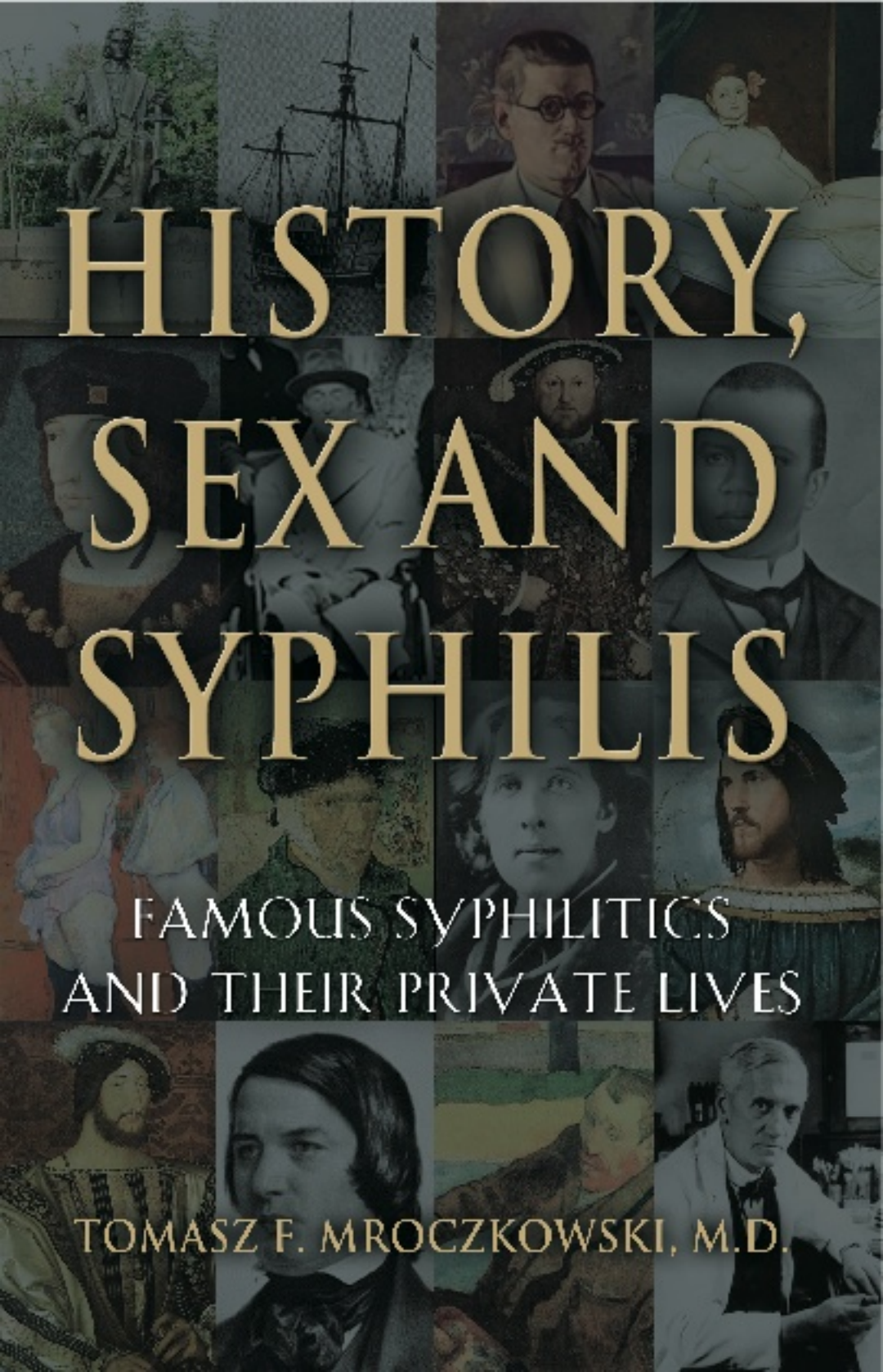
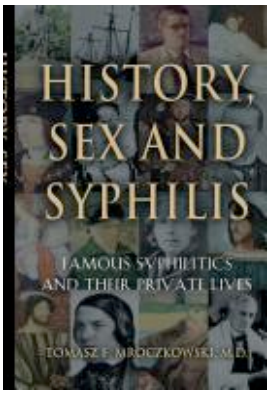

HISTORY, SEX AND SYPHILIS
FAMOUS SYPHILITICS AND THEIR PRIVATE LIVES
TOMASZ F. MROCZKOWSKI, M.D.



"History, Sex and Syphilis: Famous Syphilitics and their Private Lives," by Tomasz F. Mroczkowski, MD, is a fascinating and iconoclastic read. Written by a well-qualified physician and specialist, the author incorporates his extensive knowledge of the history of the disease with the private lives of the great writers, musicians, and artists who shaped Western Civilization, and who suffered from a disease that still too little is known about.

History, Sex And Syphilis: Famous Syphilitics and Their Private Lives

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Famous Syphilitics and their private lives

Tomasz F. Mroczkowski

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CHAPTER 5c

PAINTERS

EDOUARD MANET (1832-1883)

Edouard Manet, the mid-nineteenth century French painter, is well known to the public for his many splendid works, among which, attaining first place is the painting titled *Le dejeuner sur l'herbe* or Luncheon on the grass, painted in 1863 (Fig.5c.1). This painting is currently on display in the d'Orsey Museum in Paris, where it is one of the main attractions, and in front of which a large crowd of visitors always gathers. *Luncheon on the Grass* was presented to the annual painting exhibition (Parisian Salon) in 1864, but was rejected by the qualifications committee. Next exhibited at the so-called Salon of Independents, it was met with a great deal of interest by visitors, and, equally, with sharp criticism. One of the critics was Emperor Napoleon III, who is said to have remarked that this painting was an insult to morality, while the Empress ostentatiously pretended not to see it. (1) At a time when women wore dresses down to the ground, while the sight of a woman's foot adorned to the ankles produced excitement in men, showing a nude woman at a picnic with fully dressed men could be provocative, which was doubtless the painter's intent.

In the d'Orsey Museum, one can see many of Manet's canvases, besides *Luncheon on the grass,* many other of his paintings hang there: *Olympia, The Balcony, and The Piper*, to name the best known (Fig.5c.2). There is also among them a smaller canvas representing an older couple, titled *Portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Auguste Manet* (Fig.5c.3). In the center of the picture appears an older gentleman seated at table resting his right hand on a cane. At his side, and a bit

behind him, is a woman holding a basket. This painting, in front of which fewer people usually stop than in front of other canvases of Manet, attracted my attention due to the face of the man, who appeared familiar to me. I couldn't understand from where I could have known this man, as the picture was painted in 1860! Nevertheless, it seemed certain to me that I had seen that face somewhere, yet simply didn't remember where. The riddle, to which I did not give very much time, was solved not very long ago, while, preparing this manuscript for a book about the history of syphilis, I began to study the biographies of famous painters who suffered from lues. Only then did I learn that the older gentleman in the painting – the father of Manet – also was ill with syphilis, while at the time of his posing for the painting, he already was in the terminal stage of the disease; more specifically, he was in the advanced stage of general paresis, with certain elements of *tabes dorsalis.* I remembered then that it was not the person who appeared so familiar to me, but the expression on his face, most particularly his eyes. His eyes, though open, seem to see nothing and this creates the impression that this man, while physically present, lives in another world; that his thoughts are wandering somewhere very far away from the place where he actually exists. I have seen such people; they were my patients. Yielding to cure by penicillin, and cured *de facto* of syphilis, they were hospitalized due to the necessity of psychiatric care and neurologic rehabilitation to which they were subjected as the result of symptoms of general paresis and *tabes dorsalis.* Some were fit enough to return to an almost normal life, but many of them vegetated in a variety of protective institutions to the ends of their lives. Edouard's father, Auguste Manet, remained at home while ill, being taken care of by his wife and closest family. The once-honored citizen, judge, and recipient of the Legion of

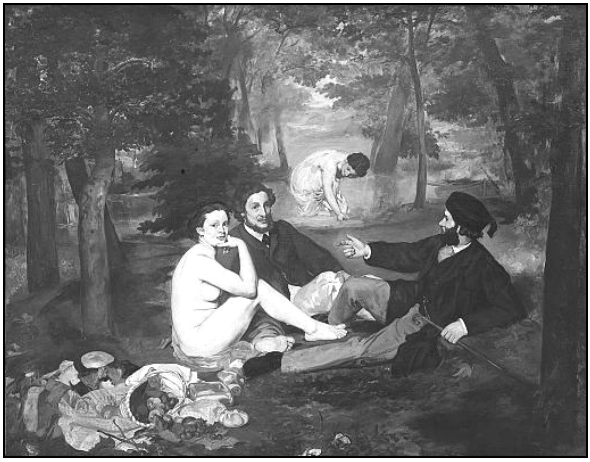


Figure 5c.1 The Luncheon on the Grass by E. Manet (1863). Musée d'Orsay

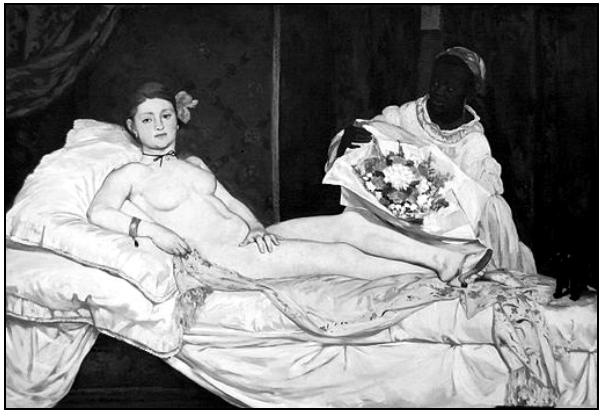


Figure 5c.2 Olympia by E. Manet (1863). Musée d'Orsay

Figure 5c.3 Portrait of M. and Mme. Auguste Manet by E. Manet 1860. Musée d'Orsay

Honor was an invalid from about 1857 on, partly paralyzed, deprived of the ability to speak, and moving with difficulty with the help of a cane. (2) Of course, the fact of his illness was a closely held secret, while officially it was said that his crippling disability was the result of a stroke.

