

Brittany : Olivia Robertson, 2019<sup>1</sup>

In 1881, the British art critic Henry Blackburn wrote that Brittany was “essentially the land of the painter.”<sup>2</sup> He proceeded in saying: “Nowhere in France are there finer peasantry; nowhere do we see more dignity of aspect in field labour, more nobility of features amongst men and women; nowhere more picturesque ruins; nowhere such primitive habitations and it must be added, such dirt.” This short description encapsulates the 19th century perception the outside world held of Brittany. This region is located in the upper left corner of the French hexagon. The Armorican Peninsula protrudes out of the continent and presses up into the English Channel. A blanket of fog often hangs over the region, especially up against the coasts, comprised of jagged rock dotted with soft-sand beaches. Especially in the south, the landscape is strewn with thousands of megalithic monuments of enormous pale stones, funeral monuments from the neolithic past that later habitents believed to be the homes of Korrigans, Breton fairies<sup>3</sup>.

The Breton people traditionally eked out their living through a combination of farm-labour and fishing. The local version of Catholicism they worship is tied strongly to the worship of Saints whose character traits were inherited from their ancient Celtic predecessors. The central icon is Saint Anne, mother to the Virgin Mary, endowed with responsibility over agriculture, fishing, and sailors, the same domains once managed by the Celtic goddess Anu in the same region<sup>4</sup>. The Breton people worship her along with a slew of other saints during

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<sup>1</sup> Work-in-Progress draft of Senior Honors Thesis to be revised and submitted Spring 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Henry Blackburn, *Breton Folk: An Artistic Tour in Brittany* (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1881), 3, [archive.org/details/bretonfolkartist01blac](https://archive.org/details/bretonfolkartist01blac)

<sup>3</sup> Mark Patton, *Statements in Stone: Monuments and Society in Neolithic Brittany* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993), ch. 4, Ebscohost ebook.

<sup>4</sup> James Doan, “Five Breton ‘Cantiques’ From ‘Pardons’.” *Folklore* 91, no. 1 (1980): 34, [www.jstor.org/stable/1259816](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1259816)

religious festivals known as “Pardons” held in July and August<sup>5</sup>. Even now, as in the 19th century, the Pardons are occasions during which Bretons gather in their renowned regional costume and carry banners, reliquaries, and portraits of Saints in a procession around the town, asking the higher powers to forgive them for the sins they committed over the year.

Due to a combination of a strong Celtic cultural influence and a centuries-long lack of interregional infrastructure connecting Brittany to the rest of France, Brittany, “administratively neglected and socially isolated,” remained fairly distinct from mainstream French culture through the 18th century<sup>6</sup>. This only began to change drastically with mandatory military conscription for French men and mandatory, free, secular education in French across the nation, integrationist policies enacted in the last quarter of the 19th century<sup>7</sup>. These were policies which forced Bretons to interact socially with mainstream French culture during their time serving in the military, as well as intellectually through their engagement with the teaching of a standardized French history in school. This forced awareness of their own “otherness” went on to spark self-conscious Breton Regionalist cultural and intellectual movements in the 19th century and a rethinking of the meaning of a Breton identity.

At the same time, the opening up of the region to the outside world meant that non-Bretons were also given the opportunity to formulate their own ideas about the Breton culture. As demonstrated by Henry Blackburne’s Breton-specific travel-book and the comments therein about the idyllic setup for genre scenes to be found upon visiting the region, this sense of admiration, fascination, and exotification was an enormous draw for artists. Through the ways in

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<sup>5</sup> Doan, “Five Breton ‘Cantiques,’” 27.

<sup>6</sup> L. A. Timm, “Modernization and Language Shift: the Case of Brittany,” *Anthropological Linguistics* 15, no. 6 (September 1973), 288.

<sup>7</sup> Timm, “Modernization and Language Shift,” 290.

which some of these artists depicted Brittany combined with knowledge of the cultural context they operated in, we can begin to understand the way that Bretons and non-Bretons alike began to think of the Breton culture in this period of dramatic flux. Mythologized in different ways by both cultural insiders and outsiders, these paintings show the kind of space Brittany occupied in the late 19th century artistic mind.

### **Tourism & Cultural Tourism**

Until the 1830's, Brittany was an area relatively unknown to painters, and more generally speaking, tourists of any variety<sup>8</sup>. This was due in large part to the poor quality of the roads and a lack of access to the region by rail until the mid-1800's<sup>9</sup>. It wasn't until 1857 that there was access by train to Rennes, the capital of Brittany, and it took until the end of 1863 for a train to run to Quimper, one of the westernmost cities in the region<sup>10</sup>. It was through this route, plus a carriage ride from Quimper to the adjacent cities of Quimperlé or Concarneau, that artists eventually came to frequent the town of Pont-Aven, turning it into an internationally known artist's colony.

In his book on the town, André Cariou credits the publication of several regionally specific guidebooks with helping to spark artistic and touristic interest in the region. He mentions, in particular, Jacques Cambry's *Voyage dans le Finistère* (1799) and Thomas Adolphus Trollope's *A Summer in Brittany* (1840) as potential sources of inspiration for both French and English speaking visitors<sup>11</sup>. These authors emphasized the picturesque ruins,

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<sup>8</sup> André Cariou, *Pont-Aven cité des peintres* (Saint Bruic: Coop Breizh, 2016), 12.

<sup>9</sup> Cariou, *Pont-Aven*, 12.

<sup>10</sup> Judy Le Paul, Le Paul, Charles-Guy, *Gauguin and the Impressionists at Pont-Aven* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1987), 8.

<sup>11</sup> Cariou, *Pont-Aven*, 12.

untouched nature, and the feudal landscape as points of visual interest. The vivid imagery of scenery in these books, combined with long-held French stereotypes of the region, meant that the early artistic visitors in the 1830's were "seeking motifs and subjects to support their aesthetic preconceptions, rather than scenes to depict objectively."<sup>12</sup> At the same time, the 1830's saw a small-scale Breton cultural revolution and an upsurge of Breton intellectuals actively contemplating their identity as people of Breton origin, leading to another push for the active teaching of the Breton language in school settings<sup>13</sup>. This most likely wouldn't have resulted in any demonstrable change visible to outsiders, except maybe a slightly increased journalistic presence of Brittany in some French newspapers. Mostly, it demonstrates the active formulation of identity and self-advocacy happening at the same moment as there was a swell in tourism to the region by outsiders searching a simple-minded peasant culture and rustic farms.

These stereotypes were not reneged but rather continually emphasized by many of the most popular guidebooks published over the course of the next century. The 1856 sixth English edition of Murray's *Handbook for Travellers in France*, supposedly corresponding closely to the French eighth edition, offers many highly detailed descriptions of the land and its inhabitants which only reenforce preconceptions and support the curious traveler's expectations of what they would see there. Introducing the region, the author writes, "There can scarcely be a more abrupt contrast to the smiling land of Normandy than that presented by the neighboring province of sombre, poverty-stricken Brittany."<sup>14</sup> In terms of Brittany's physical characteristics, he invokes the picturesque scenery, the water-mills, the quaint antiquity, as well as the notably grey weather

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<sup>12</sup> Le Paul, *Gauguin*, 7.

<sup>13</sup> Fañch Postic; Laurent, Donatien; Simon, Jean-Francois; Veillard, Jean-Yves, "Reconnaissance d'une culture régionale: la Bretagne depuis la Révolution." *Ethnologie Française, nouvelle série* 33, no. 3 (July-September 2003), 382. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27667498>

<sup>14</sup> John Murray, *A Handbook for Travellers in France* (London: John Murray, 1858), 103.

<sup>15</sup>. This description is written in a mostly positive, admiring or even idealizing romantic tone, though he shows a fair amount of disdain for the climate and is unimpressed by the food.

His ethnographic descriptions, meanwhile, are fairly patronizing, and play into the nascent ideas of the Breton people as noble simpletons. Of the local population, he writes:

“They are usually mean and small in their persons; coarse-featured in face; squalidly filthy in their habitations; rude and unskillful in their agriculture. They are almost unchanged in their manners, customs, and habits: modern innovation has not entirely rubbed off the rust of long-continued habit; old legends and superstitions still retain their hold on the popular mind. They present a curious picture of a primitive state of society; and if a century behind their neighbors in what is called improvements, they are at least not corrupted by revolutions and commotions.”<sup>16</sup>

He also makes a near-obligatory reference to their “excessively quaint” costume<sup>17</sup>, including the “curious and costly ‘coiffures’” worn by women<sup>18</sup>.

