

Paul Gauguin

The Vision after the Sermon, 1888

Gauguin wrote to Van Gogh in 1888: «I have just finished a rather badly done painting of a religious subject that has fascinated me. [...] In it a group of Bretons, wearing intensely black local dress, are seen in prayer. The bonnets on the right look like two monstrous helmets. A dark purple apple tree crosses the picture plane, with its green leaves drawn like clumped emerald clouds with open spaces of light green and sun-yellow. The surface is pure vermilion that darkens in the area nearest the church, becoming a reddish brown. The Angel is robed in a saturated sea blue and Jacob in bottle-green. I think I have achieved a rustic and superstitious simplicity in these figures. Everything about it is very severe. For me this painting's landscape and the wrestling figures exist only in the mind of the people praying after the sermon. That is why there is a contrast between the real people and the fight going on in such an unnatural and disproportionate landscape.»

Painted during the artist's second stay in Bretagne, **The Vision after the Sermon** contains all the elements that distinguish Gauguin's poetics.

The artist wanted to **give a form to the people's feelings** as they leave the Church after having heard a sermon about Jacob and the Angel. He wanted to find a way to induce them to think that they could actually witness the Biblical tale of the two struggling figures.

Japanese Forms in Bretagne

A group of farm women see the wrestling scene which the artist derived from a drawing by the great Japanese master **Hokusai** (whose Oriental figure of a Sumo Wrestler is substituted here by Gauguin's more Western choice of the Angel). Another distinctive Japanese trait is **the raised viewing point** and **the well-defined contour line**.

In its diagonal placement the tree symbolically separates the domain of reality from the realm of imagination, with two different perspectives: this two-part division is seen also in the distribution of complementary colours, red-green and white-black, with no interest in naturalistic rendering.

Synthesis of Colours and Forms

The painting is characterized by the **coexistence of several different planes** and this is clearly seen on the left side of the composition.

The artist interweaves the planes, placing the figures (especially their bonnets and bibs) in separate segments. Observe, for instance, the foreground group starting with only male figure in the lower right-hand corner (some people have seen

him as Gauguin's partial self-portrait) and moving left to the woman whose bonnet's untied string curls on her shoulder. Just behind this woman begins a separate group of four women arranged according to a different perspective, while up in the left hand corner a group of seated women suggest an impossible background plane. All naturalism has been dissembled by these body shapes that appear firmly attached one to another; they are all so solid that it is as if Gauguin had been creating painting and sculpture at the same time.

The elegant curve of the apple tree draws a borderline between this world of reality and the next world in which the scene of Jacob wrestling the Angel occurs. This is the vision experienced by the farm women who close their eyes and bend in prayer after having heard a sermon on the passage taken from Genesis (chap. 32, vv. 24-30). Although the Bible recounts the struggle as a night-time scene, Gauguin's choice of **bright, sharp red** confers an **unreal time and atmosphere** on the encounter.

Because it derived from a search to synthesize forms, Gauguin's style became known as "Synthetism."

Abstraction from Nature

In this period Gauguin's formal investigation was basically rotating around a problem of translation: how can we talk about nature? How can reality be rendered through painting?

The Impressionists had offered immediate solutions via the eyes' direct transmission of physical sight to the paintbrush. But this chain of reaction, which had characterized the open-air process, was later considered too fleeting and mechanical. Writing in August 1888 to Schuffenecker, Gauguin offered «A word of advice: do not copy too much from nature. **Art is abstraction; as you dream before nature you must squeeze art out of it, worrying more about the creation than the result.**» Gauguin painted this piece for a church in the small town of Nizon (near Pont-Avon) but it was refused by the parish priest.



Right Fig. 1 Paul Gauguin, The Vision after the Sermon, 1888.
Oil on canvas,
73x92 cm. Edinburgh,
National Gallery of Scotland.

Left Fig. 2 Katsushika Hokusai, Sumo Wrestlers, 1815.
Ukiyo-e print. Tacoma,
Tacoma Art Museum. Detail.