Edouard Manet was the firstborn son of judge Auguste Manet, and, what was a natural thing in such families, it was expected that he would not fail to reach higher honors in the French justice administration (Fig.5c 4). In school, Edouard did not stand out in anything in particular. He learned rather slowly, repeating the fifth year. More than the customary subjects, adjunctive lessons in drawing offered by the school interested him a great deal. It was in these drawing courses that he met a colleague, who remained his friend for life. This colleague was Antonin Proust, the later minister of Fine Arts, and author of memoirs about Manet, to whom we are indebted for many details about the painter's life. It is felt that

the person who contributed to Manet's deepening interest in painting during his early years was his Uncle Edmond (his Mother's brother), who himself drew beautifully, and often took Edouard and his friend to the Louvre or to other Parisian museums, where he would show the young boys the works of outstanding painters. It must be added that it was Uncle Edmond who financed the drawing courses offered by the school – which Manet's father opposed, and for which he did not want to pay.

Pressured by his father to become an attorney, Edouard declined emphatically, and threatened that in the event of further insistence, he would move out of the house. He determined to enter the Naval Academy, to which his father, though unwillingly, agreed. In 1848, Edouard embarked on a schooling voyage to Rio de Janeiro, but after his return, did not pass the entrance examinations, possibly deliberately, as a naval career also did not suit him. In the course of the race trip, more than in the study of sailing, he was interested in the landscapes provided by the localities at which the vessel made port. He wondered from afar at the peaks of the mountains of Tenerife, one of the Canary Islands, and at the beaches of Porto Santo, a tiny island belonging to the archipelago of Madeira, where Columbus ones lived. The sailing ship did not reach Madeira itself, due to bad weather, and Manet had to admire this charming island from a great distance. During the stop in Rio, Manet was amazed at the manner in which the blacks were treated. In a letter to his mother, he wrote: "The Negroes have only a pair of trousers for clothing, sometimes a linen jacket, but as slaves they are not allowed to wear shoes. The Negressess are naked to the waist, some wear a scarf that falls over the chest. They take great pains in their appearance. (3) The future portraitist immediately perceived the beauty of those women, writing about the"magnificent black eyes of Brazilian women," although he must have met some faults on their part, as he also wrote, "Brazilian women are generally attractive but do

not deserve the reputation for flirtatiousness attributed to them in France; no one is more prudish or stupid than a Brazilian women." (4) Regardless of any doubts one may have based on the previous sentence, one can clearly see that women and the natural attractions of the countries he visited interested Manet more than the mysteries of the art of sailing. During the entire period of travel, Manet did not stop sketching, and many things that he saw along the way he committed onto paper. After returning to France, it was already clear that nothing besides painting interested him and Father August agreed to finance appropriate studies for his son. Edouard signed up at the painting school conducted by Thomas Couture, where he spent the next six years.

Figure 5c.4 Portrait of Edouard Manet (1874) by Felix Nadar

Even before beginning studies at Couture's school, there appeared at the house of the Manets a young Dutch woman, who had not been in France long. Her name was Suzanne Leenhoff, and she was hired by Manet's mother as a music teacher; she was to teach Edouard and his younger brother

how to play the piano. Suzanne was nineteen years of age and, it was said, had come to Paris in order to improve her musical talents, which her father, the organist at the Groote Kerk church in Holland couldn't provide. Suzanne was warmly welcomed in the Manet home, equally by the parents as by the young students, particularly Edouard. She was nineteen and he, seventeen; she was lonely, and he was fresh from a long transoceanic voyage during which he had admired the beauty of South American women. Suzanne did not resemble the beautiful Brazilians in any way, having a type of beauty more to Rubens' taste. She was placid, plump, and looked older than her birth certificate would indicate. She was, nevertheless, not a bad pianist, preferring a romantic repertoire, with a particular affinity for the works of Robert Schumann. Suzanne rented an apartment not far from the painting school that Edouard frequented. One must admit that young Manet treated his studies very seriously, as, besides those at the Couture school, in the evenings he would attend the Swiss Academy, where, for a modest fee, students were allowed to paint live models. Because live models, and particularly female models, also posed naked at the Swiss Academy, and similarly to the Couture school the former was situated close to Suzanne's apartment, one might assume that Edouard did not devote every evening to art, unless one can so describe what he practiced with Suzanne.

At the end of January 1862, Suzanne gave birth to a child of male sex, who was named Leon-Edouard. On the birth certificate of Leon, there is a notation that the child's mother was Suzanne Leenhoff, while the father was someone with the surname Koella; no first name was listed. After giving birth to the child, Suzanne stopped teaching music at the Manets', since an esteemed family could not allow itself to provide a job to someone of "doubtful morals" in its home. Another cause was gossip that the father of the child could be Manet, but it was not known which one, as the paternity was equally suspected to be Edourd's as his father's. Further

behavior of the participants in this farce, and the later fate of Leon, indicate that Edouard was the more likely father of the boy, something to which, however, he never admitted officially. Suzanne's son was christened at age four, while his godmother was her grandmother, who had come to Paris in order to take care of her during the pregnancy, then, later, of Suzanne's child. The godfather [sic!] was Edouard Manet, most likely the biologic father of Leon. At christening, the child was given the name Leon-Edouard, which points even more at the principal of this chapter as the father of the child.

The camouflaging of the probable paternity of Manet for many years, even after his subsequent marriage to Suzanne, and while they all lived together, appears a bit strange. Manet continued to present himself as the godfather of Leon, while Suzanne began to relate that she was the older sister of the boy and his godmother. Helping to maintain this version was the fact that the true godmother of Leon, Suzanne's grandmother, had exactly the same name as she – namely Suzanne Leenhoff – which had corroboration in the birth documents. The whole story shows how prudish was the environment from which the painter came, and how hard they strove to maintain the pretense of propriety of the well-to-do.

In September 1862, after a long and difficult illness, Auguste Manet died. For the preceding five years, Edouard and his family had the opportunity to observe the gradual deterioration of the state of health of his father, and the progressive physical and mental deterioration. Edouard soon had the opportunity to observe the same process a second time, when his friend, about whom I wrote earlier, the writer and poet, Charles Beaudelaire, was dying as a result of late syphilis of the nervous system.

The death of Manet's father produced a new situation. After receiving his share of the inheritance, Edouard, became financially independent, and no longer felt obligated to observe the limits placed on him by Auguste. First of all, he

married Suzanne, with whom he had been living anyway since the death of her grandmother, and now could devote more time to painting and social life. It was during this period that paintings, which would make Manet famous were appearing from his paintbrush, specifically *Luncheon on the Grass, Music in the Tulieries*, and *Olympia*. In the last two Victorine Meurent appeared as a model, with whom the painter collaborated for thirteen years. In both paintings, Mademoiselle Meurent appeared without clothes: in *Luncheon on the Grass*, in the company of two elegantly-dressed men, while in *Olympia*, half-lying on a settee, a completely unclothed beauty reminiscent of the figures in Goya's painting, *Naked Maya* or Titian's *Venus from Urbino*. When Manet met her, Victorine was eighteen years old, with a certain degree of experience as a model. She had posed earlier for painters belonging to Manet's circle, including Thomas Couture and Alfred Stevens, the latter of whom became her lover. She came from a family in the working class, where young women had little chance for a happy and ample life. Women of her sphere could marry men of an equal status, bear them children, and attempt to make ends meet with the goal of maintaining a family from the low earnings of their husbands. Capitalism was then in its plundering form, and workers' wages often were insufficient for supporting a family. Another solution was to become a model or mistress of a rich man, which was tied to certain obligations and limitations, but provided a greater chance of a more interesting and varied life. Some women worked in the just-born industries of the time, mostly in textiles. Young, often 15-year-old girls were hired for four-year contracts in Lyons' silk factories, where they worked seventeen-hour shifts under very unhealthy conditions. (5) Prostitution, often the only accessible occupation for many women, flourished.

Victorine was one of the first of Manet's steady models, and posed for very many of his paintings. Whether something else besides a model-painter relationship linked

them, I leave to the conjecture of the readers. The long partnership may suggest a certain intimacy in their relationship, but one must admit that Mademoiselle Meurent was not deprived of talents, which Manet perceived and of which he managed to take advantage. Posing for a variety of paintings, she knew how to play a certain role as a painted figure that conferred a greater authenticity to Manet's paintings. One such example is Olympia that when exhibited in the Parisian Salon in 1863, provoked scandal and indignation on the part of the public. According to the account of Antonin Proust, only the vigilance of the Salon's organizers shielded the painting from destruction by the more prudish viewers. *Olympia* depicts a naked woman lying on a settee, facing the viewer, and in the company of a black servant. The naked woman is without a doubt a prostitute or, to say it better, a courtesan (the differences I will describe presently), testifying to which are certain accessories visible in the painting. Standing behind her, the black servant is holding a bouquet, doubtless sent by some admirer who desires to avail himself of her services. Victorine played this role excellently, looking provocatively, if not shamelessly, directly into the eyes of the viewer. Just as did to the earlier *Luncheon on the Grass*, so also, *Olympia* occasioned the press' discussion about obligations and the role of a woman in society, and, first of all, on the topic of prostitution. And there was much to write about!

In the 1830s, there were about 30,000 prostitutes in Paris, while in 1870, there were already three times as many. The letters of newly arrived Polish composer Frederick Chopin can testify as to how huge a problem prostitution and venereal diseases were in Paris. Chopin arrived in Paris in September of 1837, and described the impressions that the capital of France made on a visitor: “The city seemed huge and very modern. Splendid buildings, elegant new streets and boulevards appearing here and there, gas lighting, made Vienna, from where he had come, alongside Paris, a

provincial townlet. The city struck him with its variety and bustle." (6) In this letter to a friend, young Chopin wrote, "Here, there is the greatest splendour, the greatest villainy, the greatest virtue, the greatest transgression, at every step posters about venereal disease – shrieks, clamour, rattle, more mud than one can imagine – one perishes in this paradise and it is convenient in that respect, that no-one asks how one lives here." (Letter to Kumelski) (6).

