensations, although he also suggests that greater simplicity of expression is the aim to which a new art must aspire. The painters he mentions most frequently are Van Gogh, with Cézanne coming a close second; and if by common consent of both of the painters of Chatou Van Gogh was the artist who more than any other initiated or provoked their Fauvism, Cézanne was to be the painter who ultimately disrupted it.

For an understanding of Derain's character, most significant, perhaps, is the frequent recurrence of the word 'doubt'. In a letter of 1902 he writes: '. . . Doubt is everywhere and in everything. Some people, those, with a talent for synthesis, declare themselves openly for form. But behind it all, doubt subsists.'<sup>1</sup> And what was to characterize his work in the years following his release from the army in September 1904 was precisely a desire for synthesis, which led him to explore in turn a multiplicity of sources, tempered by that all pervading doubt that led him to reject a particular source or combination of sources the moment he had given them pictorial expression. More than any other artist of his generation in the first six years of the century he was to act as an aesthetic weather-vane and his works as premonitions of events to come. He was to give both Picasso and Matisse a nudge at significant moments in their careers; and if Vlaminck represents most compellingly the extrovert immediacy that was to give Fauve painting its urgency and its vitality, Derain's restlessness, his style searching, his doubt—these qualities were to make him the artist who reflected what Fauvism, as I see it, was most truly about. He painted many self portraits but none so revealing as the one shown in pl. *Ib*, executed probably immediately after his release from the army, showing him as it does torn between the conflicting influences of Gauguin and Cézanne, and conveying as it does the all consuming doubt that was to characterize his art through to his death in 1954.

Derain produced relatively little while he was in the army, but he painted with Vlaminck on leaves of absence spent in Chatou, and it is to 1903 or early 1904 that I would date works such as these landscapes. They are slight, and it would be dangerous to deduce too much from them; but surviving canvases of the period are extremely hard to see and because of this they are important documents. The Vlaminck is still clumsy, he is having difficulty

<sup>1</sup> Derain, *Lettres à Vlaminck*, Paris 1955, p. 98.

handling the heavy impasto which owes something, at a distance, to Van Gogh. The Derain is defter, although the handling is tentative. As we shall see, in painting it is Derain who invariably takes the lead, but in view of the fact that he never refuted Vlaminck's frequent claims to primacy during the early years of their association, perhaps we should ascribe the freedom of handling and the subsequent move into thicker, more physical paint effects to Vlaminck's influence, if not necessarily to his example. Derain, we know from contemporary sources, already had great presence and he was formidable in argument, but the letters make it patently clear that for a period at least, Vlaminck held him in total thrall.

Vlaminck's next move, and this was something with which he struggled for the next 12 months, was an attempt to separate colour from drawing in an attempt to come to terms with the component elements of painting. In Van Gogh draughtsmanship and colour are often synonymous—or to put it differently, he draws with the loaded brush; this is something which looks easy and exciting but is in fact extremely hard to achieve, and hence, I think, Vlaminck's repeated false starts. But in *Le Chaland*, a companion piece to the work which he showed at the Salon des Indépendants of 1905 (an occasion which acted as somewhat muted dress rehearsal for the great Fauve eruption and demonstration at the Salon d'Automne later that year), he seems to have been turning more thoughtfully to the kind of Van Gogh such as the *Bridge at Langlois* (1888) where in certain passages draughtsmanship and colour interact in a more independent fashion. Not surprisingly he doesn't begin yet to rival Van Gogh's luminosity, but he was learning fast, and both *Le Chaland* and the *Winter Landscape* (pl. IVa) which he showed at the Indépendants of 1905 (a work hitherto thought to have been lost) have a brooding windswept quality which is prophetic of later developments.

Derain in the meantime had turned to Gauguin, and if Van Gogh was undoubtedly the painter who meant most to Vlaminck during the years of Fauvism, Gauguin was to cast an equally potent spell on Derain, off and on, between late 1904 through to the autumn of 1906. Derain appears to have discovered Gauguin immediately on his release from the army (there is no mention of Gauguin in the letters) and he paid what amounts to an overt tribute to him in the *Old Tree*, one of his exhibits at the 1905 Indépendants; it is perhaps indicative of his character that he should always have been attracted to the moodier, darker Gauguins, whereas Matisse, for example, preferred the blonder,

higher-keyed Tahitian works. And for all the immediate pleasure afforded by Chatou Fauvism, an undercurrent of loneliness and unease in works executed in the vicinity is never very far below the surface.

*Le Pont du Pecq* (pl. IVb), another of Derain's exhibits at the Indépendants, shows him combining the lessons learnt from Gauguin (the organization of the picture surface in curving bands of colour that in Derain's work have become increasingly unnaturalistic) with a more broken stroke that may owe something to Van Gogh and possibly already to something to Divisionism, an attempt at the all desired synthesis that results here in those stylistic inconsistencies—the playing off of flatter colour areas against more broken ones, of thick paint effects against thinner ones, of relatively naturalistic colour against artificial or arbitrary notes—which were to be so fundamental to Fauvism during its first fully developed and mature style. And the result is what I would designate as the first truly Fauve work.

Matisse remembered making a couple of trips out to Chatou. One of these was almost certainly towards the end of 1904 or early in 1905; it was on this occasion that he persuaded Derain's father to finance Derain's trip to the South the following summer. Afterwards Derain took him around to Vlaminck's, and according to Vlaminck he returned the following day and his visits led to Vlaminck's showing for the first time, shortly afterwards, at the Indépendants—Matisse was chairman of the hanging committee.<sup>1</sup> Matisse had a poor head for dates and when talking about his first meeting with Vlaminck, through Derain, at the Van Gogh exhibition of 1901, he went on to say that he visited them at Chatou and wasn't surprised by what he saw because he was working in a similar vein. On the grounds of the visual evidence he was almost certainly telescoping the two events into one, because in 1901 neither of the younger painters, (and certainly not Vlaminck) could have shown him anything that could have interested him, whereas by late 1904 their work did have quite a lot in common with his own proto-Fauve experiments of the late 1890s, and in the case of a work like *Le Pont du Pecq* had actually opened up certain possibilities that he was subsequently to explore.