This near-nostalgic view of what was perceived by outsiders as a living relic of premodern society and the long-lost innocence of the more “advanced” mainstream European culture is continued and doubly emphasized in Blackburn’s *Breton Folk*. In addition to his descriptions of the seascapes and “druidical stones” he quotes two Englishmen who had visited the region decades ago. One had described the Bretons as “rude, uncivilized, simple, and dirty in their habits; they live literally like pigs” and the other had written that “he is as patient and quiet as a beast of burden” whose hard labour renders him incapable of feeling emotion<sup>19</sup>. Though he

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<sup>15</sup> Murray, *A Handbook*, 104.

<sup>16</sup> Murray, *A Handbook*, 104.

<sup>17</sup> Murray, *A Handbook*, 103.

<sup>18</sup> Murray, *A Handbook*, 105.

<sup>19</sup> Blackburn, *Breton Folk*, 59.

inserted these quotes because he felt that they still held true, for his own part, Blackburn is much less severe, writing, “Nowhere in France are there finer peasantry; nowhere do we see more dignity of aspect in field labour, more nobility of features amongst men and women; nowhere more picturesque ruins; nowhere such primitive habitations, and it must be added, such dirt.”<sup>20</sup> Although he still places emphasis on their uncleanliness, he more explicitly states the romantic honorability of working in the field and living with little means. This, from the perspective of an artist in search of a genre scene to paint, is an inherent positive, which Blackburn is very conscious of. The book is illustrated with black and white etchings placed within the text blocks, offering artists glimpses of what they themselves might be able to render during a visit to Brittany: women in their regional costume, performing daily farm and household chores against the background of rolling hills of pasture and ancient ducal estates.

This attitude pervaded into the early 20th century if not longer. The 1909 fifth edition of *Baedeker's Northern France* uses the words “quaint” and “primitive” writing about the people, and “ancient” and “picturesque” to describe their dress<sup>21</sup>. The summary of the region preceding the actual touring advice is briefer and more factual than Murray’s handbook, or Blackburn’s book of florid descriptions. The author actually makes reference to some statistics about the population, the number of Breton language speakers, and includes a number of specific historical dates. As demonstrated, though, this factuality does not equal objectivity, and the work shows the continued perception of the Breton people as somewhat stunted and backwards, at least in the English speaking world. Baedeker and Murray were both mainstream competitors in the guidebook market, with Baedeker even gaining so much recognition that the name Baedeker

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<sup>20</sup> Blackburn, *Breton Folk*, 3.

<sup>21</sup> Karl Baedeker, *Baedeker's Northern France* (Leipzig: Baedeker, 1909), 193.

itself became synonymous with “travel handbook”<sup>22</sup>. These were the books which went on to inform what a modern tourists handbook to a country should look like and what information is relevant to strangers to a region. So, the work of these authors represents the most mainstream opinion possible, and the kind of standing it held across generations.

The aforesaid nobility of peasant labor was not likely the primary interest of most Parisian tourists, who mostly went to the beaches during the warm seasons, but for the poetic-minded artists, it was a significant draw. The artist colony at Pont-Aven and the avant-garde symbolist group Nabis formed around the philosophies of Gauguin are without a doubt the most well known results of artistic tourism to the region. Gauguin’s *La vision du sermon*, painted during his time there, is the most globally recognized painting pertaining to Brittany or Breton culture in any aspect.

The appeal of Brittany for this group of artists was layered. Perhaps most significantly, due to a long-lasting economic depression and distance from the mainstream French economic systems, Brittany remained significantly cheaper to stay in than most other regions in France. In the Pont-Aven area, there were a few hotels well known for cheap lodging and meals and which had developed a reputation among artists, such as the Pension Gloanec where Gauguin and Émile Bernard stayed<sup>23</sup>. The town itself was also very picturesque, with a high number of mills and some nice surrounding forests. Additionally, the Bretons in Pont-Aven were much more willing to pose for artists than residents of other towns in the region, so the artists found relatively easy access to “authentic” Breton models who would pose cheaply<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> Edward Mendleson, “Baedeker’s Universe,” *Yale Review*, 74 (Spring 1985), [columbia.edu/~em36/baedeker.html](http://columbia.edu/~em36/baedeker.html)

<sup>23</sup> Cariou, *Pont-Aven*, 28.

<sup>24</sup> Cariou, *Pont-Aven*, 19.

Gauguin and the Nabis group have undoubtedly the most scholarship written on them out of any other artists who have passed through this area, to the degree that the movement he and Bernard started is synonymous with “l'École de Pont-Aven” or any other such phrases. This trend, however, often eclipses or ignores the wide diversity of artistic activity happening in the town at the same time. In 1868, decades before Gauguin ever set foot in the region, there was such a presence of students of painting from the Philadelphia School of Arts that it warranted a mention in the Philadelphia Evening Bulletin<sup>25</sup>. From 1878 on, there was a group of young Finnish women who were art students which would regularly visit the region as part of their studies, and in 1891, the bar-salon The Five O'clock Tea was opened to cater towards the English visitors<sup>26</sup>. There was a strong enough presence of academic painters there that Gauguin's group had a public rupture with them over their philosophies of painting that it forced the keeper of the Gloanec to serve them dinner in separate dining rooms so they wouldn't have to interact with one another<sup>27</sup>. Gauguin's group is more strongly associated with Pont-Aven than any other group due in part to the exhibition they hold at the Parisian Café Volpini in 1889, within the official borders of but not actually a part of the Exposition Universelle, so a Courbet-esque “Salon des Refusées”<sup>28</sup>. This was one of the first exhibitions that referenced the site of Pont-Aven by name, and so brought it even more into the French mainstream<sup>29</sup>.

Famous for his role in the development of primitivist modernism, it's no wonder that Gauguin would have come to Brittany specifically, given the reputation it had as a time machine

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<sup>25</sup> Cariou, *Pont-Aven*, 9.

<sup>26</sup> Cariou, *Pont-Aven*, 10.

<sup>27</sup> Cariou, *Pont-Aven*, 40.

<sup>28</sup> Jawarska, Wladyslawa, *Gauguin and the Pont-Aven School*, Translated by Patrick Evans, (Greenwich, CT: New York Graphic Society Ltd, 1971), 75.

<sup>29</sup> Le Paul, *Gauguin*, 98.

to France's feudal past. He once wrote: "I love Brittany: there I find the wild and the primitive."

<sup>30</sup> However, much like the Tahiti where he would go on to paint his most famous primitivist works, Brittany was clearly nowhere near as underdeveloped as anyone made it out to be. The inns catering specifically to artists, the constant inflow of persons of various nationalities during the summers, and the existence of a bar-salon catering to a specific foreign audience, outlines a fairly well-developed tourist industry. In no way were these "virgin" lands or people who had been preserved in a bubble outside of the churning of modernity; in fact, they capitalized on it.

In her article on Gauguin and primitivist modernism, Abigail Solomon-Godeau highlights the way in which the continued perception of Brittany as "primitive, severe, and eminently folkloric" is a form of mythic speech and a way that artists and tourists continued to mythologize the region<sup>31</sup>. In this regard, she coins the term "Bretonism", analogizing the way the mainstream western audience pictured and portrayed Brittany to the way they pictured and portrayed the eastern hemisphere with Orientalism. She argues that this idea of the rural, unlearned countryside was conceived as a deliberate antidote to high-speed Parisian modernism, and played into a romantic, primitivist sentiment of lament for a fading primordial culture<sup>32</sup>.

Ironically, though, many of the distinctive Breton customs perceived by outsiders like Gauguin as vestiges of an ancient culture actually started in post-revolutionary times<sup>33</sup>. The characteristic Breton lace headdress worn by women, the 'coiffe', for example, was a 19th century invention, resulting from a change in sumptuary laws during the revolution and

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<sup>30</sup> Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Going Native: Paul Gauguin and the Invention of Primitivist Modernism," *Art in America* 77 (July 1989), 315.