What struck the young composer most, aside from the bright lighting of the streets, was the number of prostitutes - "ladies of mercy" - accosting him at every step; *cantatrices,* tremendously willing to perform "duets," as he roguishly described it. He also said, "There was also a certain neighbor who proposed to him that they should warm themselves by a fire together on wintry days." (6) A major problem of the young man at this time was the "trouble" that he had contracted on the way to Paris, which would not allow him, as he wrote, to taste the forbidden fruit. (6) The word "trouble" means no less and no more than the venereal disease with which the young composer became infected during his trip from Vienna to Paris. This was most probably gonorrhea, with which young Chopin had become infected while on his travels through Bavaria. The infection took place at the cusp of July and August, and arriving in Paris in September, poor Chopin was either undergoing treatment, or was experiencing painful effects, which resulted in his inability to answer affirmatively to the unambiguous proposals made to him by the young Parisian women.

In Paris, each year, close to 3,800 new prostitutes were registered, and were employed in licensed categories divided according to the "quality" of the women providing services there, as well as the level of payments collected. Women working on their own without a license were subject to raids and arrest, and were placed into special prisons for women pursuing prostitution. In one of his stories, Emile Zola, who was a friend of Manet's, describes the scene of such a raid,

in which police stop women suspected of the practice of prostitution, and demand to see their palms. Those, who had signs of the pricks of a tailor's needle (meaning that they worked at sewing or repair of clothing) were allowed to go free, but without such marks, they were considered unemployed and prostitutes. (7)

In the sixties of the nineteenth century, in the St. Lazare prison in Paris, there were 4,800 women arrested for pursuing prostitution. The inmates were separated into groups according to their ages and state of health. Those who had not completed their 13th year were kept separately from the older ones. Women who were diagnosed with venereal diseases were also kept separately. (8) Supposedly, during the (French) Second Empire, namely between 1852 and 1870, physicians employed by the police to examine prostitutes boasted that they were able to examine a patient (and determine her state of health) in 30 seconds. (9) Although this sounds improbable, such examinations certainly took place, to which attests the painting by Toulouse Lautrec (himself a syphilitic) showing women – prostitutes – standing in a row with dresses thrown up, waiting for an examination, doubtless only a look, by a physician. Just how low a value such examinations had is evidenced by the numbers of those venereally infected, not only prostitutes, but, generally, in the entire population. It is estimated that near the end of the nineteenth century, 20% of Parisians suffered from syphilis alone. (10) The low rate of diagnosis of these diseases, together with ineffective treatment, caused them to be daily companions of people; they were present in every environment, and almost every family. Since, for prostitutes, venereal disease was an occupational disease, using their services was equivalent to playing with fire, and Gustave Flaubert, also himself ill with syphilis, is supposed to have said that contemporary women were “hell under a skirt.” (11)

But, let us return to Manet and his *Olympia*. First, I owe my readers an explanation of the difference between a prostitute and a courtesan. According to a certain writer from the eighteenth[h] century, “A courtesan was less than a mistress, and more than a prostitute. Less than a mistress because she sold her love for material gain, but more than a prostitute, as it was she who picked out her lovers.” (12) The name Olympia was reserved for courtesans – somehow the upper class of women cultivating sex for money. "This upper class of the profession bore high-flown names taken from epic poems or the ancient world: Armide, Arthemise, Asparie, Ismene, Lucrece, Octavie, Olympe. As *noms de querre*, they went back to the courtesans of Rome and Venice." (13) In Manet's case, one can surmise that he chose the name Olympia, taking as an example the painting by Velasquez from 1649, who, while in Rome to paint the portrait of Pope Innocent X, also painted that of Olympia Maldachini Pamphilia, his widowed sister-in-law, who was reputedly also the pope's mistress. This story, which very few remember today, was generally known in Manet's time. (14) Another example of a courtesan by the name of Olympia and living in Paris in the 30s of the nineteenth century was Olympia Pelissier, a mistress of the Italian composer, Rossini, and whom he married after the death of his wife. (15)

The next woman associated with Manet, to whom the painter devoted much time and attention and who found herself in many of his paintings, was Berthe Morisot, the daughter of a family well-acquainted with Manet's own (Fig.5c.5). Monsieur & Madame Morisot belonged to the same social circle, and members of the family were often at each other’s homes. Edouard began to visit the Morisots as early as in 1868, and did not hide his interest in one of their daughters. Berthe Morisot was not only an intelligent and beautiful woman, but was also interested in art. She, herself, painted beautifully, and was an admirer of Manet's paintings. Valued in artistic circles, she maintained contact with many

famous painters of that time. Among her friends were Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Paul Cezanne, Camille Pissaro, Claude Monet, and many others. When Berthe met Manet, she did not yet feel secure as a paintress and often took advantage of his advice. Opportunities for this were very numerous, as, in addition to painting, Berthe often posed for Manet for his paintings, and what was easy to notice, was often their central figure. Berthe was enchanted with Manet's works – and with Manet as a man. Attesting to this is her letter written to her sister, as well as the paintings in which she is the central figure, where the expression on her face and her look suggests her bewitchment by the painter. As Beth Archer Bromebert writes:

> The years 1864-1872 were difficult ones for Berthe Morisot. The letters exchanged between mother and daughters, examined in the light of Manet's portraits of her, suggest that the relationship between Berthe and Manet went beyond that of model, younger colleague, or social acquaintance. (16)

As cited by Berthe Morisot's biographer, Anne Higonnet, these portraits were described as "elegant, sensual, beautiful, engaging, passionate and delicate." (17)

When Edouard met Berthe, he was already a married man, and took great care to maintain the appearances of fidelity toward his wife. The majority of his biographers, however, hold the opinion that something more than friendship and a mutual interest in art joined Berthe and Edouard. They stress the lack of attractiveness, equally physical as intellectual, of his wife, considering as an obvious thing in this situation, that the above-average artist could have had a romance with a beautiful and talented woman. As evidence that Berthe was bewitched by Manet is offered the fact that, not being able to join Edouard, she married his younger brother, who was very similar to the painter. In this way, she became a member of his closest family, reconciling

herself to the fact that, not being able to have the original, she would be happy with his copy. Many art historians, among them Beatrice Farwell, wonder "what emotional undertones reverberated beneath the ostensibly proper relationship between this married man and the disturbingly attractive, still-young and unmarried colleague, who sat for him so often and who ended up married to his brother." (18) For those readers who would want to evaluate for themselves the emotional relationship between Manet and his model, Berthe, I recommend looking at several of Manet's paintings with Berthe as principal subject, and particularly, *Repose* from 1870; *Balcony*, Berthe Morisot with black hat, *Violets*, (1872) and *Berthe Morisot Reclining* (1873).

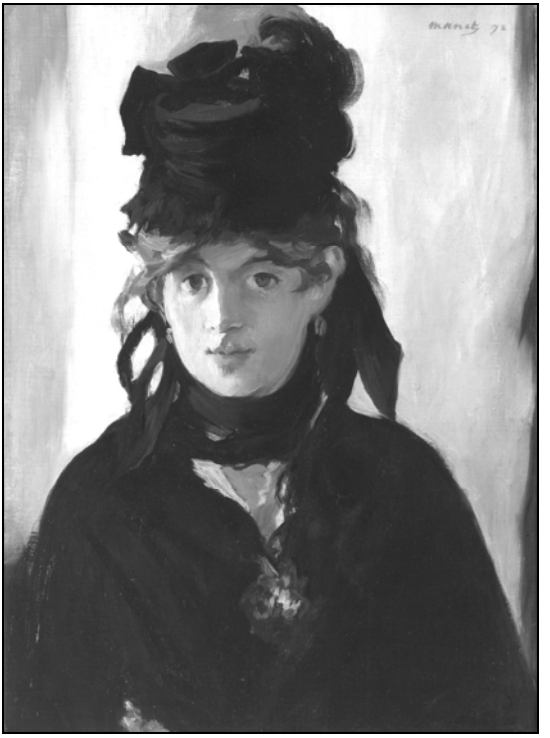


Figure 5c.5 Berthe Morisot by E. Manet (1872) Musée d'Orsay

The Berthe Morisot period in the life and creativity of Edouard Manet lasted over eight years, and it would appear that she was the only one of but a few women with whom the painter was authentically emotionally engaged. His later relationships with women – and there were many, particularly the flirt with Isabelle Lemmonier, or the long-term acquaintance with Mary Laurent – did not have the same character and meaning as the relationship with Berhe Morisot.

During the summer of 1870, the Prusso-French War broke out, and in mid-September, the Prussian armies began

to encircle Paris. Edouard, together with his brothers, enlisted in the National Guard, while their family, that is their mother and Edouard's wife and son, left the city and took up residence in Oloron-Sainte-Marie in the Pyrenees. During the battles and the encirclement of Paris, Manet did not distinguish himself in any particular way. Together with his compatriots, he suffered the inconveniences associated with a lack of provisions as well as a dramatic deterioration of sanitary conditions in the city. During this time there appear for the first time changes in the artist's state of health. In a letter from March 1871, his brother Gustave asked, "Has Edouard finally recovered from the ailments he contracted during the siege, and does he understand at last how much he would have saved himself had he bought the essentials from time to time? He would not have fallen sick." Edouard, in turn, in letters to his wife, did mention his health problems, but, minimized their significance, not wanting to unnecessarily worry his family, or – and this is only my speculation – not wanting to inform his dear ones exactly as to the nature of his illness, in order not to arouse suspicions. Edouard wrote, very generally, that he had boils caused by long rides on horseback (one can speculate as their location), that he had a cold, and unspecified problems with his feet. (19) Because some biographers refer to the 1870s as the likely time at which Manet could have become infected with syphilis, one can wonder whether some of this niggardly and unprofessional description of his symptoms might not have been signs of early syphilis. Inasmuch as the boils, described as though caused by a long ride on horseback, were localized in the area of the groin or buttocks, one can speculate whether or not they were a primary chancre, the sign that commonly appears three weeks after infection, and which, if re-infected, can be very painful and bring to mind a common boil. Another manifestation of syphilis appearing as “boils” could have been flat *condyloma lata*, or pustular lumps, which are manifestations of secondary lues, and

appear several months after infection. Very suspicious are Manet's unspecified troubles with his feet that he mentioned; if one can assume these to be of luetic origin, could have simply been the typical maculo-papular rash that appears on the palms and feet in the second stage of syphilis. I want to stress that these are purely my conjectures, though the conjectures of a venereologist aware that such imprecisely described signs in the letters could have been caused by other diseases and not necessarily syphilis.