The Indépendants of 1905 featured a large Van Gogh retrospective, and I would like to think that Derain's *Mountains at Collioure* was one of the first paintings to be executed in the south when he arrived there with memories of Van Gogh fresh in his mind. In a letter to Vlaminck dated 28 July 1905, after he had

<sup>1</sup> Marcel Sauvage, *Vlaminck, sa vie et son message*, Geneva, 1956.

been in Collioure some weeks he claimed to have already learnt two points from the visit:

- (1) 'A new concept of light which consists in this: the negation of shadow. Here light is very strong, shadows very faint. Every shadow is a world of clarity and luminosity which contrasts with the sunlight. Both of us have overlooked this, and in future, where composition is concerned it will make for a renewal of expression.' At first glance this goes very little beyond Impressionism, but within the concept of a simplified form of painting there is the implication that not only do shadows contain light but that they can be as colouristically and hence as compositionally dominant. However, in relationship to the Fauvism of Chatou the statement is of enormous importance, because from the autumn of 1905 through to that of 1906 it was to rely for its effects on the intense light sensations of the South imported to the north and arbitrarily grafted on to the northern countryside with a resultant heightening of colouristic abstraction and artificiality.
- (2) 'Have come to know when working near Matisse that I must eradicate anything to do with division of tones. He goes on but I've had my fill . . . its a logical means to use in a luminous and harmonious picture. But it only injures things which owe their expressiveness to deliberate disharmonies.'<sup>1</sup> And I think that the words 'deliberate disharmonies' are probably more revealing and prophetic than any that Derain had used hitherto. The statement also confirms the fact that with the possible exception of a handful of strongly Van Goghian paintings, Derain's first Collioure paintings (see pl. *Va*) were the most purely Divisionist. And here a point that has never been made must be stressed, and this is that for the Fauves the Divisionist sketch was more important than the Divisionist painting, for the simple reason that in their paintings the Divisionists were forced to grade their pure colours out or reduce them to paler tints where they meet, while in the sketches which allow a lot of white ground to come through each colour mark or area stands much more purely for itself and acts on the colours around it in a much more independent and autonomous fashion.

There follows a reversion to a more banded, colouristically orchestrated sort of painting of the *Pont du Pecq* type, although the new, Collioure canvases are more tapestry like in effect—the result almost certainly of a visit undertaken by Derain and

<sup>1</sup> *Lettres*, pp. 154–5.



Matisse, in the company of Maillol, to visit Daniel de Montfried's country estate nearby. Gauguin's South Seas canvases had been seen in fairly large quantities in Paris during the preceding years, but de Montfried's collection was one of the finest; he was furthermore Gauguin's executor, and the Gauguin estate was at this time in his hands—I have not been able to find out if some or all of this was stored in the South where de Montfried had more space than in Paris, but if this were indeed the case, it must have been for young painters a particularly moving and thrilling experience. Works like *Collioure*, *Le Faubourg* (pl. VII) which combine a synthetist or cloisonist structure with touches of Divisionist-derived strokes should logically come between the more purely Divisionist canvases and the more Gauguinesque paintings; but what one can learn from Derain's working methods from the contemporary sketch book now in the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris (1903-5) is that the first statements of an individual theme are often the most fully developed and assured, while they tend to tail off in a series of after thoughts, metaphorical aesthetic question marks which challenge or question the initial theme or else comment on it in terms of earlier idioms.

Derain's entries to the famous Fauve 'cage' at the Salon d'Automne showed him working in a variety of styles and consulting a variety of sources wide enough to have preoccupied a young painter over a period of many years although they had been painted during the space of a few brief months. Vlaminck's exhibits, on the other hand, showed him still faithful to his first great mentor and love, and one of them, *La Maison de Mon Père* (pl. VIIIa), shows him closer to Van Gogh than anything that he had produced hitherto. He now appears to have been looking at Van Gogh's drawings as well as his paintings (he certainly knew those owned by Matisse which had been shown at the retrospective mounted within the Indépendants earlier in the year). The design is sketched in in dark outlines on a primed but raw canvas support and paint is then applied in rhythmic strokes that approximate in a simplified way the ripples and eddies and whirlpools of Van Gogh's markings. It is revealing to place a detail of the Vlaminck next to one from a painting by Van Gogh because the comparison demonstrates how much more inconsistent Vlaminck's technique is (and I have already suggested that this was a basic feature of Fauvism) and the confrontation also makes the point that whereas the surface rhythms evoked by Van Gogh's brush strokes are very insistent, they also have a very strong directional thrust backwards and forwards through space,

while by contrast Vlaminck's strokes are much more purely two dimensional in emphasis.

Vlaminck's rejection of all theory (and he even hated discussions about painting), would have put Divisionism beyond the pale for him; but he assimilated a certain amount of it indirectly through Derain and Matisse and I would place in the autumn of 1905, that is to say after his two friends got back from Collioure, a group of paintings of which *Landscape at Chatou* (pl. VIIIb) is one, and which have been dated as diversely as 1903 and 1907; in them Vlaminck makes use of a white ground to achieve a separation of colour markings or touches that in *La Maison de Mon Père* had been separated by a drawn black outline, with a resultant heightening of luminosity. Vlaminck was to speak very emotionally of his use of primary colours; in fact he very seldom relied on them exclusively for his effects. He once remarked more factually 'I used only seven colours (in my Fauve painting) almost without intermediaries'<sup>1</sup>—and here they can be counted.

We now come to the vexed question of Derain's London visits. We know that he made two, and that he was certainly here in March of 1906. Dorival, who knew Derain personally, states categorically that he came over for the first time in the autumn of 1905, although he gives no supporting documentary evidence.<sup>2</sup> The most recent American scholarship has suggested that a first visit was made in the spring of 1905 and that the brilliant, Divisionist-inspired London works were executed then and are the result of Derain having seen Matisse's major work in that idiom, his famous *Luxe Calme et Volupté*.<sup>3</sup> Personally I find it impossible to believe that Derain could have achieved the colouristic saturation and luminosity which characterize all the London paintings, without the experience of Collioure behind him. *Big Ben* (pl. VI) may be a work of the autumn, but I wouldn't rule out the possibility of a first channel crossing simply having been a reconnaissance trip to sound out the terrain. We know that he came to England on the instigation of Vollard, who wanted a latter day sequel to Monet's Thames paintings which had been shown with such success at Durand-Ruel's in 1904. Derain spoke of nine paintings done for Vollard; in fact approximately twice that number are known, but we know from his letters that he was working all out, and he had produced a greater number still during his months at Collioure.