<sup>31</sup> Solomon-Godeau, *Going Native*, 316.

<sup>32</sup> Solomon-Godeau, *Going Native*, 324.

<sup>33</sup> Solomon-Godeau, *Going Native*, 316.

innovations in technology which made the fabric much cheaper<sup>34</sup>. Through the 1890's into the 1920's and 30's, Bretons began to wear these costumes more and more performatively, holding public festivals with the dual intent of creating an occasion for the personal celebration of culture and to draw tourists<sup>35</sup>. In the great 19th century romantic panic about the sun setting on the diverse cultures of the world, Brittany's costume was seized upon both internally and externally as a form of cultural expression to protect. Breton regionalists saw it as evidence of continued Breton resistance to French republicanism and therefore French culture, and encouraged its changing and adapting as a continued practice rather than allowing it to stagnate and become a relic of the past<sup>36</sup>. To these ends, some supported tourism as a means to keep it alive. Outsiders were obsessed with the idea of Breton costume as a part of French regional patrimony, and therefore a communal heritage that could be accessed by the French people as a whole, and with the costumes as a representation of "authenticity"<sup>37</sup>. This idea of "authenticity" rests on the expectation that the tourist is able to see the Breton people behaving as they would if they were not expecting a touristic presence. However, increased interest by tourists provided increased motivation to wear the costume for Bretons cognizant of, or likely directly involved in, the local tourism industry.

Although Solomon-Godeau writes specifically about Gauguin, the idea of "Bretonism" that she develops could be used to describe any number the participants of this local tourist industry. Certainly, it could be used to describe Baedeker and his usage of the word "ancient" in reference to the Breton costume. Gauguin, Émile Bernard, Baedeker, Murray, and Blackburn are

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<sup>34</sup> Patrick Young, "Fashioning Heritage: Regional Costume and Tourism in Brittany, 1890-1937." *Journal of Social History* 42, no. 3 (Spring 2009), 634.

<sup>35</sup> Young, "Fashioning Heritage", 637.

<sup>36</sup> Young, "Fashioning Heritage", 636.

<sup>37</sup> Young, "Fashioning Heritage", 645.

all part of the same cohort which projects the same fantasy of “timeless Breton traditionalism”<sup>38</sup> onto this group of people. They treat the culture as if it were preserved in amber, a perfect sample of what France was like when it was stable but stagnant, before any of the radical political shifts that characterized the late 18th and early 19th century. Inherent in this is a sense of nostalgia and idealization of what used to be. The philosophical turmoil of the modern urban gentleman led him to regret society’s turn away from farming, connection with the earth, small-town simplicity, and what he perceived as intellectually challenged lives, if only in an abstract sense. The constant acknowledgement of the poverty of the province and the difficult living conditions of the Breton people are coupled with the paternalistic sense that these poor country-folk accept their circumstances and don’t even know enough to know that their lives are unusually difficult. Through reference to the “nobility” of their labor and their unawareness of the sins of modernity, the most sympathetic among these authors ascribes the Breton people a higher moral stature exclusively on the basis of their poverty.

These nostalgic notions exclude, as nostalgia necessarily does, any memory of the tangibility of the hardship that such a rural life constitutes. Gauguin and the painters at Pont-Aven focused either on the women’s performances of femininity and maternity or the watermills planted at the streams around town. These artists bought into and reproduced “l’image artificielle d’une Bretagne élégiaque et pittoresque d’où sont exclues les représentations du travail et de la misère.”<sup>39,40</sup> High death rates, cold winters, and a lack of a political voice are the real consequences of rural poverty. Discrimination and exclusion from French mainstream

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<sup>38</sup> Young, “Fashioning Heritage”, 634.

<sup>39</sup> Cariou, *Pont-Aven*, 21.

<sup>40</sup> “The artificial image of an elegiac and picturesque Brittany which excludes representations of work and misery.” Author’s own translation.

society support these conditions. These are realities which are sidelined by the outsider's shock at the visual differences between themselves and the Breton people. Even more, they're easy to ignore when the visitor actively doesn't want to acknowledge them. Gauguin, in his search for the primitive and primordial, refused to acknowledge the inherent struggles of living without modern technologies, and instead leaned into the fantasy of an abundant mother nature, the fecundity of women and a connection with the intangible undercurrents of the world. Really, such intense religiosity as seen among the Bretons cannot be considered entirely separately from their constant and very real knowledge of mortality.

Gauguin is not one of the central artists whose imagery will be analyzed in this piece: his name has only been invoked here because of the depth of scholarship available on him and the movement at Pont-Aven. It must be acknowledged that he was seen as controversial even by his contemporaries, and that it would be irresponsible to use him as a representation of the average late 19th century artist. However, because this is the most detailed information available about the motivations and experiences of an artist in Brittany, it must be drawn upon to inform our understanding of what academic painters might also have been privy to during their own excursions to the region. It's clear that the Bretonist fantasy existed outside of his own troubled imagination, and that elements of it were drawn upon or perpetuated by many players in French and Breton society through the 19th century and into the 20th.

This popular conception of a society fixed in time was translated into images by mainstream French academics both famous and virtually unknown by today's art historians, such as William-Adolphe Bougereau, Pascal-Adolphe-Jean Dagnan Bouveret, Jules Breton, Jean-Eugène Bouland, and Fernand le Quesne. At the same time, the regional history and

identity was depicted by Bretons themselves, including Henri-Paul Royer, Yann' Dargent, Edgar Maxence, Alfred Guillou, and Evariste-Vital Luminais. The contrasting depictions of Breton society and the motivations and purpose of each painting will serve as the main concern of this text. All of these paintings were conducted underneath the spectre of the 19th century dichotomy of the prejudice towards and mythologizing of Breton society, with the academically trained Breton artists operating under both this knowledge and their own personal cultural knowledge of Breton society.

### **The Breton Reality**

Not all of the preconceptions of Brittany held by outsiders were entirely wrong. The poverty, as previously described, was a fact of life for the majority, and the worshippers in this devout Catholic society held firm beliefs about local legends and the supernatural which others often viewed as superstitious. It's also true that Breton society was largely stagnant for a long time, receiving only very slowly some of the benefits that modern technology had brought to the rest of the western world.

Through the 19th century, Brittany retained much of its early modern economy and societal structure, a "land of fundamentally static social organization and authoritarian political culture."<sup>41</sup> In 1881, the population was still 78.5% non urban, a fifth higher than the French average, with two thirds of the region's population still involved in fishing and agriculture, and only 15% working in industry<sup>42</sup>. Since the year 1700, much of Brittany had been sunk into a

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<sup>41</sup> Jack E. Reece, *The Bretons Against France: Ethnic Minority Nationalism in Twentieth-Century Brittany*. (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 44.

<sup>42</sup> Reece, *The Bretons*, 45.

severe economic depression caused in part by an overtaxation of the peasant class<sup>43</sup>, which continued into the 19th century and was strained by the growing Breton population<sup>44</sup>. In 1880 Gilbert Le Guen wrote that Brittany displayed “an almost indecent fecundity in an otherwise Malthusian France, a congenital incapacity to stimulate the growth of large-scale industry and all the other traits characteristic of a deliberately peasant society still tied to the rectory and the château.”<sup>45</sup> If there was any deliberation, though, it was likely not on the part of the peasant class but rather the clerico-aristocratic elite who continued to dominate the personal and political lives of Bretons well into the 19th century<sup>46</sup>. Whoever was responsible, the result of the Breton region’s economic deficiency was a mass exodus of Bretons outside of the country and into the city, as well as out of the region entirely and into the rest of Europe<sup>47</sup>. From 1876 to 1911, the habitancy of Breton cities increased by about 20 or 27%, and at the same time at least 411,000 Bretons found homes outside of the region, with around 160,000 in the Paris region, a population greater than the population in any of the Breton cities<sup>48</sup>.