Immediately after the war, Manet's health worsened to such an extent that, for a certain time, he stopped painting, and this happened to him very rarely! "Manet was wandering aimlessly from the Cafe Guerbois to the Mulhause to the Tortoni," which, as Tabarrant wrote was due to a nervous depression caused by his wartime experiences. (20) Based on a supposition that Manet could have been infected with syphilis during the wartime period, his “nervous depression” could have been a reaction to infection with the disease from which his father had died, and/or subsequent mercury treatment that did not belong to the most pleasant of these. Under the suspicion that Manet had become infected with syphilis during the war, a logical suggestion would be that he could have been treated in May/June 1871. Caring for Manet's health at this time was his friend and physician, Dr. Siredey, who did treat him (although we don't know with what), obtaining some improvement. Manet's psychiatric state of health nonetheless improved only very slowly, as the artist returned to painting only in the spring of 1872. Unfortunately, all the information concerning the painter's health from this period is very sparse, without detailed reports of illnesses or the types of medications taken, not to mention diagnoses or an identification of the disease by name. All of this may be without significance; nevertheless, avoiding definition of the causes of his illnesses could suggest that Manet suffered from, and was treated for a

disease, of which, paraphrasing Oscar Wilde, one “didn't speak its name.”

When Manet returned to health and began to paint once again in his studio, a young woman appeared. She arrived in the company of Alphonse Hirsch, a painter and neighbor of Manet. Manet, who was in an adjacent room, heard the voice of the woman, who expressed delight about the painting on which he had just been working, as well as about other paintings hanging in the studio. Intrigued by the enthusiastic appraisal of his works by an unknown woman, he asked, “Who are you Madame, and why are you appraising well that which many consider as very bad?” (21) According to the report of Proust, Manet frankly wept with happiness seeing in a woman, yet unknown to him, a person of uncommon intelligence, who was able to perceive in his painting something that others did not see. That woman was Mery Laurent, who later found herself in many of Manet's paintings, and who became his friend and, probably his mistress, for many years

Mery Laurent actual name was Anne-Rose, Suzanne Louviot, and she came from Nancy. She appeared in Paris when she was still very young, and beginning her career as a cabaret dancer to whom a role in an operetta was proposed. Her renown and the interest of, particularly, the male portion of the public, brought her the role of Venus in the opera of Jacques Offenabach, *La Belle Helene* (Beautiful Helen). Mery, in the role of Venus, appeared in a transparent costume, which, despite being a tight body suit allowed the unusually sexual build of her body to be seen. There, in fact, she met Thomas Evans, an American dentist living in Paris. Dr. Evans was the personal dentist of the Emperor Napoleon III, and was a popular and influential person who moved in the highest society circles. It was he who chose the very English-sounding artistic pseudonym of Mery for Anne-Rose Louviot, bought the then 17-year-old a beautiful flat, financed all her whims, and appeared publicly with her at the most

important celebrations that took place in Paris. Mery Laurent was a most charming young lady, who turned the heads of not only the doctor, but of many other famous men of that time. To the circle of her admirers and friends belonged, among others, Guy de Maupassant, the poet Paul Verlaine, writer Emile Zola, and the composer and pianist, Emmanuel Chabrier. The last deserves a wider introduction, as he was not only a friend of Mery Laurent, but also a friend and neighbor of Manet's, an admirer of painting, and with whom he shared a certain misfortune, about which, more in a moment.

Emmanuel Chabrier, similarly to Manet, came from a juridical family (Fig.5c.6). In contrast to latter, young Chabrier continued in his father's footsteps, and finished the study of law in Paris, after which he took up work in one of the governmental ministries. He took his administrative work seriously, but quickly came to the conclusion that a legal career was not the field to which he wanted to dedicate himself, and that his passion and calling were music and composition. To the best-known and presently most often played compositions of Chabrier belong the musical poem “Espagna,” the unusually charming “Habanera” and “Marche Joyeuse,” as well as several piano compositions. Chabrier composed a number of operas, among which were *Gwendoline*, *L'Etoile* and *Le Roi Malgre Lui* (The King Despite Himself). The last, in my opinion, deserves a special comment for harmonic originality and unusual rhythms. Many fragments from this opera are widely known to the public, mainly from the orchestral version, which in my opinion is not enough; only a full execution, together with chorus, permits one to appreciate the unusual beauty and originality of these works. Here, I have in mind *La Fete Polonaise* and *Dance Slave*, as well as several other fragments of the opera, which, heard together with the chorus, are greatly benefited.

Emmanuel Chabrier had tremendous bad luck in his life; the fact that the creations of this talented artist are not

sufficiently appreciated, and are rarely performed is just one bit of evidence. But, there are others. His opera, *Gwendoline*, rejected by the established Opera in Paris, was presented in Bruxelles. Unfortunately, after two performances, it was removed from the billing as a result of the bankruptcy of the producer. Also, *Le Roi Malgre Lui* was presented in Paris but saw only three performances, as the opera building was destroyed by fire. When Chabrier was already somewhat older, and sick, he lost the bulk of his money, due to the failure and insolvency of the bank where he kept it. Yet, his greatest bad luck touched upon his health. Not only did the composer become infected with lues, but he found himself among the one third of those with syphilis in whom the disease did not pause in its development, and led quickly to his death. Chabrier developed general paresis to such an extent that, in 1893, after the Parisian premiere of *Gwendoline*, when the audience was ready to give the composer a standing ovation, he was not in a state to understand that the bravos that he heard were intended for him. Bad luck did not leave Chabrier even after his death, as, although the composer's wish to be buried next to the grave of Manet, for some unknown reason, he was buried in a different cemetery, in Montparnasse.

Figure 5c.6 Emmanuel Chabrier, painting by Edouard Manet. (Ordrupgaard Museum, Denmark)

Mery Laurent, the companion of Chabrier and Manet mentioned earlier, had much better luck in life—artistically, financially and socially. She was Manet's model as well as the muse of other artists namely, of Emile Zola, Marcel Proust, and the poet, Steven Mallarme. Mery was the model for the first part of Zola's novel, *Nana*, a fragment of which I cited earlier in writing about the raid on prostitutes in Paris. (7) She was one of the heroines (Odette Swann) in Marcel Proust's novel, *In Search of Lost Time*. She also was the muse and multi-year mistress of Manet's friend, the poet Steven Mallarme, with whom she became associated after the painter's death.

Mery Laurent was an emancipated woman, and it didn't bother her that, in public opinion, she passed for something between an actress and a courtesan, with emphasis on the second designation. The same cannot be said about Manet, who was a married man, universally known, concerned about his reputation, and desiring at all cost to pass for a Parisian bourgeois full of virtue. Manet took great care that details concerning his private life did not reach public opinion, and that any indiscretions of this type were unusually rare.

One of these rare indiscretions came from an account by George Moore, the Irish painter living in Paris. Moore describes an occasion when Manet and Mery Laurent were caught in a meeting about which no one was to know. One evening, as was customary, Mery was hosting Dr. Evans, who, as we remember, contributed to her upkeep and who, if one can call him so, was her official lover. On the pretext of a bad migraine Mery asked the dentist to leave her by herself, as she wanted to go to sleep early. Not long after exiting, Dr. Evans noticed that he had left his appointment book at Mery's and returned to retrieve it. To his astonishment, and certainly his indignation, he found his mistress on the stairs in the company of Manet; both were dressed as though they were going to some ball. Evans was insulted, but only for a short time, as after a few days, his relationship with Mery returned to normal; similarly his relationship with Manet did not undergo a change, as the gentlemen subsequently remained friends.

It was not only with Manet that Mery had secret meetings, although she spent many hours in his painter's studio in the role of a model. She posed for many of his famous paintings, and had no objection to doing so naked. In one of the paintings, entitled *In the Bath* (1878), Mery appeared as a woman washing herself in a bathtub standing, showing her charms from behind, a contrast to *Olympia,* which showed her from the front. In addition to these, Mery posed for many portraits for Manet, with a hat or without, as well as in many

carefully chosen attires, such as *Autumn* and *Woman in Furs*.

In the summer of 1876, during a visit with friends at Montegeron, Manet began to feel unwell. The joint pains in his lower extremities, from which the painter had suffered for some time, clearly became worse. Until that time, he had considered the pain to be rheumatism – a frequent ailment in people over 50. The pain grew more serious, and I do not know whether it was in this period that Manet realized that this could be a sign of late syphilis. Indeed, during that year, he noticed numbness in his left leg, and pain and tingling sensations, for the first time. With no possibility of performing special tests – which were not available then – it would be very difficult to determine whether these were, in fact, signs of *tabes dorsalis*, or of something else.

We know that Manet considered the possibility that his rheumatic problems could have had a venerealogic basis, as in one of his later letters to Berthe Morisot, he wrote that one of his doctors "seems to believe in an origin that might allow for some hope." (22) Most likely, one of the doctors, when it was already evident that Manet could have syphilis, had suggested that his joint pains could be of gonorrheal origin, which provided a chance for cure. It was, unfortunately, otherwise, and two years later, problems with bending of the right leg appeared, as well as in coordination of movement of both lower extremities; these were acknowledged to be ataxia, a component of *tabes dorsalis.* Manet developed problems with movement, and began to step in a manner characteristic of tabetics, and described as a "stamping gait."