<sup>1</sup> Gaston Diehl, *Les Fauves*, Paris 1971.

<sup>2</sup> See *The Tate Gallery Catalogue: The Foreign Paintings*, London 1959, pp. 64-5.

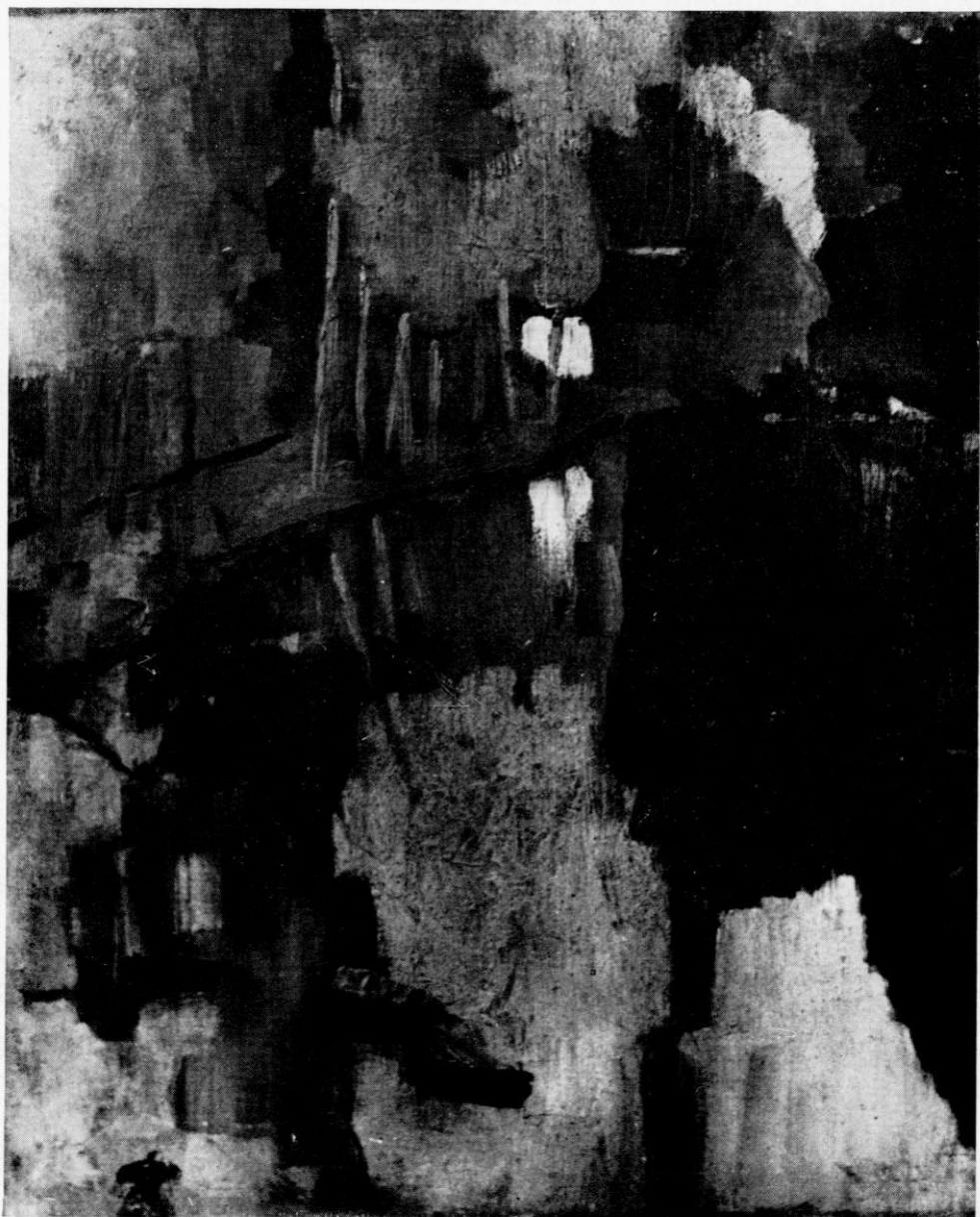
<sup>3</sup> Ellen Oppler, *Fauvism Re-examined*, New York/London, 1974, p. 104. John Elderfield, *Fauvism*, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1976, p. 35.



(b) Derain: *Self Portrait*, 1904  
Private collection, USA



(a) Vlaminck: *L'Homme à la Pipe (Père Bouju)*, 1900-1  
Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris



Sérusier: *Landscape at the Bois d'Amour (The Talisman)*, 1888  
Private collection, France