This is not to say that there was no industry at all in Brittany. The extension of the railroad across Brittany connected the Breton region of Bigoudennie to Paris in 1884, leading to a boom in the local commercial fishing industry<sup>49</sup>. During the same time frame, the famous Quimper lacework production started to take off, there was a rise in dairy and tanning in the countryside and of paper manufacturing in the cities<sup>50</sup>. The forges of Hennebont produced high

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<sup>43</sup> James B. Collins, *Classes, Estates and Order in Early Modern Brittany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 60.

<sup>44</sup> Charles R. Menzies, “Class and Identity on the Margins of Industrial Society: A Breton Illustration.” *Anthropologica* 39, No. 1/2 (1997), 28.

<sup>45</sup> Reece, *The Bretons*, 45.

<sup>46</sup> Reece, *The Bretons*, 42.

<sup>47</sup> Reece, *The Bretons*, 47.

<sup>48</sup> Reece, *The Bretons*, 47.

<sup>49</sup> Menzies, “Class and Identity,” 29.

<sup>50</sup> Reece, *The Bretons*, 45.

quality iron which was used in the construction of farm implements and around the important naval base in Brest there was a local industry producing instruments of war for France. These were changes that happened very slowly and very late relative to the rest of France, only picking up in the years preceding the first world war. So, for a long time, modernity was a creeping shadow cast westward by Paris.

This time period is also when the first Breton folklorists began working to document Breton culture, most notably Théodore Hersart de la Villemarqué and his 1839 book *Barzaz-Breiz* (Bards of Brittany), which recounts the legends and folklore of Brittany<sup>51</sup>. The book was targeted towards an urban French audience, and became so popular that it was followed by an expanded edition in 1845 and a definitive edition in 1869<sup>52</sup>. Brittany's rich cultural history gained attention from the outside because of the sheer volumes of legends it retains, both the legends of saints and of popular figures who have entered into the international mainstream.

Outside of the popularly known St. Anne, Bretons worshipped a number of other founder-saints, largely monks of Irish or Welsh origin who had sailed across the channel to establish Churches in Brittany. This includes the 5th century St. Corentin, credited with converting the medieval pagan king Gralon to Christianity and to whom the cathedral in Quimper is dedicated<sup>53</sup>. It also includes St. Budoc, born the count's daughter Azénor who was put in a barrel and thrown into the ocean after marrying at the bequest of her evil stepmother, and who gave birth to her son while at sea, whose name, Budoc, translates to "drowned one"<sup>54</sup>. Saint

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<sup>51</sup> Reece, *The Bretons*, 26.

<sup>52</sup> Postic, "Reconnaissance d'une culture," 383.

<sup>53</sup> W. Branch Johnson, *Folktales of Brittany* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company Publishers: 1927), 4.

<sup>54</sup> Johnson, *Folktales of Brittany*, 7.

Guérolé was the son of a Welsh chieftain who went on to found a monastery in Landévennec; Saint Gi'ldas came from Wales in a stone boat and survived even though Satan tossed him into the sea; Saint Armel also came over on a stone boat and afterwards had the ability to transform rocks into animals<sup>55</sup>. Knowledge of these saints was traditionally transmitted by the father of the family, who would often teach the lives of saints, Buhez ar Zent, over dinner<sup>56</sup>. They were not recognized by the Catholic Church due to the lack of “unimpeachable written evidence” surrounding the events of their lives<sup>57</sup>. Additionally, when fighting the reputability of Breton popular saints, church officials often chose to highlight examples of some of the less savory saints, such as Saint Piro, the abbot of a Welsh island monastery who died falling drunk into a well<sup>58</sup>. The cyclical Pardons held to honor these saints may be the “‘last vestiges of the ancient Feasts of the Dead’ adapted from Druidism to Christianity.”<sup>59</sup>

These more Catholic additions to the Breton mythology sometimes were built to fill the same roles as their pagan predecessors, but they did not completely supplant all of the pagan mythologies already in place. Even to the modern day, some Breton people believe in the existence of Ankou, a skeletal figure in a squeaky chariot who comes to collect the souls of the dead and warns people of their passing through the screeches of owls and dogs barking at their door in the middle of the night<sup>60</sup>. Legends about him vary from parish to parish; some believe that he’s the immortal King of the Dead, some believe he’s the last man who died in the

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<sup>55</sup> Johnson, *Folktales of Brittany*, 9-11.

<sup>56</sup> Yann Brekilien, *La Vie Quotidienne des Paysans en Bretagne au XIXe siècle* (Paris, Librairie Hachette: 1966), 90.

<sup>57</sup> Julia M. H. Smith, “Oral and Written: Saints, Miracles, and Relics in Brittany c. 850-1250), *Speculum* 65, no. 2 (April 1990), 309.

<sup>58</sup> Smith, “Oral and Written,” 309.

<sup>59</sup> Johnson

<sup>60</sup> Ellen Badone, “Death Omens in a Breton Memoriate,” *Folklore* 98, no. 1 (1989), 99.

preceding year<sup>61</sup>. The most common fairy creatures are called Korrigan, mysterious elf-like creatures who cause mischief and are rumored to be seen dancing around the Menhirs at night<sup>62</sup>. All of the megaliths were associated strongly with fairies, and sometimes newlywed couples would dance around or rub themselves on dolmens in the hope that the fairy-magic would make them more fertile or bless them with a long and happy marriage<sup>63</sup>. In addition, there are the Mary Morgan, a species of often malevolent ocean-based fairies, mostly women, though with the occasional male known to lure Breton women to their cave homes<sup>64</sup>.

One of the most popular legends of the Breton region is the legend of Ker-Ys<sup>65</sup>. Ker-Ys was the ancient mythic capital city of Brittany, ruled over by the king Gradlon, who had earlier been converted to Christianity by Saint Corentin and now governed with Saint Guérolé by his side. Gradlon's daughter, the princess Ahès, was less pious than her father, and was seduced by the devil who convinced her to give him the keys to the city's dam. When he opened the dam and the city flooded, Guérolé went to Gradlon and swept him up onto his horse, taking him to flee the city. Ahès tried to get onto the horse, and Gradlon tried to pull her up onto the horse so they could carry her with them, but Guérolé knew she was responsible and allowed her to fall, swept away by the ocean. In some versions of the account, she later reemerged and Gradlon later saw her murdering a man by the ocean. Ker-Ys here assumes the role of a sort of Sodom, with the Breton people being punished for the pagan lust of Ahès with the destruction of their most prominent city. However, as the story goes, Ker-Ys still exists underwater and may be summoned back to the surface as soon as someone figures out the magic word.

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<sup>61</sup> W. Y. Evans Wentz, *The Fairy Faith in Celtic Countries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1911), 218.

<sup>62</sup> Wentz, *The Fairy Faith*, 207.

<sup>63</sup> Johnson, *Folktales of Brittany*, 84.

<sup>64</sup> Johnson, *Folktales of Brittany*, 91.

<sup>65</sup> Following account of Legend of Ker-Ys from Johnson, *Folktales in Brittany*, 48-57.

This idea is mirrored in the Rex-Futurus narrative of King Arthur, not dead but waiting in the wings, ready to assume power, and this may have in fact informed the Arthurian cycle in some way. The Arthurian Legends were formed slowly through exchange of information between the English and the Normans, and many of the sites invoked in the stories have been linked, at least by Breton people, to actual sites in Brittany. Notably, the Ile de Sein, an ancient stronghold of druidism in the region, is claimed to be the birthplace of Merlin, and the magical forest of Brocéiland is claimed to be the site of his grave<sup>66</sup>. There are more ways in which the Arthurian legends can be connected to Brittany's ancient folklore: the Mary Morgan fairies, for example, may have been folkloric descendants of the princess Ahès, and Ahès may have informed the character of Morgan le Fay<sup>67</sup>. All of which goes to show the ways in which Breton cultural has filtered into the mainstream cultural imagination of the entire western world.

It was also in the 19th century that Bretons, migrating out to the major cities of Paris to look for work, began to conceive of their own cultural differences from the dominant Parisian french culture, and formulate an identity in reaction to this. Previously restricted in their understanding of the world by the church and the nobility, who supported their ignorance in order to retain Brittany as a stronghold against republicanism, Bretons were able to develop their own philosophies of their lives and governance<sup>68</sup>. For decades, young Breton students in state schools were called “pémocke” or “plouk” by classmates, a word derived from the sounds used in the names of many Breton villages which eventually came to mean something like “hick”<sup>69</sup>. Students were punished if they were caught speaking the Breton language in schools<sup>70</sup>. By the

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<sup>66</sup> Johnson, *Folktales of Brittany*, 112.