Whether or not Edouard was aware of the state of his health, is difficult to say. His biographer (Beth Archer Brombert) writes that, probably yes, as in this period he painted two self-portraits, as though he wanted to show his posterity a picture of himself at this period of his life. On one of them, Manet painted himself with a stiff right leg thrust forward, as though he wanted to say, see how I look in 1878.

Simultaneously we know that at this time, the artist was very attentive to his appearance, showing himself in public dressed blamelessly, as though trying to hide any worrisome physical ailments. We know also, that, in 1878, his physicians recommended hydrotherapy for him with the aim, as was said, of stimulating damaged nerves. Manet also tried unconventional methods, including homeopathy, recommended to him by his brother, Eugene, who had treated migraines in this way. (23) None of these treatments helped much, as in the following year, there appeared new manifestations of *tabes dorsalis*, so-called “lightning pains.” On one occasion, while walking along the street, he fell to the ground, howling from the pain radiating along one leg. Dr. Siredey urged Manet to try the hydrotherapy offered in Bellevue outside Paris, where they specialized in the treatment of rheumatism and diseases of the circulatory system. Manet availed himself of the doctor's advice, and very reliably complied with the therapists' recommendations, submitting to massages, water baths and showers for four to five hours daily, believing assurances that these measures would ensure circulation of blood in the legs, would awaken nerves, and would restore proper function to the lower extremities. Then living on the institute's grounds, Manet still went for short walks about the area and painted a bit.

Tired of the advancing disease, and repetition of treatments at Bellevue, Manet found pleasure in painting scenes with the participation of beautiful women and the painting of their portraits. One of the ladies, whom Manet clearly found attractive, and with whom he was infatuated, was Isabelle Lemonnier. She is the main figure in several of his paintings from this period, including a series of portraits. It is believed that one of Manet’s better-known paintings, *Chez le Pere Lathuille* (1879), in which a pair of young people are seen sitting at a cafe table and flirting, represents the painter imagining himself in the company of Mlle. Lemonnier.

Isabelle Lemonnier was a young, unmarried, yet independent woman. She was the daughter of a wealthy Parisian jeweler, whose older sister was the wife of the well-known and influential publisher, George Charpentier; he was the owner of a newly opened gallery that exhibited paintings, and whose firm also published the works of the modernists among then-renowned writers. (24) Isabelle had a lot of money and much free time. During 1879 she sat for Manet for six portraits, so we can imagine how much time they spent together, alone in the studio – of course without my making judgments about any inappropriate behavior by one or the other. For Mlle. Lemonnier, attention paid to her by the famous artist was certainly imposing, while Manet's humor improved in the company of a young woman, whose presence allowed him to forget the worsening state of his health.

Isabelle was not the only woman whom Manet painted during this time. During one of his treatment sessions at Bellevue, Manet rented a villa, which belonged to the opera singer, Emilie Ambre, the former mistress of the Dutch king. Manet painted her in the costume of Carmen from the opera of the same name by Bizet, for which the singer returned the favor by taking his painting, The Execution of Maximilian with her to the U.S.A. for exhibitions in New York and Boston.

From among the other women for whom Manet painted portraits, one must name the wife of the writer, Emile Zola, as well as the ballerina, Rosite Mauri, the mistress of his friend, Anthony Proust. It is at this time that Proust was named Minister of Fine Arts in the newly formed government, of which Gambetta became Premier. This opened up new perspectives for the painter, who for some time had dreamed of nomination to the Legion of Honor, which he certainly deserved, as he had already fulfilled all the criteria, which Andre Gide had mentioned. In December 1881, in the governmental bulletin, it was officially announced that Mr. Edouard Manet had become a Cavalier of the Legion of

Honor. This happened almost at the last minute. In less than a month, Gambetta's government tendered its resignation, and that included the Minister of Fine Arts, Anthony Proust. Regardless of the fact that acceptance of Manet to the Legion of Honor suggests personal favor, it is obvious to me that Manet deserved this honor, and not just because he was forty and suffering from syphilis!

The end of 1881 brought the painter not only important honors, but also increasing health problems. In a letter to Berthe Morisot (at this time, she was already Berthe Manet), he excused himself for not buying her a New Year's present on time, but was unable to go shopping, as he did not feel well. (25) At the same time, someone by the name of Potain prescribed for Manet ergot, an alkaloid obtained from the toxic parasitic fungus on rye. This medication, used appropriately for other illnesses, constricts the blood vessels and used for a long time could cause gangrene. Mr. Potain – we do not know if he was a physician – believed that Manet's problems did not have to be caused by syphilis, and that this medication could facilitate walking. Dr. Siredey warned his patient of the consequences of this type of therapy, and even wrote to Manet's friends to persuade him to stop taking it. Unfortunately, Manet, who was ready to do anything to improve the function of his lower limbs, did take ergot for a time, which, as we now know, ended tragically for him. In addition to ergot, Manet also tried vegetarian diets for a time, but these only worsened his general state of health. (26)

The beginning of 1882 brought a degree of improvement in the painter’s health, about which his brother wrote in a letter to his wife. (26) In the first half of the year, Manet painted the seven portraits of Mery Laurent, about which I wrote earlier, and also prepared paintings for the annual artistic exhibition at the Parisian Salon. In summer, he rented a small house near Paris, in order to avoid the heat in the city. Unfortunately, problems with walking remained, and even increased, as there were days when taking a single

step caused him severe pain. He painted intensively in order not to think of his illness, but did so mostly while sitting. He painted things that were mostly within the limits of his field of vision. The subjects in his painting from this period are fruits, flowers on a table, a view of the garden through the window, and the house in Rueil itself.

Disturbances in coordination of movement of Manet's upper extremities began to manifest themselves; we have evidence for this from a remark he made in a letter to Mery Laurent, in which Manet apologizes for his unclear writing, excusing himself for a bad pen. It would seem that the cause of the scrawls was a change in the character of his writing, related partly to ataxia, which had already been noticed two years earlier. (27) It is interesting that only the character of his *writing* underwent a change, while his ability to perform other movements with his hands remained as though unhandicapped, for the paintings that appeared during this time do not bear witness that Manet had any manual problems whatsoever. It is possible that any errors he eventually made were immediately corrected, but, not knowing the techniques of painting, I will say no more on this subject.

At the end of September 1882, the Manets returned to Paris rather unexpectedly, and Edouard went to a notary (lawyer), where his will was written. The heir of his estate was his wife, Suzanne, with the addendum that after her death, the entire estate was to go to her son, Leon. Despite preparations for the event of his death, Manet did not give up, and tried to work whenever the state of his health allowed. Much moral support for him came from the visits of his friends, particularly Mery Laurent, who would bring him flowers, which he would paint afterwards. To his favorites belonged lilac, but there were also others: roses, peonies and clematis. At the beginning of 1883, Manet stopped going to his studio, because attempts at walking threatened falls

and hurting himself. In March, his mother wrote in a letter to a cousin:

> Edouard continues to suffer very much; his leg is now seized by attacks of fulginating pain that happily do not rob him of his appetite. He is beginning to accept his meals with some degree of pleasure, which makes me hope for a return to health! But I fear it will take a very long time!

In another letter written three days later, she observed, “The outcome of the consultation that just took place between the two doctors does little to quiet my fears. The foot is swollen and fever, chills have begun. I am very alarmed.” (28)

Despite the worsening of the state of his health, Manet, just before Easter, appeared in his studio, to which also came Mery Laurent’s servant, Eliza, bringing large Easter eggs and other presents from her lady. Edouard proposed to Eliza that she sit for a portrait for him, but this was one that he never finished. When Eliza returned the next day, her unfinished portrait hung on an easel, but Manet was no longer there. He lay at home, brought down by a fever and attacks of chills, as well as severe pains in his affected leg. The leg turned black, which irrefutably indicated gangrene, and it was clear that amputation awaited the patient. The operation was performed in Manet's house with the participation of a group of doctors, among whom Dr. Siredey was also. The operation was done with chloroform anesthesia, amputating the foot and the calf below the knee. The patient lived through the operation, but his general state did not improve. During the next ten days, Manet had a high fever, but was conscious to the extent that he could converse with visiting friends and his family. He died on April 30, at the age of 51. His admirer and later sister-in-law, Berthe Manet wrote, “it was a death in its most horrible form.” (29)

One can ask whether Edouard Manet died of syphilis or as the result of inappropriate treatment. We do not know what the opinion of the doctors was in this case, but a painter friend had written to one of his own friends that he had no hope that Manet would recover, and that "that doctor Hureau from Villeneuve surely poisoned him with ergot." (30) This citation confirms other information that says that Manet used this preparation (ergot) for a long time, which most likely led to ischaemia of the foot and gangrene. Opinions that the cause of the gangrene could have been an ulcer of the foot (*mal perforans*), which can accompany *tabes dorsalis* also have to be treated seriously. This type of lesion, repeatedly infected on an ischaemic extremity, and caused by taking ergot, could have caused gangrene, to be followed by sepsis. The question of which of these versions is the true one will probably remain unanswered, as we have too little data to allow a definitive resolution of matter.

Manet was buried in the cemetery at Passy, and each year, in spring, when the first lilacs bloomed, Mery Laurent brought a wreath woven from them, and placed it on his grave.

PAUL GAUGIN (1848-1903)

Paul Gaugin, one of the better-known French painters of the nineteenth century, a post-impressionist and co-creator of a new style called synthetism, died on one of the islands of French Polynesia, not having exceeded the age of 55 (Fig.5c.7) The direct cause of the painter's death was probably a heart attack or an overdose of pain medicine, although some maintain that the basic disease, which ruined his health and led to his death was syphilis. Gaugin traveled a great deal, including in countries with tropical climates. He suffered from malaria, dysentery, and possibly yellow fever, each of which could have left its mark on the painter's later health. He was a habitual smoker and used alcohol to excess. He suffered from chronic heart disease and stasis

dermatitis with ulcerations, which became a real nightmare for him in the declining years of his life. Widely talented, he was not only a painter, but equally a sculptor, did artistic ceramic work, and was a journalist and writer. Not appreciated during his life for a long time, he suffered from poverty, while his paintings, which found buyers with difficulty while he was alive, currently decorate the walls of the greatest museums in the world

Gauigin was not easy to get along with, while his personal life, except for a short period of a happy marriage, abounded with numerous short-lived relationships, most often with women much younger than he. Like many of his friends, he engaged the services of prostitutes, and it was one of these – but not until he was 47 years old – that infected him with syphilis. Despite treatment of the disease for some time, it poisoned his life, but it was not lues, in my opinion, that was the cause of his death. During most of his adult life, the painter suffered from heart disease, which had no connection with syphilis. It is a shame that he died so young, yet one must acknowledge that during his not very long life, he created many splendid things.