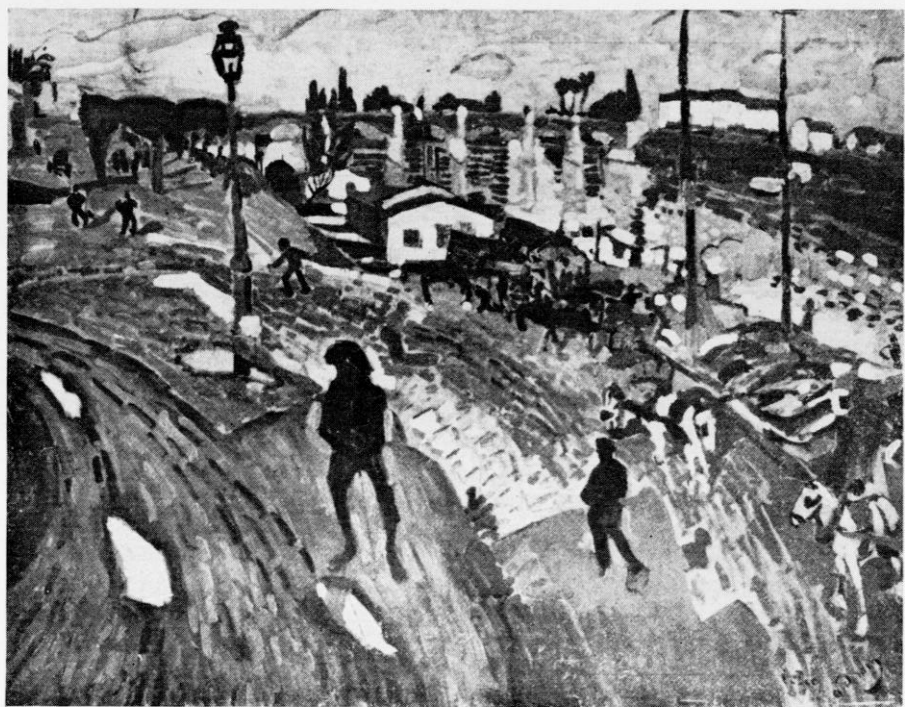


Derain: *Trois Arbres, L'Estaque*, 1906  
The Art Gallery of Ontario

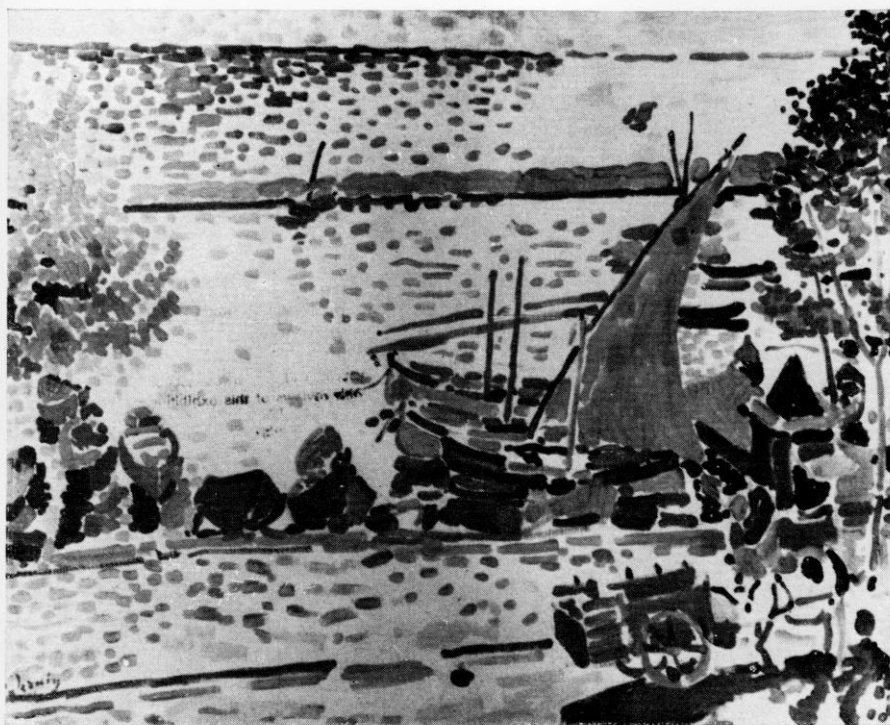
PLATE IV



(a) Vlaminck: *Winter Landscape (Blanche Tristesse)*, 1904-5



(b) Derain: *Le Pont du Pecq*, 1904-5  
Private collection, Paris

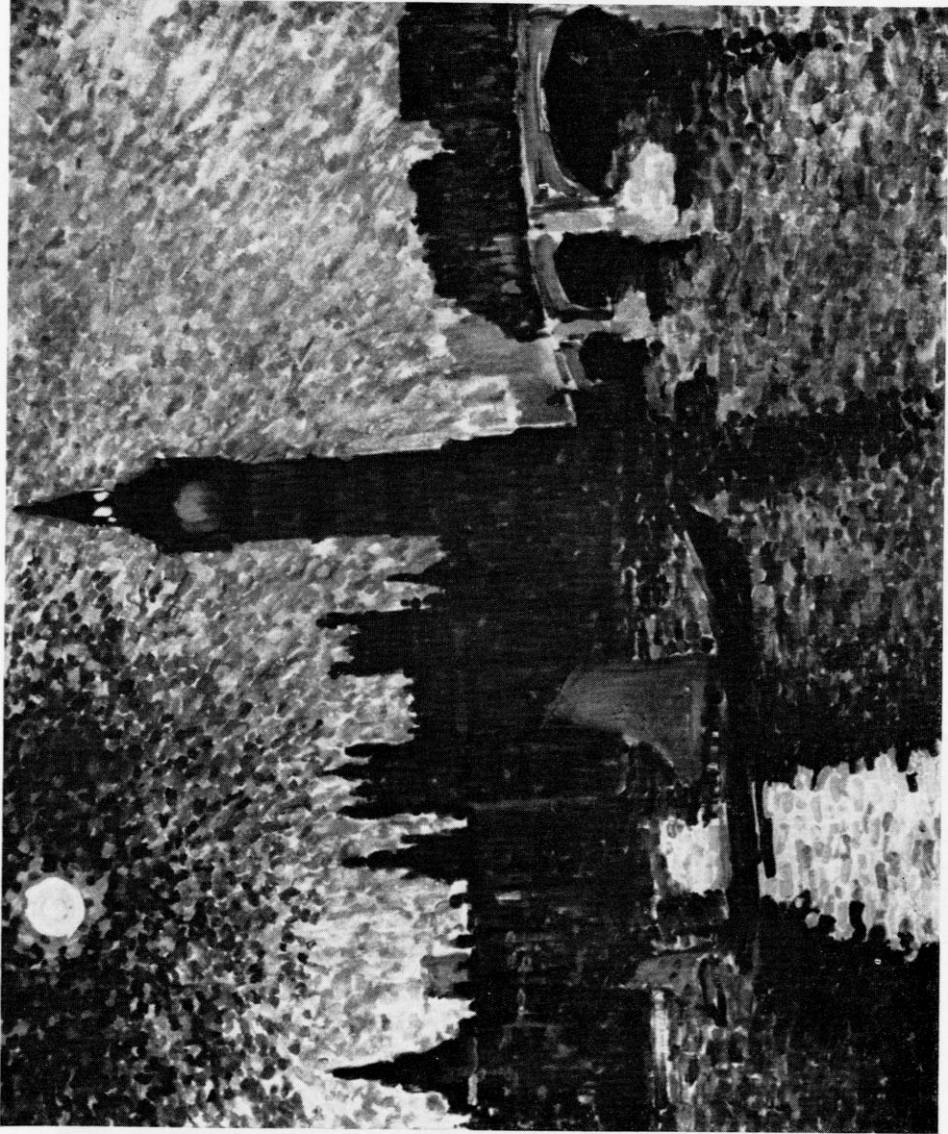