<sup>67</sup> Johnson, *Folktales of Brittany*, 113.

<sup>68</sup> Reece, *The Bretons*, 47.

<sup>69</sup> Reece, *The Bretons*, 31.

<sup>70</sup> Reece, *The Bretons*, 31.

end of the 19th century, a third of Bretons were monolingual in Breton, with the rest bilingual in both Breton and French<sup>71</sup>, and a large number of Bretons were illiterate in French but could read Breton<sup>72</sup>. Breton parents often encouraged or at least accepted these punishments, associating their own cultural heritage with the centuries of poverty and oppression they'd faced, and thinking of the mainstream French culture and language, in comparison, as a path of tremendous opportunity<sup>73</sup>.

Reacted to this and moved emotionally by the public demonstrations of the richness of their culture, such as *Barzaz-Breizh*, Bretons began to take pride in their history and cultural heritage and push back against the assimilationist politics of France. In the 1830's, the idea of Bretons as Celts grew more and more popular, particularly because it offered them a way to distinguish themselves ethnically from what they believed to be the more latinate Parisians<sup>74</sup>. As Napoleon and Napoleon III created the myth of the little-documented Gallic hero Vercingetorix and the idea of a common French gallic heritage for propaganda purposes, they made every policy move possible to reduce weaken Breton culture, despite the fact that Brittany was acknowledged as the closest living link to this distant past<sup>75</sup>. Even as the governing forces pursued the narrative as France as a gallic nation, they required that all education be in French, and contributed directly to the decline of the Breton language<sup>76</sup>. However, all of this contributed to the Breton valorization of their identity as Gauls and led to this counterclaim of true Gallic

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<sup>71</sup> L. A. Timm, "Modernization and Language Shift: The Case of Brittany," *Anthropological Linguistics* 15, no. 6 (September 1973), 289.

<sup>72</sup> Brekilien, *La Vie Quotidienne*, 91.

<sup>73</sup> Reece, *The Bretons*, 31.

<sup>74</sup> Postic, "Reconnaissance d'une culture," 382.

<sup>75</sup> Michael Dietler, "Our Ancestors the Gauls: Archaeology, Ethnic Nationalism, and the Manipulation of Celtic Identity in Modern Europe." *American Anthropologist* 96, No. 3 (September 1994), 594.

<sup>76</sup> Dietler, "Or Ancestors the Gauls," 594.

ethnicity as a centerpiece in later, more radical separatist Breton movements like Breiz Atao, which rose to prominence during the interwar period<sup>77</sup>.

This unique cultural heritage, distinct from what Parisians would identify as French, combined with a language spoken nowhere else in the world, is what made Bretons seem so exotic to the tourists of the 19th century. Brittany, though it had been part of France since the 1500's, seemed like a foreign land. In the way that French people did not recognize Breton culture as their own, Breton people did not accept French culture as theirs or see themselves in the French national identity, and some even began to reject it consciously when they developed more political self-awareness. These two sides: the heritors of this rich culture, and those who romanticized it from the outside: are the sides seen represented by these artists.

### **The Artists**

The prime characteristic in the depiction of Breton culture by an outside artist is the depiction of the “coiffe,” the famous white-lace headdress worn by Breton women. If there is nothing else to suggest that the subjects of a painting are Breton, there is always at least that distinctive white lace headpiece to indicate to viewers that this is the artist's intention. This is certainly true in William Bouguereau's 1871 painting “Breton Brother and Sister”, which exemplifies many characteristics of a restrained, academic vision of Bretonisme.

The painting is a portrait of a young woman of serious countenance, sitting on a small dirt ledge in underneath lush trees with her golden-haired toddler-aged younger brother sitting in her lap. The portrait is done head-on, with her and her brother directly facing the viewer,

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<sup>77</sup> Reece, *The Bretons*, 92.

occupying the middle third of the painting. Both of their feet are bare but not dirty and her cherub-like brother holds a yellow pear up to his chin. The background is composed of dark forest, and a small opening in the trees which gives way to verdant pasture. There's a certain tenderness in the closeness of the two figures, and certainly an implied maternal quality to the teen or young-adult aged older sister as she holds her brother securely in her lap. The bare feet, uncultivated land and multicolored peasant costume gives the painting a feeling of total simplicity. The pear in the child's hand almost suggests an innate and direct connection with nature, an edenlike ability to feed directly off the land without the overly complicated systems and desires of the modern world.

These characters bear little sign of labour, and, in fact, little sign of authentic breton-ness as well. The white coiffe, white shirt, and black top of the Breton woman and the cap of the boy were brought from Pont-Aven to Bouguereau's Paris studio where he used Parisian models to pose in them, and improvised many of the other elements with generic peasant costume pieces he had access to<sup>78</sup>. So, the models used are not Breton, the scenery is imagined, and the dress itself is not something any Breton person would have been seen wearing in real life. As with the fictitious and romantic paintings of the middle east done by Orientalist painters, this painting seeks to present Parisian viewers with a beautiful depiction of their preconceived notions of Brittany. It cuts through the necessity for fact and speaks directly to their nostalgic desire to believe that somewhere nearby, there exists a place where life is still beautiful and untouched by the smog of modern industry. This is not an image that teaches the viewer that the Breton people have a hard life, but one which evokes the memory of the whimsical folk tales of *Barzaz-Breiz*.

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<sup>78</sup> Cariou, *Pont-Aven*, 20.

The theme of maternity and maternal instinct implied by this painting is also a common motif in paintings of Brittany. Brittany had a much higher birth rate than the rest of France, as well as a much stronger sense of religiosity which pervaded well into the 20th century. Additionally, the cultural worship of Saint Anne in addition to Mary places a double emphasis on the importance of the idea of maternity and the role of the woman in the family. The comparison between the Breton mother and the Holy Mother is made very explicitly in the 1896 painting “Notre Dame de Penmarc’h” by Lucien Levy-Dhurmer.

The painting is a straightforward portrait of a woman in Breton costume, holding a toddler on her left knee, painted in front of an iconic rocky Breton coastal landscape. The painting is too flat to qualify as a strictly academic piece, and seems to draw some influence from the eastern Art Nouveau movement in its details. Underneath the painting, the title is painted in gold onto rough carvings of the letter forms in the dark wood, with the irregular and thick letter sizes and shapes designed in an Art Nouveau or even Art Deco fashion. The subjects of the painting are posed in the fashion of a traditional Icon painting, and the child has a thin ring of gold around its head while the mother’s head is emanating many thin beams of light forming an overall mandorla shape around her. The frame, which seems to be an original part of the piece, is carved in geometric pattern in dark wood reminiscent of decorative furniture, and its thickness and dark tone gives the painting an overall quality of heaviness and gravity.

The face of the mother is serious but not scowling, lips drawn back into a neutral expression that could be interpreted as a slight smile or as a slight frown. Her eyebrows are thick and her hair and eyes are dark. She is wearing the Breton Costume, but a much simpler and more realistic version when compared to Bougeureau’s “Brother and Sister”. She’s wearing a black

dress that comes up to her wrists, and only a little fringe of white shirt is visible poking out from under the sleeve, as well as a thin strip of white shirt-collar at her neck. She is wearing a coiffe, but it's a very small and simple one, a piece of white fabric almost in the shape of a nurse's hat tied around her head and connected with black and white string at her chin. The child is also wearing black, but not the same rich and shapeless black as its mother. It's wearing a black dress with a lighter black smock on top, and a small black headpiece on brown hair. The color of the fabric is light enough that the pleats and folds of its dress is visible, and it wears a ruffled white lace collar at the neck. It's holding its hand out from its body, making the traditional Byzantine sign of the cross. Its eyes are a much lighter, clearer blue when compared with its mothers, and its expression is unquestionably more serious and doleful.