Paul Gaugin was born in Paris in 1848, his parents being Clovis Gaugin, a journalist employed by the pro-republican newspaper, *Le National*, and Alina Maria Chazal, the daughter of a known socialist activist, and a precursor of feminists, Flory Tristan. When Paul was a year and a half old, the family decided to leave for Peru, mostly for political reasons, where his mother's uncle, an influential and wealthy person, and former minister in the Peruvian government, lived. This uncle was not only an influential politician, but a capable businessman, who had made a great deal of money from growing sugar cane and the production of sugar. Gauguin's mother's family had Spanish roots going back to the Renaissance period, supposedly derived from the Borgia family. Another of its branches reached back to the times of

the Conquistadors, and she was said to have descended from an Indian leader. (31)

The Gaugins' journey to Peru began with bad luck. During a stop in Port Famine in Patagonia, Clovis Gaugin suddenly became weak, and died on the deck of the ship, most likely as the result of an aortic aneurysm. (32) After a quick funeral, the ship sailed on, delivering to Lima the new widow and her two children, Paul and his older sister, Marie.

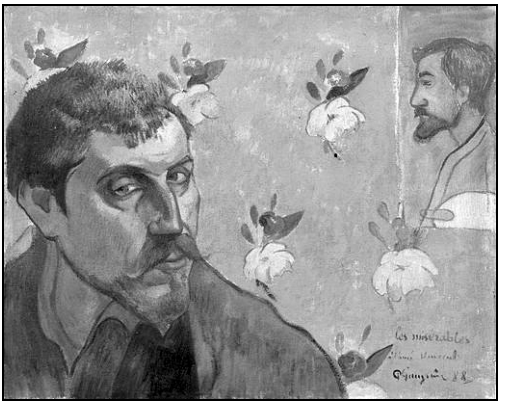


Figure 5c.7 Paul Gauguin Self Portrait 1888 (Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam)

Despite the tragedy that happened during the trip, Paul Gaugin remembered his stay in Lima very positively. From the material standpoint, nothing was lacking him, while, thanks to his mother (who was interested in ancient Indian pottery), Paul came into contact with the art of the Incas for the first time.

At age 7½, Paul Gaugin and his family found themselves once again in France, residing in Orleans with grandparents from his father's side. Paul was enrolled in a Catholic boarding school, which, as it appears, did not appeal to him very much. When seventeen, he was asked what he wanted to do with himself, and he responded that he wanted to be an

officer of the Merchant Marines, which, doubtless occurred to him from the earlier sea voyages to tropical countries that he still remembered from his childhood.

Consistently with the demands of his stated vocation, the future Merchant Marine officer had to begin his career as a cadet. Before sailing on his first assignment, Paul met an older colleague in Le Havre, who was a cadet on the ship, *Luzitano*; the cadet gave him a letter and a small package, and requested that he deliver it to a particular lady living in Rio de Janeiro, where his ship was headed. As it turned out upon arrival there, the addressee of the letter and package was a Mademoiselle Aimee, a 30-year-old French lady from Bordeaux, living in a cheerful district of Rio, on Rue d'Ouvidor. Miss Aimee was a well-known person in the town; she sang well, specializing in the repertoire of Jacques Offenbach, and also organized amusements, mainly for young sailors stopping at the port. Even a young cadet from the Russian schooling ship, who was the son of the Russian Tsar, did not resist her charms. Miss Aimee did not hide this relationship, and even boasted about it, emphasizing that, being the official mistress, even for a short time, of the son of the Russian Emperor, she made some good money.

Upon delivering the package and letter from his friend from Le Havre, Paul was greeted by Miss Aimee with the words, "let me look at you darling. How handsome you are!" – and was invited into her home. (33) Paul spent close to a month in Rio, and undoubtedly not just in the arms of the beautiful Frenchwoman. The same author writes that in Rio Gaugin "sinned for the first time in some sailor's brothel." (33) It is worth remembering that, seventeen years earlier, in December 1848, another would be sailor, sailed on a schooling ship for Rio de Janeiro, also from Le Havre, and also became a painter. He was Edouard Manet, who was very much attracted to Brazilian women, but to whom he attributed a lack of talent for flirting. Paul Gaugin had more luck, as, thanks to the recommendations of a colleague, he

happened upon a countrywoman who was as beautiful as young Brazilian women, and could also be as charming as all French women. The experience Gaugin obtained from his acquaintance with Miss Aimee became useful during the return journey, as, now being experienced in his masculinity, he occupied himself with a fellow passenger, as he described in one of his letters:

> And Aimee certainly made my virtue cascade. The ground was no doubt propitious, for I became very licentious. On the voyage home, we had several female passengers, among others a plump Prussian woman. It was the captain's turn to be attracted, and he did his best, but it was quite useless. The Prussian woman and I found a delightful little corner in the sail-store, whose door gave on to the saloon by the companionway. Liar that I was, I told her a whole heap of nonsense, and the Prussian, who was very attracted, wanted to see me again in Paris …. (33)

Gaugin took part in two assignments of the *Luzitano* to Brazil, and, after promotion to second mate, left on a thirteen-month assignment around the world on a three-master, the *Chili*. During this latter trip, he had the opportunity to visit his father's grave in Patagonia, the shore and ports of Chile, the then-still-narrow Panama Canal, as well as Taboga island, which he again visited many years later. After his return from the voyage, Gauguin, now a seasoned mariner, enlisted in the French Navy as a stoker on the corvette *Jerome-Napoleon*, on the deck of which the Franco-Prussian War met him. Gaugin's corvette took part in battles on the sea, and seized four ships of the Prussian fleet, including the ship *Franziska*, on which he was a member of the prize crew for a time. We do not know how the young sailor remembered his games with the plump Prussian woman on the *Luzitano* during this time, although in

the new situation, a romance of this sort would be considered very unpatriotic.

After five years at sea, Paul Gauguin concluded that he had had enough of being a sailor, and decided to try life on land. With the help of a friend of his deceased mother, Gustave Arosa, Gauguin obtained employment as a stockbroker in the Paris Bourse. For a person who had never had contact with business, young Gaugin did quite well, quickly advancing and earning considerable savings for a man of his means. He became friends then with some of the members of the Arosa family, who occupied themselves with amateur painting during free moments. One of these was the daughter of Gustave Arosa, Margarette, who gave him several lessons. It was probably at this moment that young Paul Gauguin became enamored with painting. Nevertheless, until Gauguin began to earn something from his paintings, he supported himself and his family for a long time with income obtained from his work at the stock exchange.

At the end of 1872, in a restaurant in a small hotel, where Gaugin used to eat lunch, he met two Danish tourists—Marie Heegaard, the daughter of a Copenhagen industrialist, and her lady companion, Mette Sophie Gad. The young people became friends, and after a short time, Paul fell in love with Mette. The young Danish woman, who earned her living independently, impressed Paul, and quickly filled the emptiness in his family life that had arisen after the death of his mother. Similarly for Mette, the young and energetic Paul, having steady work at the stock exchange, appeared to be a good match, boding quite well for the future. The young people married, and soon children appeared, of which there were five. Paul worked conscientiously at the exchange, but began to devote more and more time to his hobby, namely painting. Soon, he found friends who shared his passion, among them a colleague from the exchange, Claude Emile Schuffenecker, with whom he began to attend classes at the

Academie Colarossi, where they studied painting. Seeing her husband's painting trials, Mette recognized his talent, yet became concerned that Paul was becoming overly engaged with art, which started to reflect on his professional work and domestic obligations. Among Gaugin's acquaintances, there began to appear painters, and among them, Camille Pissaro, the later famous impressionist, who was born on the island of St. Thomas, which belonged to Denmark at the time (currently one of U.S. Virgin Islands). Pissaro was often invited to the Gaugin home, where he became friends with Mette, with whom he could speak in Danish. It was Pissaro who explained to Mette – who was disturbed by the excessive spending of her husband on paintings and other works of art – that the latter were a good place for locating capital, and represented a sure investment. Gaugin and Pissaro often painted together, mainly in the districts of Pontoise near Paris, where Pissaro lived with his family. Pissaro not only taught and perfected Gaugin's painting technique, but introduced him to the art community, which was composed mostly of impressionists. In 1881, Paul was invited to take part in an Impressionist Exhibition, where, for the first time, he met with approving opinions of art critics, among whom was J.K. Huysmans. (34)

Stocks on the Parisian Exchange were rising. Investors were earning money, as, also were the Exchange's employees. Increasing turnover on the Exchange demanded a greater engagement on the part of the people working there, which did not greatly please Gaugin. The beginning painter was ever more frequently coming to the conclusion that time spent at the Exchange was time lost, and felt that he truly lived only when he was standing in front of his easels and taking his brushes into his hands. (35)

January 1882 was a turning-point period in Gaugin's life. It was then that a crash took place on the stock exchange, and both big and small investors lost fortunes. A similar fate met the exchange's staff, for whom it was not enough that

they lost their personally invested funds, but they also lost their jobs. This also affected Gaugin, who not only lost a lot of his own money, but had to say goodbye to his job, as well. The family was forced to move out of a large and comfortable home in Paris, and to move to Rouen, where the cost of living was lower. Gauguin had hopes that it would be easier to sell his paintings in his new surroundings, as well as to obtain orders for portraits. Unfortunately, that is not what happened. The local clientele was not interested in the works of an unknown painter, and there likewise were no orders for portraits; this resulted in the family finding itself without a livelihood, in a short while. After a half-year vegetating in Rouen, Mette was able to convince her husband it would be easier for him to find work in Copenhagen, doubtless counting on the help of her family who lived there. Unfortunately, here also, they met disillusionment. Gaugin, as a result of linguistic difficulties, was not able to find work, while his paintings did not find any buyers. Additionally, Mette's family did not demonstrate sufficient desire to help, considering him a freeloader, who wasted his time painting pictures for which there were no buyers. One source of income was French lessons given by Mette, as well as translation of French texts into Danish. Gaugin was in a depression, and thought of suicide. In a letter to Pissaro he said, "Every day I ask myself whether it wouldn't be better to go to the attic and put a rope around my neck." (36)

In June 1885, in the company of Clovis, his 6-year-old son, Gaugin returned to Paris. He had not a cent to his name, and availed himself of the hospitality of friends, living on small loans offered by them. He tried to find work, even at the stock exchange, where he had many friends, but there was no room for him. In December, Clovis became ill with smallpox, and thanks only to the generosity and protection of Gaugin's friends, did he manage to get well. In a short while, Gaugin's marriage came into question, as Mette set the condition that they could again be together, but Paul had to

forget about painting, and had to find work that would allow him to support the family.