(a) Derain: *View of Collioure*, 1905  
Museum Folkway, Essen



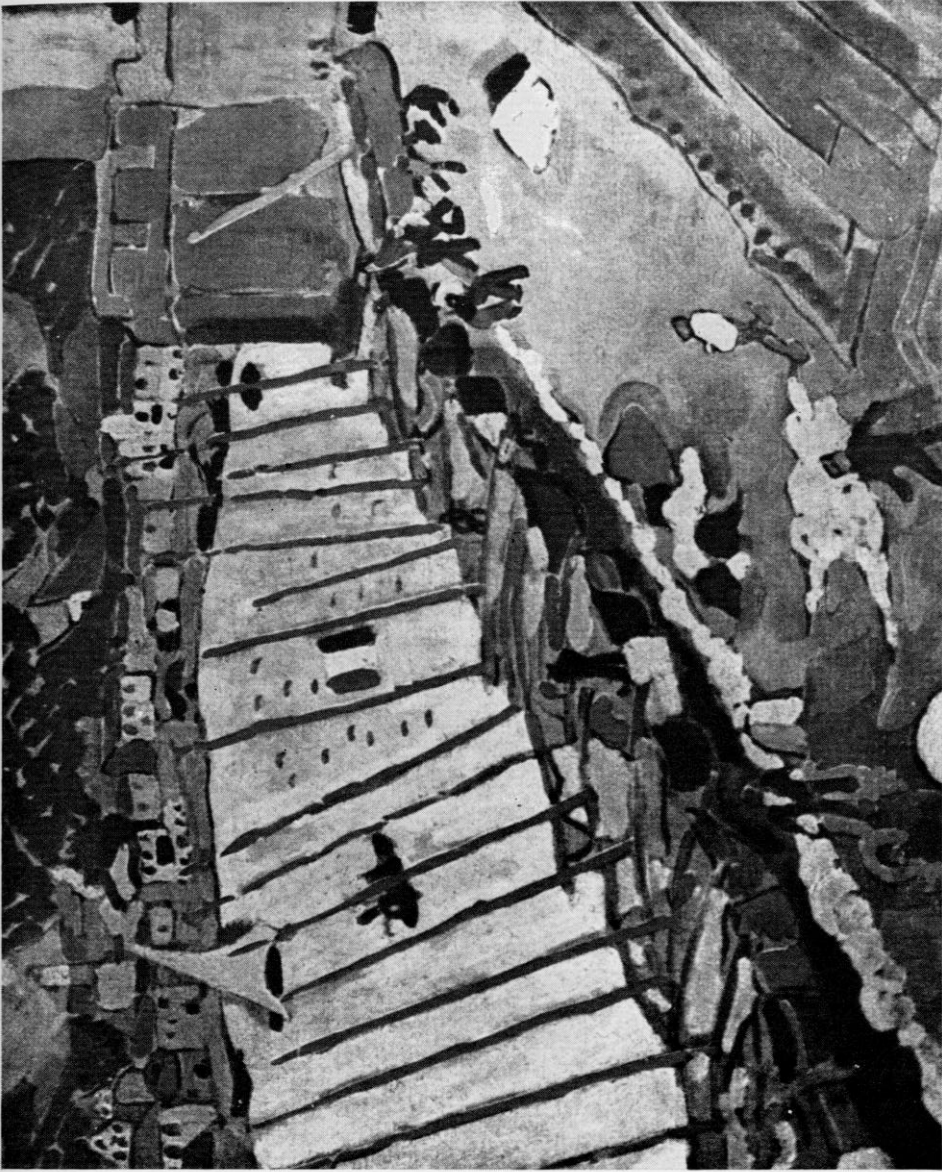
(b) Derain: *The Houses of Parliament and Westminster Bridge*, 1906

PLATE VI



Derain: *Big Ben*, 1905-6  
Private collection, France





Derain: *Collioire, Le Faubourg*, 1905  
Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris

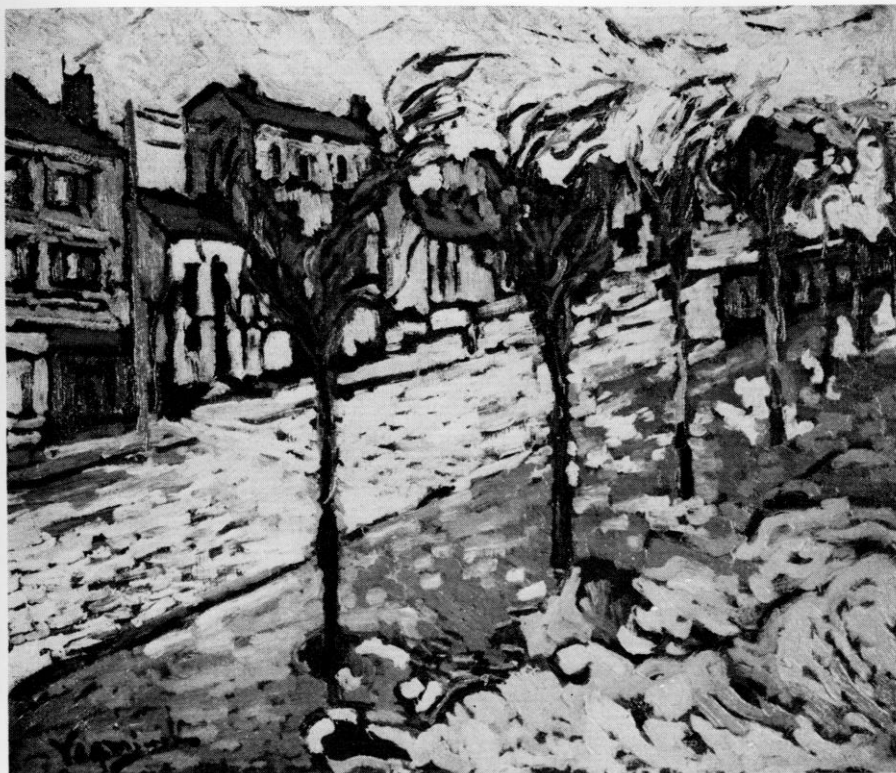
PLATE VIII



(a) Vlaminck: *La Maison de Mon Père*, 1905



(b) Vlaminck: *Landscape at Chatou*, 1905



(a) Vlaminck: *Paysage de Banlieue*, 1906  
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston



(b) Vlaminck: *Landscape and Red Trees*, 1906  
Musée National d'Art Moderne, Paris

PLATE X



(a) Vlaminck: *Le Pont de Chatou*, 1906-7



(b) *View of Martiques*, 1908  
Kunsthau, Zürich

The *Houses of Parliament* (pl. Vb), which with its echoes of Monet one might have been inclined to place early in the series, and which in terms of pictorial logic should come before *Big Ben* is the only work of the series known to me which bears what appears to be a contemporary signature and date, and this is 1906. I would suggest, tentatively, a progression through from the first works with references to both Divisionism and Impressionism, through to the softer examples with echoes of Monet and Turner (a letter dated March 1906 mentions a visit to look at the National Gallery Turners), on to works where the technique is more mixed and the colour more arbitrary and personal and which tend to be characterized by exceptionally high view points and by exciting ellisions of lines and forms. But once again, on the evidence of the sketch book it would be dangerous to try to construct too logical a sequence. However, what I can say with conviction is that the London series contains works that are to me the most liberated, the most spontaneous and the most truly enjoyable and hedonistic that Derain ever produced. Working in a new and stimulating environment, free temporarily from the competition of his colleagues in Chatou and Paris and from the ever constant anxiety as to what the next step should be, he achieved a quality of physical and optical exhilaration he was never again to recapture.

The London paintings were understandably enough to affect Vlaminck deeply (see pl. IXa). Through them he was in turn to be influenced indirectly by other artists whose impact upon his own work, and most particularly that of Gauguin, he would have violently denied. 1906 was to be, on the visual evidence of his painting, the happiest and most relaxed year in his career. And it was in the spring, summer and early autumn of this year, that for a brief spell of approximately four months the two painters of Chatou held together in perfect balance the divergent currents and streams that had been informing Derain's art during the past two years. The spiritual harmony which reigned in their work is demonstrated by the affinities between Derain's *Trois Arbres*, *L'Estaque*, painted in the South in the late summer of 1906, and Vlaminck's *Landscape and Red Trees* (pl. IXb) painted a few months or even weeks later in the countryside just north of Chatou.

And this brings me back to the starting point of the lecture. Writing on Gauguin's death in 1903 Maurice Denis remarked that the secret of his ascendancy over young painters was: 'That he furnished us with one or two ideas, very simple, of a necessary

truth, at a moment when we were totally without instruction.’<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere in his obituary he made the point that the Nabis, the representatives of the most avantgarde tendencies in young art in the early 1890s knew virtually nothing of Impressionism. And I think that deprived of the retinal disciplines of Impressionist procedures to which Gauguin had submitted himself, and of the direct contact with the literary experiments and achievements of the 1880s which had informed his aesthetics—and on which young writers were already turning their backs (and here Moréas is perhaps the classical case in point)—the teachings of Gauguin could indeed be dangerously simplistic. By the middle of the 90s Bonnard and Vuillard, the most gifted of the Nabis, who had briefly used Gauguin and oriental art to produce work that was unprecedentedly simple and straightforwardly decorative in its effects, had reverted to what could perhaps best be described as a latter day, somewhat conceptualized, indoor Impressionism. Sérusier and Denis were following paths that parallel very closely those of the writers of the Catholic revival, those authors who had partaken of and in some instance contributed to the literary innovations of the 1880s, but whose subsequent production belongs to what a literary historian of the period has aptly called ‘The Reactionary Revolution’.<sup>2</sup> And in painting the rhythm of the previous decades, whereby artists of a new generation adapted or examined the style of a previous one and almost immediately turned it into something different—this rhythm was broken.

Contemporary critics of the 1880s, baffled by the diversity and the novelty of the painting created in its second half saw it as a confused time; and yet in retrospect the decade looks marvellously rich and diverse, but full of clarity of purpose. In the succeeding decade the heroic figures of the 1880s who survived were undoubtedly consolidating their achievements. But if we isolate the work of the younger generation of painters, after 1892 the 1890s become dappled and shadowy, full of nuance which immediately evades the historian when he tries to ascribe to the period an optimistic, forward-looking pictorial face.

It seems to me deeply significant that we can learn as much (and indeed, I think, possibly more) about the aesthetic problems and cross-currents of the time by examining the work of the painters who retrenched or who tacitly admitted failure—painters like Emile Bernard, Sérusier, and Denis—as we can by looking at the

<sup>1</sup> Maurice Denis, *L'influence de Gauguin in L'Occident*, Oct. 1903, reprinted in *Théories*, Paris, 1964, pp. 50–4.

<sup>2</sup> Richard Griffiths, *The Reactionary Revolution*, London, 1966.

works of their more gifted colleagues. Matisse, we have to keep reminding ourselves, was the same age as the Nabis, but he had chosen to serve an exceptionally long apprenticeship, while Bonnard, the most deeply talented of the Nabis, when he emerges as a truly great artist in the first decade of the twentieth century, but above all in the 20s and 30s, had become in a sense historically displaced, a rare example of a major artist who tells us little of the times in which he lived. Surely it is not without significance that in the closing years of the century the artist working in Paris who was extracting the most compelling visual conclusions from Gauguin's Post-Impressionism and from the symbolist aesthetic which had helped to provoke it was not French but Scandinavian and a bird of passage—I refer, of course, to Edward Munch.