The sense of severity is compounded by the gloomy quality of the dusky lavender-blue sky behind them, and the dark and jagged rocks spotted with many small pools of clear water as the tide falls. This rocky coastline ends in the top fifth of the painting, so only one small band of skyline is visible above it. In the left third of the painting, there's a gap where the still sea swells up higher in the rocky shores and several small sailboats are coming in to the coast. In the bottom left, there are a few light-green patches of grass and a few small sprigs of a light blue flower, which are the few signs of vegetation on an otherwise muddy orange-brown or dry yellow earth.

Between the name and the posturing of the scene, the artist's intention to draw comparison between Breton motherhood and the Holy family is quite unambiguous. The austere pair, simple and austere, may represent the religious pureness of Breton living, a hard but honest life which makes them more religiously profound than their urban counterparts. The ships at sea

behind them make reference to fishing, one of the key trades of Breton society, and the rockiness to the bald danger and difficulties that these families face. However, the painting is a demonstration of the beauty of this kind of natural scenery. Approaching one extremity of how a coastline can look—challenging and rough, with bitter weather—it celebrates the beauty in the bleakness of these conditions.

This painting is especially interesting because of its authorship: rather than belonging to mainstream Parisian society, Levy-Durhmer was a Jewish pied-noir who was raised in the French colonial Algeria. The socio-cultural and political details of these circumstances are far too complicated to explain in detail here, but at the very least, this means that he would have grown up in a setting where he would have had exposure to Jewish, French-Catholic and Algerian Arab and Amazigh Muslim and Christian cultures. These life experiences may have made him more understanding of diverse cultural perspectives and religious practices than a Paris-born Catholic might have had. The profound respectfulness of this image is also interesting considering the Breton cultural trend towards severe antisemitism, especially at the end of the 19th century. Breton nationalist movements began centering Breton ethnicity and Catholicism as major aspects of Breton-ness, and the vitriol intensified by the Dreyfus Affair, which included a long trail of Dreyfus in the Breton city of Rennes, resulted in antisemitic protest, rioting, and an “atmosphère de pogrom” in some of the cities in Brittany<sup>79</sup>. Painted in 1896, this would have been created exactly in the middle of Dreyfus’s trial in Rennes, perhaps during the most intense moment of anti-semitism Brittany had seen up to this moment, before the same nationalist groups engaged in collaboration with the occupying forces during WWII.

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<sup>79</sup> Claude Toczé, Annie Lambert, *Les Juifs en Bretagne (Ve-XXe siècles)*. (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2006), 95-97.

It's possible that, as someone who was probably not a resident of the area, Levy-Durher was never personally impacted by it, which would have helped him to maintain a sense of sympathy with the Bretons: or, these elements would lend themselves to a satirical interpretation of Bretons and their self-conception of their own "holiness" even as the culture allowed them to engage in prejudiced acts of violence towards minority groups. More than that, though, the beauty of the piece and earnestness in the portrayal of its subjects suggest that it's a simple appreciation of another culture and another cultural dress relatively unimpacted by the events of the time period. Brittany, when compared with the rising anti semitism across western Europe at the time period, may not have seemed particularly malevolent.

Emile Renoufs undated **"La veuve d'Île de Seine"** is another portrait of a mother and child, but in a much more standard style and with purely explicit real-world connections made between Bretons and Religiosity, rather than more conceptual and metaphorical ones. This painting shows a widow dressed in all black with her son, visiting a grey graveyard against the same iconic landscape of ocean brume and rocks that can be seen in Levy-Dhurmer's painting. It's much more dour, and being set in a cemetery, the image is replete with stone crosses, at least five which adorn the graves around here. The religiosity in this circumstance is highlighted within the context of death and mourning. The young son, kneeling at the grave, turns his head to face the viewer. His gaze is more inquiring than confrontational. The mother, for her part, is bent forward, either with her eyes closed or severely downturned to the grave. It's a painting which does acknowledge some aspect of the hardship ingrained in Breton society, and paints a romantic portrait of it. The viewer feels pity for the woman and her young son, but admires also the mist rising off of the sea in the background and the sky streaked with lavender clouds.

The pardon was also a common opportunity for outside painters to depict the religiosity of Bretons, a tourist draw because of the increased costuming and public celebration which happened during these festivals. In “The Pardon in Brittany” Pascal-Adolphe-Jean Dagnan-Bouveret, any sense of celebration is replaced by the sombre aspects of the participants. The composition of the painting is unusual: the viewer looks down one exterior wall of a church into a right-angle corner, and sees the line of worshipers tracing around the building’s exterior. No sky is visible here. The entire background behind them is undecorated brown-gray stone almost identical in color to the bare, dirt ground, which has a very light smattering of grass, and almost all of the space is filled with people, creating a sense of claustrophobia but also giving the viewer the impression that they could be a participant in the scene. Both the women and the men are wearing traditional black and white dress, with the men’s costumes also bearing the occasional brass button or gold detailing at a hemline. Much like in Bougereau’s “Breton Brother and Sister”, they seem to be barefoot.

This is one of the rare instances in which Breton men are shown, due to what Solomon-Godeau describes as a “feminized geography”<sup>80</sup>. The Breton landscape, transformed into a space of fantasy where the disenchanted urban painter arrives to reconnect with primal human nature, becomes also romantically inviting and nurturing in a maternal way. Men are evoked almost only in group settings such as these, and even then the scene is dominated by the female characters. There are at least female bodies in this scene, and only three male.

In the right third of the painting, where worshipers are streaming out of the church doors, two pale beggars sit on the ground dressed in rags, holding plates out to the passing churchgoers,

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<sup>80</sup> Solomon-Godeau, “Going Native,” 318.

pleading for alms. The worshippers in the painting stare straight ahead, tense and focused. The figure of the beggar is a somewhat established character of Breton culture and folklore, to the degree that there are some recorded folktales of Breton worshippers abusing a beggar on a pardon-day and being cursed in punishment<sup>81</sup>. Thusly, the beggar plays into the overall mythos of the scene of the pardon, especially the aspects of the scene which make it seem like a more medieval practice.

This painting was shown at the Salon of 1887 to almost universal acclaim and later won the artist a Medal of Honor at the Exposition Universelle<sup>82</sup>. This painting was praised by Parisian critics for revealing the “true Breton character” and this work was seen as an example of naturalist painting at its finest<sup>83</sup>. In fact, the church in the painting has been identified as the church in Rumengol in the department Finistère, which holds three major pardons a year, one of which Dagnan-Bouveret could have very likely seen during his first trip to Brittany in 1885<sup>84</sup>. However, though the building itself has been identified as authentically Breton in nature, several of the models used in the painting have also been identified as non-Breton models through comparisons with some of his other sketches and paintings, and this painting of Brittany, while likely based off sketches done in the region, was completed in a studio in Paris<sup>85</sup>.

The choices to complete the painting off-site and with non-Breton models has a less severe impact on the interpretation of the painting in this case than it does in the case of Bougeureau. Here, the scene is based off scenes that the artist might have actually borne witness

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<sup>81</sup> Johnson, *Folktales of Brittany*, 25.

<sup>82</sup> Gretchen Wold, “Some Notes on The Pardon in Brittany by Dagnan-Bouveret,” *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 35 (2000), 237.

<sup>83</sup> Wold, “Some Notes,” 237.

<sup>84</sup> Wold, “Some Notes,” 237.

<sup>85</sup> Wold, “Some Notes,” 237.

to, and at least attempts to be an accurate recreation of one of these prominent moments of public devotion and cultural expression. Nevertheless, there is a sense of irony in the seeming academic fascination with the recreation of and accurate representation of what they perceive to be an “authentic” cultural moment. The “character” they are referring to must be the pious solemnity world-weariness of their expressions, their sober and colorless garb in their sober, colorless world. Flush up against the brink of poverty, appearing here in the form of these dishevelled beggars, they march fastidiously and in bare feet in recompense for an entire year’s worth of ungodly thoughts and behavior, and seek the forgiveness and protection of the divine in their brutal lives.

It is interesting to note that this image which is ascribed so much credibility and documentary accuracy is one made by someone who was not himself Breton, and did not approach the painting with an insider’s understanding of the culture. This is someone who would have received the perceptions of Brittany transmitted by travel manuals, held in popular culture, transmitted by word of mouth from the other painters who went there in search of honest and primal living. The combined portrait that these four images paint of Brittany is dour and religious, and not always falsely so.