In July of the following year, thanks to a larger loan obtained from a friend, Gaugin sent Clovis to a boarding school, while he, himself left for Pont-Aven in Brittany, a small town situated on the Atlantic shore. This town had been popular for some time among painters, who gathered there from various countries, not just from France. A huge advantage of Pont-Aven, other than beautiful landscapes, was low cost of living and lodging. Gaugin, similarly to many other painters without a cent to his name, rented a room in a *pension* of Marie-Joanne Gloanec, perhaps the cheapest *pension* in the area, while its greatest advantage was that its owner allowed her tenants to pay their bills irregularly. It was here that, for the first time, Paul Gaugin felt like a painter, a free person, who could devote as much time to his talent as he considered appropriate. In addition to all this, he found himself among people who understood his passion, were able to discuss subjects in which he was interested, and respected his views on art. Gaugin wrote to Mette," I am respected as the best painter in Pont-Aven ... Everyone discusses my advice." (36) It was here that Gaugin befriended Emile Bernard, considered as one of the most important creators of the then new style of painting, called *Synthetism,* whose concepts he strongly supported. (38)

With the arrival of autumn, it was necessary for Gaugin to return to Paris, which was meant facing the sad reality that there was neither work nor buyers for his paintings. He tried to join the business of a friend occupied with the production of ceramic articles, unfortunately with the awareness that he could not count on significant income, if any. Engaging himself with ceramics gave him a lot of pleasure, even though the painter still needed a means for living. Gaugin's sister, whose husband, Juan Uribe, tried to start a business in Panama and needed an assistant, provided some help. Paul became enthusiastic about the idea, remembering his

stay in that region during his schooling trip round the world. He was full of hope for a change of fortune, and saw himself painting in the tropics, free of material concerns, thanks to employment in his brother-in-law's firm. His imagination moved itself so far that in letters to his wife, he wrote that, after establishing himself in Panama, he would want to move his whole family there.

The trip to Panama, Gaugin planned for spring, while, in the meantime, winter and poverty were taking their toll. Malnutrition and low temperatures caused him to catch cold, and he landed in the hospital with a diagnosis of tonsillitis. The disease must have had a difficult course, as Gaugin spent close to four weeks there, which, for such a usually mild illness, appears suspiciously long, even though this was before the antibiotic era. We do not know how he was treated, but can assume that, at least, he was warm and not hungry.

As he had resolved, so he did, and in April 1887, Gaugin left for Panama in the company of another painter he had met in Pont-Aven. This was Charles Laval, ill with tuberculosis, whom Gaugin convinced that the change of climate would be beneficial for his lungs. After arriving there, it turned out that their hopes for a comfortable life in Panama had no chance of realization. Gaugin's sister's husband was not interested in collaborating with him, so he had to undertake work with the company involved with the building of the Panama Canal. This did not last long, because the firm went bankrupt, and Gaugin was again left without a job. After a short reflection, Gaugin and Laval determined to relocate to the island of Taboga, with the hope that it would be easier to find work, and that living costs would be lower there. Unfortunately, land prices and living costs had increased considerably from the time when Gaugin had been there earlier, and the men returned to Panama, stopping in Colon, a town situated on the western side of the isthmus. Gaugin tried physical work, but the high temperatures and humidity,

as well as swarms of mosquitoes, did not allow them rest, even at night. The region in which they found themselves was known for its high rates of malaria, yellow fever and dysentery, and it was said that every kilometer of the railroad built there earlier had cost one human life. Gaugin comforted himself that these diseases supposedly concerned mainly the Blacks employed in the building of the Canal, but was wrong, as, in a short while, Laval became ill with yellow fever, and thanks only to the care of Gaugin, did not leave this world. Tired of Panama, the travelling painters determined to move to Martinique, a not-too-distant island belonging to France, and here, it seemed that their luck changed. A mild climate and a low cost of living permitted a reasonably comfortable life from a not-very-large fund that they had saved during their work in Panama. The inhabitants were friendly, and the women frankly incited to sin. In a letter to Mette, Gaugin wrote:

> A sixteen-year old Negress, and pretty too, had given [me] half a guava which she pressed against her breast. A mulatto had told [me] that this was a declaration of love and that the fruit had 'magic'. I can assure you the white man here has difficulty in keeping his clothes intact, for the ladies Putiphar are not lacking ..." But, he added, "You can sleep calmly as far as my virtue is concerned. (39)

I think, however, that after receiving this letter, Mette had serious doubts as to her husband's truthfulness.

The idyll on Martinique didn't last too long; after just a month from their arrival on the island, Gaugin fell ill with dysentery. For close to four months, he lay on his pallet, howling from the pain in his abdomen, often unconscious. "His illness had exhausted him. His head was cracked, he suffered from giddiness, reeled on his feet, shivered and sweated. He became terribly thin, [and] was no more, he said, than a mere skeleton. However little he ate, his liver

tortured him." (40) The local doctors recommended a return to France, warning that if he didn't, he "would be ill with his liver and fever for ever." (40) Rather frightened, Gaugin turned to Schuffenecker with a plea for a loan or the sale, for whatever price of the paintings he had left in France. He wrote that he had to get the money as quickly as possible, otherwise, "I shall die like a dog!" I am in such a nervous state that all these anxieties prevent my recovering. I cannot stand on my legs. Come on, Shuff ... do your best." (40) Because the money was not forthcoming, the desperate Gaugin signed on as a deckhand to the *Master*, one of the ships sailing to Europe, and appeared in Paris at the end of November 1887, where he stayed temporarily at the Schuffneckers.

With nothing in view by way of an occupation that would bring in even a small income, as well as fading hopes for a sale of one or another of his paintings, Gaugin decided to leave for Brittany again. Wintertime in Pont-Aven in no way resembled spring and summer, when it was full of painters with whom one could drink absinthe and discuss art. The doleful atmosphere worsened his intestinal problems, which were causing Gaugin to spend three out of six days in bed as a result of dysentery. (41) I am not certain if the words "in bed" properly describes the place where the artist stayed during this time, although dysentery is characterized by abdominal pain, fever, and unrelenting diarrhea, which caused him to frequently outside the house, due to the complete lack of sanitary arrangements in the *pension* in which he lived.

During his stay in Pont-Aven, Gauguin established correspondence contacts with Theo van Gogh (Vincent van Gogh's brother), whom he had come to know earlier, and who succeeded in selling a couple of Gaugin's paintings. Theo tried to persuade Gaugin to join a so-called colony of artists of which Vincent van Gogh, then living in Arles, dreamed, and proposed giving him a small pension in

exchange for one painting a month, under the condition that he would reside with his brother in Arles. Vincent van Gogh lived under similar conditions, as he could paint, thanks only to a regular pension paid by his brother in exchange for paintings. Gaugin accepted the offer, but did not hurry to leave. In Brittany, spring came, and with it painters whom Gaugin had befriended during earlier painting seasons began to appear. Among them were Gustave de Maupassant, the father of the writer, Guy de Maupassant, as well as Emile Bernard, who, together with Gaugin had formed an organization of critics of impressionism. Gaugin and Bernard were considered as followers of the then-new style called symbolism or synthetism, and believed that the aim of artists should be "to express their inner feelings and visions through their paintings rather than to depict reality or portray nature like the Impressionist. Gauguin wrote to Schuff, "Don't copy nature too literally. Art is observation; draw out from nature as you dream in nature's presence." (42)

Gaugin and Bernard spent time not only on mutual painting and discussions about art, but also visited the local bordello together; its atmosphere was particularly to Bernard's liking. Attesting to this could be the cycle of drawings by him, entitled *Au Bordel*, on one of which is found a footnote by one of the prostitutes, "No one can give a man as good a time as I can." (43) Despite Gaugin and Bernard were in agreement in regard to the general principles of the new style in painting, they disagreed very sharply about various particulars and even competed with each other for leadership in the group of the followers of synthetism. Their fights underwent a considerable assuagement after the arrival in Pont-Aven of Bernard's mother and sister, 17-year-old Madelaine, with whom Gaugin immediately fell in love. (44) Gaugin painted Madelaine's portrait, in which she appears rather more serious than her seventeen years, while Mlle. Bernard appeared much prettier in a painting done by her brother, bearing the title, *Madelaine dans le Bois*

d'Amour. This painting is a good example of symbolism, and it was also asserted by Gaugin that this was one of the best paintings done by Emile Bernard. (45) Gaugin's feelings for Madelaine had a purely platonic character, and the painter behaved toward her more as an older colleague and teacher (Madelaine was a talented painter), than as an admirer or potential lover.