It was probably towards the mid-90s, when they were closest, that Pissarro said to Sérusier: 'We have been the destroyers. It is now the turn for the builders to come forward'<sup>1</sup>—a statement which poignantly underlines the dilemma which the Nabis faced. They were intelligent and sensitive enough to see and understand that the great pioneers of the previous generation had to a certain extent cleared away the burden of the Renaissance tradition, and that a new painting was necessary and possible. But the 'too great liberty'<sup>2</sup> of which Sérusier spoke with fear, and the responsibility it implied, placed an intolerable burden on a group of young artists in their early twenties and deprived by circumstances of the personal support and encouragement of their artistic fathers and mentors. It is possible, as Denis implied, that if Gauguin had remained in France the situation might have been different. The premature deaths of Van Gogh and Seurat, and the fact that Neo-Impressionism failed to produce an artist of true genius must obviously be taken into account. The Nabis paid lip service to Cézanne, but he was becoming increasingly inaccessible, both personally and because of the ever increasing complexity of his style, while his example had to a certain extent been falsified to them since they tended to look at him through Gauguin's eyes. As a subsidiary consideration we must remember that for the first time in many decades the primacy of Paris had been challenged, by Brussels; and there are good grounds for supposing that in the 90s it meant more to young painters to show in Brussels with *Les XX* and after 1893 with *La Libre Esthétique*, rather than in the

<sup>1</sup> Charles Chassé, *Les Nabis et leur Temps*, Paris, 1960, p. 56.

<sup>2</sup> *ABC de la Peinture*, third edition, Paris, 1950 (contains a 'correspondance inédit' collected by Mme P. Sérusier and annotated by Mlle H. Boutaric), pp. 39-42.

constricted quarters of Le Barc de Boutteville or in the ever widening chaos of the Indépendants. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why when we think visually of the 1890s we so often associate them with the decorative and applied arts on which the Belgians placed such emphasis rather than with main-line painting.

I believe that Fauvism shows a renewed apprehension of the fact that the work of the Post-Impressionists held the key to something completely new; and by focusing on individual elements in Post-Impressionist painting, however briefly, the Fauves were clearing the way for a reinvention of the vocabulary of art. But in the case of the painters of Chatou at least, they were still not entirely certain as to where the discoveries of Post-Impressionism might lead; and the precariousness of the balance in which they held a multiplicity of sources during the brief months of their fully mature Fauve style is demonstrated by the rapidity with which that balance was so conclusively destroyed. And to this extent I think that the Fauvism of Chatou can best be regarded as a final, marvellously youthful and vivid flowering of Post-Impressionist painting.

The Fauvism of Matisse was something different, but it is not simply for the purposes of this lecture that I would argue that he was not the archetypal Fauve. If we want to catch the movement's urgency, its buoyancy and its impetuosity it is to the work of Vlaminck and to Derain's Collioure and London periods that we must turn, while the movement's restlessness, the uncertainty and the intellectual doubts—these are most clearly mirrored in Derain's Fauve period seen as a whole.

It is quite obvious that any revolution effected by Fauvism was primarily colouristic. The statements made by the painters themselves on the subject are contradictory and confused; but all seem to have agreed that colour was to produce an immediate sensation of light that was to emanate directly and artificially forwards from the surface of the canvas, rather than to create an illusion or substitute for the changing effects of light observed in nature. This was something already implicit in Gauguin's painting lesson and it was achieved to a certain extent by himself, by Van Gogh and by the Neo-Impressionists and even in the late manners of some of the Impressionists themselves. But with Fauvism, colour had reached a new degree of intensity and autonomy—there is a sense in which Fauvism marks the beginning of the advance of the picture towards the spectator, and to this extent at least it belongs very exclusively to the twentieth century.

But the fact that for the painters of Chatou the dilemma or the



crisis of the late 80s and the early 90s still persisted in a very real form is underlined most vividly by comparing letters written by Sérusier and Derain to their respective friends Denis and Vlaminck. Writing in 1889 from Pont Aven Sérusier says: 'I find myself all at sea. What worries me above all is this: What part ought nature to play in a work of art? . . . Should one work from nature or only look at it and work from memory? Too much liberty frightens me, poor copyist that I am . . . yet nature seems to me poor and banal.'<sup>1</sup> Writing from L'Estaque in 1906 Derain says: '. . . I see no future except in composition, because working from nature I am the slave of things so stupid that my (deeper) feelings are shattered by them. I can't see what the future should be in order to conform to our tendencies; on one side we strive to disengage ourselves from objective things, and on the other hand we cling to them as both means and end.'<sup>2</sup> There is of course a subtle difference of emphasis. In Derain the dichotomy between two methods of work is more clearly seen and stated. Behind this statement there is furthermore the implication that heightened or transposed colour sensations are not enough. He seems to have realized that if colour had reached a new degree of autonomy within the general move towards a more conceptualized form of art and given to painting a new and luminous skin, its bones and sinews were still to be examined. And once again, in the summer of 1906, Derain is acting as a sounding board of things to come.

I have so far said very little about Cézanne. Cézanne had been an early enthusiasm of Derain's; his influence had made itself felt when Derain resumed painting seriously after his release from the army, and one senses Cézanne's presence behind Derain's Fauvism from time to time during the next two years; indeed, there are echoes of Cézanne even here in one of Derain's most strongly Gauguinesque works, in the hints or suggestions of a new planar spatial structure underlying and informing the more insistent surface arabesques. But it is in the months between the great Gauguin retrospective held at the Salon d'Automne in 1906 and Cézanne's own held at the same Salon the following year that the example of Cézanne becomes paramount for young painting. And it is in certain respects made more dramatically manifest in the art of Vlaminck who was resistant to outside influences, than in that of Derain, who, as we have seen, was if anything too receptive to every fresh aesthetic current that blew his way.

The influence of Cézanne on Vlaminck is sensed first in a general

<sup>1</sup> *ABC* (1950 edition), pp. 39-42.