The solemnity and grit of Dagnan-Bouveret stands in strong contrast to Alfred Guillou’s 1887 “**Arrivée du pardon de Sainte-Anne-de-Fouesnant à Concarneau**”. Guillou was a native of Concarneau, who trained in Paris in the ateliers of Alexander Cabanel and William Bougeureau before returning to Concarneau where he formed an artists’ colony<sup>86</sup>. This group of painters grew quickly and was both a neighbor and good-natured rival of the colony at Pont-Aven. By 1889,

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<sup>86</sup> “Alfred Guillou Biography”, Rehs Galleries, Inc., [https://rehs.com/Alfred\\_Guillou\\_Bio.html?](https://rehs.com/Alfred_Guillou_Bio.html?)

there were at least 38 French and 79 international artists working at Concarneau, including a large number of Americans inspired to visit by the tragic romance novel *Guenn* (1884) by Blanche Willis Howard<sup>87</sup>.

The painting shows a legion of rowboats coming in to shore as part of a procession for a Pardon. At the front of the group is a boat bearing seven women in long white dresses and modest coiffes, holding a small golden statue of a saint and a tall, square banner flag of Mary, tipped with a cross. Two men at the bottom-right of the painting are standing in the water and helping to pull the first boat into shore. At the helm of this boat is one woman, standing in the center and holding her skirts, almost ready to disembark. Her head lands almost exactly in the center of the painting. Behind her is another boat with a similar flag, and then at least dozens more speckled across the horizon. All except for hers have a variety of costume present, often breaking from this all-white uniform to wear other dark, plain, clothing, especially the men.

The influence of Bouguereau's mentorship cannot be easily dismissed, especially when this image provides so much grounds for comparison with Bouguereau's storybook presentation of Breton culture. Certainly, Guillou takes after his teacher in subject matter here, and does not differ too wildly in the mode of presentation. The procession takes a fantastical shape and assumes an almost fairytale atmosphere. It does nothing to divest itself of the conception of a totally apart, mythic, ancient Brittany, but presents the same narrative in a tone that is regal and ethereal. Where Bougeureau's image emphasizes the medieval folkiness of the quaint rural lifestyle, Guillou proposes a more self-possessed and spiritually transcendent version of this story.

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<sup>87</sup> Nina Lübbren, *Rural Artists' Colonies in Europe 1870-1910* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 167.

Although this painting is definitely designed to capture the grandeur and remarkability of the ceremony, it does so with an entirely different bias present than Dagnan-Bouveret's: one that is much more earnest and worshipful. The scene takes place either at sunset or sunrise and the entire thing is slightly backlit, and the water reflects the same warm, dewey colors of the sky. The viewer's eye is drawn across the canvas in a triangular sweeping motion, down from the sails of the ships on the horizon to the boat of white-clad women in the center, to the darkly dressed men putting in the labor to bring these worshippers to shore. These white dresses are a demonstration of cleanliness: whether or not this in the artist's mind when he painted it, the shining light fabric unblemished by dirt contradicts all the cultural stereotypes perpetuated by outsiders about the rude filth that Bretons live in. It references spiritual purity, youth, virginity, and general holiness. It's a much more optimistic scene of Pardon than that which Dagnan-Bouveret provides. Arguably, it's perception of a pardon by someone who more likely believes in its power.

The sheer volume of worshippers present in this scene touting billowing flags, sails, and crosses, seaborne across a colorful and peaceful ocean, is a much more glorious scene than Dagnan-Bouveret's grim presentation. In all its unblemished prestinity, this is certainly a romantic rather than realist portrait. However, he adds to it the authenticity of lived experience. If experiencing authenticity means entering as closely as possible into the dimension of experience of the culture being studied, than this painting comes much closer to authenticity than the other.

Another subject matter that Breton painters approach more freely in a state of celebration is that of their own mythology. Rife with material, this is a subject which must still be less

tempting to the Parisian Salon painters than the rural genre scene. Evariste-Vital Luminais makes a traditional action-packed history painting out of the legend of Ker-Ys in his work “Fuite de Gradlon” (1884). Gradlon and Guénolé are fleeing the city of Ker-Ys, now just a dark sliver on distant ocean. Both of them are riding horses through raucous waves, and Guénolé in his brown monk’s robes and halo is gesturing upwards, pointing to the darkly clouded sky. Gradlon’s pale horse is rearing back, and as Gradlon grabs his daughter by the wrist, she falls backwards into the sea. Guénolé’s robes and Gradlon’s beard and costumey red cape are billowing under a strong wind.

The artist, Luminais, painted primarily history scenes, and largely not Breton-specific ones. He was born and raised in Nantes, the largest city in the southern part of the Breton region with a relatively weaker sense of Breton identity relative to the westernmost part of Brittany, “bas-Bretagne”<sup>88</sup>, so it can be less easily assumed that Luminais would have a strong sense of regional identity compared to a Concarneau native like Guillou. Even without this element of linkage, the story of the city of Ker-Ys is certainly compelling enough to be the subject of such a painting. There are some components of Breton mythology which have been given a lot of exposure on the global stage: specifically, the Arthurian mythology. The aspects of Breton culture which contributed to the creation of this mythology, however, remain much more obscure. This is a painting of a scene that has all the drama of a scene from the Arthurian cycles, though is still broadly unknown.

The painting captures a climactic moment which highlights both the astonishing power and the immense defeat of Brittany. It harkens back to a mythic era of Breton power and cultural

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<sup>88</sup> Lois Kuter, “Labeling People: Who Are the Bretons?” *Anthropological Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (January 1985), 18.

dominance which future storytellers and activists would be able to look back to as a symbol of the innate power of Breton-ness. Far away in the background is a city which must be enormous, and in the foreground there is the well-dressed King accompanied by a Saint, both on strong horses. This strong alliance between the political and religious leaders gives the figures of this time period an additional support of spiritual purity. Guénolé, being worshipped as an actual Saint, must be preserved in memory as more than just a far-fetched folk-hero but as a character whose actions have actual weight and whose presence can be communed with through prayer. This blurs the line of the fantasy of this story; the presence of an actual worshipped saint ties the history more substantially into a real world-view narrative that a Breton citizen might have had. So, this image harkens to the existence of the powerful Breton kingdom and an independent Breton king, an era of higher spiritual and political standing.

However, it also necessarily highlights the destruction of this power and the shift towards a modern Breton impotence relative to the power of the French state. The betrayal of the Princess Ahès is clearly a moralizing lesson comparable to that of Sodom and Gomorrah, which teaches that the fall from greatness was a consequence of the willingness of the Breton people to be seduced by sin. Ahès becomes a figure of Eve to whom the subsequent centuries of suffering can be traced. The survival of Gradlon and Guénolé mean little in this case for the reestablishment of any mythic Breton empire; it's little thanks for their moral superiority over the people they created.

An even more direct opportunity for Parisian and Breton treatment of similar subject matter is offered by "Les Lavandières de la nuit" by Yan' Dargent in 1861 and "La Légende de Kerdeck" by Fernand le Quesne in 1890. These works both make reference to the mysticism of

Breton folklore through drastically different strategies, one of which involves staying much closer to the nature of Breton legend and one of which serves more broadly as an adaptation of Breton influences to the French Salon standard.

Yan' Dargent was a Breton painter, born in Saint-Servais in 1824. His birth-name was Jean-Edouard; little scholarship exists on this artist, so there is no accessible account of why he used this name as his artist's nom-de-plume, but it might be extrapolated that this change was done to distinguish himself from other artists with the relatively common, very French name Jean-Edouard, and to reemphasize the Bretonness of his identity with a very Breton sounding name<sup>89</sup>. In 1850, he moved to Paris to work as a painter and consistently exhibited paintings in the Salon every year with little to no critical reception until 1861, when the famous art critic Théophile Gautier wrote in praise of "Les Lavandières de la nuit". This was more or less the only time the artist was to receive any critical response to his work, and shortly afterward he shifted his focus to illustrating, which is how he was able to provide for himself financially for the rest of his life<sup>90</sup>. The subject of this painting was a piece of popular Breton mythology about a group of mysterious, perhaps undead washerwomen who can sometimes be seen at night washing funeral shrouds and who kill those who refuse to help them.

