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Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Acquires Watershed Work by Paul Sérusier
Painting Bridges Impressionism and Modern Art



Paul Sérusier, *The Three-Pond Cottage at Le Pouldu*, 1889. Collection of Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

Richmond, Virginia—The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts (VMFA) announced today that it has acquired *The Three-Pond Cottage at Le Pouldu*, an ambitious painting by Paul Sérusier (1864-1927), a pioneering Post-Impressionist who inspired the Nabis art movement and helped revolutionize 19th-century French art.

During the summer of 1888 Sérusier, a student at the Académie Julian, a renowned private art school in Paris, traveled to Pont-Aven (Brittany, northwestern France), a small artist enclave where Paul Gauguin agreed to take him as an apprentice. Rejecting the approach of Impressionists who focused on the light, color and shading to give visual dimension to a subject, Gauguin had already begun to distill subjects to their essence, formed by bold, flat planes of color and contour lines, a style that came to be known as Cloisonnism. Gauguin also delved into Synthetism, a style which sought to explore and visually convey poetry, spirituality and emotion. Working with Gauguin was a transformative experience for Sérusier, helping him expand his own artistic vision.

Sérusier returned to Paris with an unfinished work, created under Gauguin's direction, that reduced a view of Aven River and the adjoining wooded area to its elemental components. The result was profoundly innovative, sensational and influential. Several of his peers at Académie Julian, including Pierre Bonnard, Maurice Denis, Jean-Édouard Vuillard and Paul-Élie Ranson, exalted the painted sketch, originally titled *The Bois d'Amour at Pont Aven* before Ranson

aply renamed it *The Talisman* (now in the collection of the Musée d'Orsay in Paris). Aspiring to re-envision painting, these artists formed a group named the Nabis (French: Les Nabis, a derivation of nebiim, Hebrew for prophet), active in France from 1888 to 1900. The Nabis created art that diverged from realism, infusing their art with vivid color and resonating metaphor and symbolism.

The following year, in 1889, Gauguin left Pont-Aven and settled for a time in nearby Le Pouldu, a Breton fishing village in northwestern France. Sérusier joined him there for a few weeks in the fall and further developed his philosophy of painting, pushing beyond Gauguin's Synthetism and advancing his own work with more confident, intentional and innovative results. Sérusier's most ambitious work from this trip, *The Three-Pond Cottage at Le Pouldu*, began as a plein air sketch and took on new life in the artist's studio. The cottage and surrounding ponds, marsh grasses, wheat fields and haystacks are formed by the dynamic interplay between flat planes of complementary colors—swaths of warm ochre offset by deep blue and patches of russet red against dark green. The undulating compositional elements and repeated use of colors create a continued sense of movement, interrupted by textured vertical lines which effectively root the viewer in the foreground.

“The overall effect of this experiment was nothing less than the total sublimation of the outward appearance of the painter's surroundings into a landscape inhabited by spiritual presence, a mystical vision rendered onto the canvas with a bold harmonization of color and form,” said Dr. Sylvain Cordier, VMFA's Paul Mellon Curator and Head of the Department of European Art. *The Three-Pond Cottage at Le Pouldu* “is one of the earliest works to demonstrate how the Nabis artists would transform the foundations of art and distinguish their work from their Impressionist predecessors.”

“*The Three-Pond Cottage at Le Pouldu* is an important addition to the European art collection at VMFA as it provides a crucial contextual link between Post-Impressionist paintings by Gauguin and Vincent Van Gogh in the museum's Mellon Collection, as well as later modern artists like Bonnard and Matisse.” said Alex Nyerges, VMFA's Director and CEO.

“When situated between the paintings of Gauguin and Van Gogh in the newly renovated Mellon Galleries at VMFA next year, Sérusier's *The Three-Pond Cottage at Le Pouldu* will occupy a vital position in the room dedicated to Post-Impressionism,” added Michael Taylor, VMFA's Chief Curator and Deputy Director for Art and Education. “This work perfectly illustrates the essential nature of Gauguin's influence on an entire generation of avant-garde painters, while also demonstrating how Sérusier transcended his mentor in conveying the poetic and the metaphysical through his visionary presentation of color and form. We are delighted to add such an important painting to the museum's collection.”

Dr. Cordier will present a virtual lecture, “Painting Alongside Gauguin: A Masterpiece of the Pont-Aven School by Paul Sérusier” on Thursday, Nov. 5 at 6:30 p.m. EST. The online event, hosted on Zoom, is free to attend. Participants can register to access the lecture at www.VMFA.museum. Sérusier's painting *The Three-Pond Cottage at Le Pouldu* is currently on view in VMFA's Atrium. Other works by the artist can be found in the collections of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, the Art Institute of Chicago, the Museum of Fine Arts-Houston, Musée d'Orsay in Paris, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Brest and Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam.

About the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, Virginia, is one of the largest comprehensive art museums in the United States. VMFA, which opened in 1936, is a state agency and privately endowed educational institution. Its purpose is to collect, preserve, exhibit, and interpret art, and to encourage the study of the arts. Through the Office of Statewide Partnerships program, the museum offers curated exhibitions, arts-related audiovisual programs, symposia, lectures, conferences and workshops by visual and performing artists. In addition to presenting a wide array of special exhibitions, the museum provides visitors with the opportunity to experience a global collection of art that spans more than 6,000 years. VMFA's permanent holdings encompass nearly 40,000 artworks, including the largest public collection of Fabergé outside of Russia, the finest collection of Art Nouveau outside of Paris, and one of the nation's finest collections of American art. VMFA is also home to important collections of Chinese art, English silver, and

French Impressionist, Post-Impressionist, British sporting, and modern and contemporary art, as well as renowned South Asian, Himalayan and African art. In May 2010, VMFA opened its doors to the public after a transformative expansion, the largest in its history.

The Virginia Museum of Fine Arts is the only art museum in the United States open 365 days a year with free general admission. For additional information, telephone 804.340.1400 or visit www.VMFA.museum.

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