<sup>2</sup> *Lettres*, p. 147.

way in his works of late 1906 and early 1907, in which the ultramarines of Cézanne's last and most emotive manner predominate, although in a work like *Le Pont de Chatou* (pl. Xa), Vlaminck is still marrying only certain superficial aspects of Cézanne to his previous work, so that the result is still fully Fauve in feeling. But with the great Cézanne display of the autumn all references to other artists were temporarily banished from his work; and it is now, at this moment, that Cézanne succeeded posthumously in convincing a large number of significant young artists of what he had so firmly believed in life: that the art of Gauguin was shallow and pernicious. And in a strange but very real way between 1906 and 1907 one does sense a posthumous clash or battle between these two gigantic artistic personalities.

Vlaminck's *Viaduct at S. Germain* is a bold painting, and it is not an unintelligent way of looking at Cézanne. He seems to have realized that the rhythmic, parallel hatchings of Cézanne served to evoke naturalistic space and simultaneously to organize the surface of the canvas in terms of short thrusts and counter thrusts in and out of a more limited, very tactile and palpable pictorial depth. But it is very characteristic of Vlaminck that he should have felt he could swallow Cézanne whole, in a way in which he had to a certain extent devoured Van Gogh, albeit after a prolonged period of gestation and at the sacrifice of much of the latter's subtlety and emotional depth. Now Cézanne was a painter of such infinite complexity that artists could look at him in an astonishing variety of ways, and get a series of totally different answers to the questions which they were putting to him. Of all twentieth-century artists possibly Matisse examined more different facets of Cézanne's art than any other, but he examined them one at a time and over a period of many years. The Cubists, on the other hand, tended each one to focus on a different aspect of his work, and in a sense it was by pooling the different results they obtained that they succeeded in producing an art that was totally new and different in kind from what had gone before. By attempting to come to grips with the multi-layered formal complexity of Cézanne's art in a single assault, Vlaminck had simply bitten off more than he could chew; and it could be argued that if Van Gogh invented him as an artist, Cézanne was in certain respects ultimately to destroy him (and hence, perhaps, his latter day hatred and animosity towards the master of Aix), although between 1907 and 1909 he produced some of his finest and to me most deeply moving canvases, precisely, I think, because Cézanne had forced on him, temporarily at least, an intuitive recognition of

the indefinability and magnitude of great art. Discussing Cubism, Vlaminck said: 'Negro sculpture and the first tentative beginnings of the theory of reconstructing light (noticeable in the last canvases of Cézanne) were now united to meet the requirement of a new formula.'<sup>1</sup> This reference to Cézanne's light is in a sense odd because this is the aspect of Cézanne's art on which Vlaminck immediately turns his back. Light in Cézanne is the result of the orchestration of a personal but relatively full palette, deployed so skilfully that often quite heavily impasted hatchings of one colour blend into those of another with those effects of transparency so dear to the Cubists. Vlaminck on the other hand, while aiming at Cézanne's methods of planar construction, reverted quite simply to traditional landscape *chiaroscuro*, and at a single throw of the dice, the colouristic ground he had won during the previous years was lost.

In *La Maison de Chatou* (1908) there is still a powerful feeling of light, but it is now that the Flemish and Lowlands heritage of which Vlaminck was so proud comes to the fore, and it is the light of the stormier Ruisdaels and of Van Connixloo. Of his defection from Fauvism he later said: 'Working directly in this way, tube against canvas, one quickly arrives at an excessive facility. One ends in transposing mathematically. The emerald green becomes black, the pink flaming red etc. Winning numbers come up at every draw and immediate success becomes an impasse. Pre-occupied with light I neglected the object . . . either you think nature or you think light.'<sup>2</sup>

The history of Vlaminck's art during the following years was to be the abandonment of a search for style in favour of the cultivation of a manner. Shortly before his death in 1958 he remarked with pride that there was a Vlaminck manner in landscape painting just as there was a Corot manner or a Courbet manner.<sup>3</sup> But a manner is the unconscious result of a lifetime or at least of many years of labour—it is not something that can be willed into existence. I believe that in the years succeeding 1910–12 and his brief flirtation with Cubism, Vlaminck had become frightened of looking at other art. A failure of nerve resulted in a sense of guilt; and it is in this light that his remarks about visiting museums in the same spirit that he visited brothels takes on a deeper and more damning significance.

The case of Derain is more complex and more interesting. He

<sup>1</sup> *Dangerous Corner*, p. 76.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Jean-Paul Crespelle, *Vlaminck*, Paris 1958.

was one of the first artists to attempt to draw simplified conclusions from Cézanne's complex procedures of pictorial construction; this is apparent in some of his earliest extant landscapes at the turn of the century and is very obvious in the landscapes of 1908 (see *View of Martigues*, pl. Xb) when it still looked to many of his contemporaries as if he could have produced a viable alternative to the more experimental views of L'Estaque and the Rue des Bois produced by Braque and Picasso in the same year. In this lecture I have limited myself to landscape because Chatou Fauvism was essentially a landscape style; but in his figure pieces of late 1906 Derain had looked at Cézanne in a deeply original way, and a single one of these would have earned him a significant position in the history of post-Fauve painting. In subsequent years he was prepared to explore the possibilities of a Cubist multiple view-point perspective, implicit in Cézanne's art, provided that it did not involve the shattering of the object and above all of the human body. This is something that is psychologically extremely hard to achieve, and Derain's inability or refusal to do so throws into relief the magnitude of the Cubist achievement.

In 1907, that epoch-making year, we find him writing to Vlaminck, not without a touch of nostalgia: 'The prospect of Chatou tempts me not at all.'<sup>1</sup> With his customary intelligence he seems to have realized that a chapter in the history of art was over. And in conclusion I would simply say that one of the defects of contemporary art-historical method (and this is particularly true of art history in the modern period) is that we tend to see history too exclusively in terms of successful revolution and sustained innovation. And we stand to learn a lot about the nature of twentieth-century art by trying to understand sympathetically why one of the most naturally gifted artists of his age felt compelled to leave the field of battle.

<sup>1</sup> *Lettres*, p. 150.