This story was summarized by Gautier in his review of the work, and he continued in writing, "M. Yan d'Argent [sic] exprime le côté légendaire de cette Bretagne dont Adolphe Leleux, Luminais et Fortin rendent si bien le côté rustique<sup>91</sup>." On one hand, by saying that this painting helps to fill out the legendary understanding of Brittany, a location known through its

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<sup>89</sup> "Yan' Dargent," Le musée Yan' Dargent, Accessed 12/08/2019, <https://yan.dargent.free.fr/yda.htm>

<sup>90</sup> Le musée Yan' Dargent, "Yan' Dargent," .

<sup>91</sup> Théophile Gautier, *Abécédaire du Salon de 1861*. (Paris: Librairie de la Société des Gens des lettres, 1861), 119, [https://books.google.com/books?id=IE0EAAAAYAAJ&source=gbs\\_navlinks\\_s](https://books.google.com/books?id=IE0EAAAAYAAJ&source=gbs_navlinks_s).

more rustic portrayals, Gautier puts some distance between this sort of imagery and the common imagery of a genre scene. However, in drawing this comparison at all, he does clearly say that this is the legendary side of that *same* rural Brittany, thereby linking the two modalities of representation and situating this image within a more extended definition of Breton genre-scene.

In the painting, a wandering peasant unlucky enough to stumble upon this supernatural group is seen being chased into the bottom-right corner. He is painted in warm earth tones, while the wispy, ghastly figures chasing after him are pure white, and the nocturnal landscape is composed of pale gray and teal tones. The path he walks on is lined on either side with gnarled and barren dark tree forms twisted into ghoulish shapes, and on the foggy horizon the moon is bright and sallow, casting shadows across the scene. The outline of the narrative of the image is roughly discernible even to those who have no prior knowledge of its actual legendary background. It amounts to a menacing ghost story, and the sinister faces of the ghosts along with the petrified countenance of the protagonist transmit this essence in its most base and direct form.

Fernand Le Quesne does not paint the same scene, but one of similar inspiration filtered already one time through the Parisian gaze. His painting, “La Légende de Kerdeck,” is based off of the eponymous poem by Jean-Louis Dubut; a poem which retold the myth of Hylas and the nymphs in the context of Brittany<sup>92</sup>. In this telling, the wandering musician Yvon is so distracted by his own music that he allows a group of nude nymphs to seduce and then drown him. Already, this story of virility and seduction transplanted from another region’s mythology is markedly different in tone from more standard Breton mythology, such as the previously

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<sup>92</sup> “La Légende de Kerdeck,” Musée de Beaux-Arts Quimper, Accessed 12/08/2019, <http://www.mbaq.fr/fr/nos-collections/peintures-d-inspiration-bretonne/fernand-le-quesne-la-legende-de-kerdeck-518.html>.

described legend of the washerwomen which focalizes on a group of menacing and ugly old women as the key supernatural element rather than this group of nubile, naked young fae. Secondly, in his interpretation of this poem into painting, Le Quesne switched the instrument Yvon plays from a “biniou,” which closely resembles a bagpipe to a “bombarde,” which is a type of flute<sup>93</sup>. This could have been either a conscious choice on his part to depict an instrument he was more familiar with and which he assumed would be more easily recognizable to the audience, or just a simple confusion caused by his lack of knowledge of Breton instruments.

The character of Yvon is hardly a figure of note in this painting. Lit from behind and wearing a wide-brimmed Breton hat, his face and his hands on the instrument are almost entirely obscured by shadow. He is standing in the middle distance, ankle-deep in the ocean waves as one of the nymphs places a hand on his shoulder and escorts him deeper into the water. The entire foreground of this painting is composed of the female nudes splashing around in the water, arranged in a variety of poses. The effect achieved is entirely reminiscent of Cabanel’s 1963 “Birth of Venus.” Throughout the entire painting, there are no less than 16 of these figures in total. Le Quesne, a student of Gervex and Albert Maignan, combined his teachers’ respective propensities for painting the nude and the historical scene into this highly eroticized romp<sup>94</sup>.

The veil of mysticism and pretense of any kind of historical context here is supplied almost entirely by Yvon’s traditional Breton hat, which, on its own, implies that this indulgent scene must have some sort of background other than the artist’s own imagination, thus legitimizing it as more than just erotica. This scenario is altogether a pretext, and one which lacks what would be qualified as “authentic” Breton roots. The specifically Breton aspect may

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<sup>93</sup> Musée de Beaux-Arts de Quimper, “La Légende de Kerdek.”

<sup>94</sup> “Fernand Le Quesne,” BNF, Accessed 12/08/2019, <http://catalogue.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb149594070>.

have been chosen to help distinguish the painting from the legions of identical works based loosely in Greek mythology, or to give the painting a more eerie and mysterious edge that the very academic mythologies may have lacked. It also situates this scene much geographically closer to the viewer but exotic and mysterious enough that this sort of happening begins to more closely approach the orientalist harem painting than a traditional academic greco-roman painting. The cultural distance and imagined reality of Brittany as a country frozen in time lends this kind of scene just slightly more plausibility than something similar painted in a Parisian fountain or in the Seine. In the fantastical world of Brittany, the boundaries of reality and unreality are more blurred than they are in the “real” world.

Due in part to the more realist quality of Le Quesne’s brush, Dargent’s painting takes on a much more folkloric quality. “Les Lavandières” is a vessel of actual emotion which attempts to represent the tenor of the source material through the use of visuals. Both of these stories are of a wandering man about to be killed by supernatural spirits, but Dargent’s is the only one which holds a sense of tension and fear. The landscape is menacing: each aspect of the image is designed to feel as threatening as possible. The moonlight and the trees shaped to resemble violent human figures recalls the actual sensation living to the retellings of a ghost-story and the thrilling paranoia that contorts the landscape during and after the experience. “La Légende de Kerdeck” is less compelling emotionally, more purely titillating and with the Breton presence as a cultural prop.

Of course, the selected Breton paintings described in this section cannot be taken to represent all existing Breton paintings. The methodologies and products of these few artists cannot and should not be taken as the only ways a Paris-based Salon artist can view and

represent the Breton culture, or the only ways Bretons interacted visually with their own cultural heritage. Instead, these images should be taken to represent a selection of typical modalities of representation, and to represent the ways in which Breton culture has been commodified and depicted by outsiders.

## **Conclusion**

The reality of Brittany and the Breton experience is three dimensional: it has a touch, a taste, a smell, a sound, and any attempt to produce this in a two dimensional format will automatically flatten it by virtue of what it excludes. All of these art pieces, by Bretons and non-Bretons alike, try to recreate certain moments of the Breton experience that capture what they see to be the essence of the culture. For some, this entire essence is contained simply by the Breton costume and the sentiments it evokes on sight. It represents all the strangeness, exoticism, quaint rurality and timelessness that outsiders saw in Brittany. For others, the Breton religious ritual of the Pardon encapsulated it. From one perspective, the Pardon is a hopeless circumambulation in a destitute and futile prayer for a long-awaited improvement in conditions: from another, a moment of divine spiritual connection and closeness between man and God. In addition to that, various portrayals of Breton folklore evoke the spooky and superstitious legendary side of the culture.

As flawed as the outside artist's depiction of Brittany can often be, both on a factual level and in the somewhat judgemental or exotifying tenor with which the Breton lifestyle is sometimes portrayed, both their paintings and the paintings of Breton artists interact within the same conceptual space of the mythologized Brittany. The non-Breton artists mythologized the

people. The portrayal of Bretons in these artworks and the general conception of them could almost be compared to the modern American mainstream conception of the Amish. A joy in the simplicity of rural living was projected onto them, the peace of mind that comes with an ignorance of the evils of the world, or a sense of bleakness and stark mourning. The Breton artists, meanwhile, mythologized the land, their cultural practices and the stories and religious rituals which actually had been built up and developed for centuries. The travel-guide writers like Baedeker may have gotten it wrong when they said that the Breton costume was ancient, but the intangibles, the beliefs, the language, and the worship practices, are actually the things rooted in the distant past.

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