In autumn, as happened every year, Pont-Aven began to empty, and Gaugin began to pack his belongings. Encouraged by the advance of funds that he had received from Theo van Gogh, who had been able to sell some pottery, Gaugin was readying himself to leave for Arles. Shortly before leaving, however, symptoms of dysentery appeared, which fortunately did not last long, and at the end of October, Gaugin appeared in Arles, to be enthusiastically greeted by Vincent van Gogh. The reader can find a more detailed account of Gaugin's stay in Arles in the chapter devoted to van Gogh; here, however, I will only add that neither the town nor its inhabitants, equally, particularly appealed to his taste. During the day, both painters spent their time painting intensively, while in the evenings they quarreled mostly due to differences concerning artistic matters, though soothed by the consumption of large quantities of absinthe or visits to the local bordello. This did not cost them too much, and expenses for the purpose were planned for in their joint budget ahead of time, under the entry, "nocturnal and hygienic outings." (46)

Gaugin treated his stay in Arles as temporary from its very start, which greatly disturbed van Gogh, who was counting on his friend to stay with him longer. In December, just before the Christmas, during an attack of delirium, van Gogh tried to attack Gaugin with a razor, but the incident ended upon his cutting off a piece of his own ear, and landing in the hospital – which only hastened Gaugin's return to Paris. He did not stay there too long, as, after only a month, he again left for Brittany, where he remained for close

to two years with interruptions practically until his leaving for Tahiti.

As always, Gaugin worked hard, yet was always without funds. He perceived some hope of selling his paintings at an exhibition that the French government organized in connection with the World's Fair held in Paris in 1889 on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the French Revolution. Unfortunately, like other *avant-garde* painters, he did not find himself on the list of the Qualifying Committee. On the advice of Schuffenecker, rejected artists such as Gaugin, van Gogh, Schuffenecker, Bernard and others, organized a competing exhibition – which turned out to be a failure, as none of the paintings shown there were sold. (47)

After his return to Brittany, Gaugin changed his residence from Pont-Aven to La Pouldu, where it was less crowded and had better conditions for work. Many amateur artists had been arriving in Pont-Aven, which caused the little town to become crowded by tourists. In Le Pouldu, he availed himself of a studio rented by the Dutch painter, Jacob Meyer de Haan, who – importantly – covered the rental costs for the place. During this time, Gaugin painted a series of paintings considered as among his best, such as *The Seaweed Gatherers*, depicting the occupation of the local inhabitants, as well as *The Yellow Christ*, a work inspired by the wooden figure of Christ from the seventeeth century. (48)

In November 1890 Gaugin returned to Paris yet again, and as usual stayed with Schuffenecker. He felt at home there, to the extent that he began to invite guests there without any prior consultation with the owner of the house. Schuffenecker was always very much under Gaugin's influence, and allowed his friend a great deal, although at a certain point, acknowledged that he had exceeded the mark. Almost every Gaugin biographer writes about Schuffenecker's wife as a woman full of coquetry and disrespectful of her husband. All underscore that she flirted

with Gaugin, and some even are of the opinion that their flirting may have resulted in adultery. (49)

Forced to leave his host's house, Gaugin rented a room on Rue Delambre, not far from the restaurant, *Chez Charlotte*, in which he took his meals. The restaurant was located opposite the *Academie Colarossi*, and often visited by its students. The owner of the restaurant was Charlotte Caron, who valued art, and who allowed impoverished artists eating there to pay past due bills by accepting their paintings. For this reason, her place was decorated with paintings by then little known artists – and whose current estimated value would be many millions of dollars. In the place of honor, there was a portrait of the owner by a poorly known then, Polish artist, Stanislaw Wyspianski. (50, 51)

Parenthetically, I cannot fail to add at this point that Stanislaw Wyspianski was not only a talented painter, but also an accomplished poet and dramatist; his historical drama, *Wesele* (The Wedding) has been in teaching programs of high school students in Poland until the present. Often presented on stage, his work also attained several film adaptations. Wyspianski was popular in his homeland even while living, though his life was greatly shortened as a result of serious illness. The poet died in Krakow (Cracow) in 1907, the result of syphilis, with which he became infected during a stay in Paris, though this is not completely certain. The last years of his life Wyspianski spent at home, practically tied to his bed, writhing with pain, as a result of the cutaneous (skin) form of third-stage syphilis. (52)

Louise Schuffenecker was not the only woman in whom Gaugin was interested during this time. Shortly after arriving in Paris, he funded for himself a young, 24-year-old mistress by the name of Juliette Huet. (53) She was a friend of the mistress of George Daniel de Monfried, a painter and friend of Gaugin's. Both women were seamstresses by profession, and worked in the same tailor shop. It may be that Juliette also repaired Gaugin's clothing, but her main occupation was

posing for his pictures – and not only that, as in November, 1891 she gave birth to a little daughter, Germaine, whom Gaugin acknowledged as his child. One must grant that the artist behaved a gentleman, as even before leaving for Tahiti, he bought Juliette a sewing machine and left her some money, so that mother and daughter would not starve to death. I took the word *gentleman* out of quotation marks, even if this seems unfair, as this type of behavior of men with respect to their out-of-wedlock children was considered unusually decent. The majority of children out of these relationships, such as between Juliette and Gaugin, were handed over to the mother's family, who lived in the country, most commonly, or placed in orphanages, thus supplying successive ranks of future Parisian prostitutes.

Gaugin's stay in Paris this time was taken up, not only by discussions with colleagues on the subject of new directions in art (and in chasing their wives), but also, and maybe primarily, in striving to procure of funds for his travel to the tropics, which had been planned for some time. At first, Gauguin planned to travel to Tonkin (currently Vietnam), counting on co-financing of the trip by the French government; however, as nothing came of this, he wanted to travel to Madagascar, where he dreamed of founding an artists' colony, similar to van Gogh's, who planned to establish his in Arles. As this idea also did not work out, Gaugin started to gather funds for a trip to Tahiti, as there appeared to be some hope of obtaining a significant discount for the voyage, granted to persons traveling officially to the French colonies. Gaugin, thanks to the patronage of his acquaintances, obtained a document entitling him to a major discount on the ticket price, saying that Mr. Gaugin, artist and painter, was travelling to Tahiti on an official mission. This document allowed Gaugin not only to undertake the travel for a small sum, but, after his arrival on the island, caused the authorities to treat him as someone important, at least in the

beginning, suspecting that he was a person whose unofficial mission was to inspect their efficiency.

The first weeks of his stay in Papeete, the capital of Tahiti, were very promising. Received with respect by the local elite, the painter expected lucrative orders of portraits, which would allow him to live at a high level. He even had the promise of audience with King Pomare V, which unfortunately, did not occur, as the monarch had suffered a long time from alcoholism, and died before the day of the planned visit.

After some time, the painter felt rather disillusioned with Papeete, in which strong European influences could be recognized. In one of his letters, he wrote, "It was Europe – the Europe I thought I had finished with, in a form even worse, with colonial snobbery and aping of our customs, fashions, vices and crazes in a manner so grotesque that it bordered on caricature." (54) Bored with the snobbishness of the French settlers, as well as with the staff of the colonial administration, Gaugin began to visit places frequented mainly by the natives. One of these was the district of nighttime recreations, where dances were held twice weekly. Being a good dancer, he quickly gained the liking of the local women, proof of which was the fact that they began to ask him to dance. It is hardly surprising that he did not refuse the invitations, as the beauty of the local women, their dresses, and customs were unusually tempting for him. It was actually for this that he had come to Tahiti, to find himself in a different civilization, in a different world than that, which he had experienced in France. So this is what a description of the diversions in which Gaugin took part looked like, seen through the eyes of another Frenchman living there:

> On all sides are groups of native women in long white dresses, with thick black hair worn loose; eyes as dark as their hair, and sensuous, inviting lips. All wear a showy white gardenia in their ebony-black hair, and, reclining comfortably on their mates, fan themselves

> and smoke long cigarettes. Barely visible in the half-light, which lends itself so admirably to flirting and intimate talk, they receive the tributes, compliments, and jesting approaches of the men with a delightful charm peculiar to these tropical women, which always has a touch of piquancy, owing to their immorality, incredible candour, and uninhibited *joie de vivre.* (55)

Another French writer added, "What these women chiefly desire, quite simply, is to intoxicate themselves with singing, dancing and drinking and loving (56), while Gaugin added, "All Tahitian women have much love in their veins that it is always love, even when it is bought." (57) After the dances ended, their participants, generally couples already, dispersed to the district's parks or groves, where they occupied themselves with each other until dawn, or sometimes longer.

Gaugin was delighted, and it appeared that he had finally found in Tahiti what he had longed for. After years of poverty and restrictions, he had some money, was surrounded by young and beautiful women – for whom, as a European, he provided a certain attraction – far from European civilization, and surrounded by tropical nature, he found himself in seventh heaven. Unfortunately, awakening came more quickly than he had expected.

In September 1891, Gauguin fell ill, and found himself in a hospital. This was a military hospital, one of those in the town where mainly Europeans were treated. The cause of the hospitalization was hemorrhage from the respiratory tract, and heart problems. (58, 59) Not all biographers agree as to the date of this occurrence, providing various versions, among others that of March 1892 (59). Unfortunately, almost all of them indicate that the cause of the illness was syphilis, with which the painter had supposedly been infected at age 17 or 18, during his first travels to Rio de Janeiro. (60) I do not agree with this diagnosis and consider it of very low probability.

Commenting on the painter's stay in the hospital, adherents to the syphilis theory of his illness suggest that the cause of the hemorrhage from his respiratory tract was heart disease caused by syphilis. The patient was treated with mustard plasters applied to his chest and legs, and also with preparations containing digitalis. I will add, however, that none of these measures are ever used in the treatment of syphilis! The signs of the illness, as well as the method of Gaugin's treatment, do not indicate that Dr. Chassaniol, under whose care he was, considered that the patient was ill with lues. It is true that in late syphilis changes in the circulatory system can occur; one of the most frequent are lesions in the large vessels, most often the aorta, in which aneurysms appear (*cf.* Alfred de Musset). Sometimes, syphilis causes changes in the heart valves, while stenosis of the mitral valve, which causes high blood pressure in the lungs can cause not very great hemorrhages. Just as, in Gaugin's time, syphilis was the cause of heart ailments more often than currently, it certainly was not one of its causes. There are many causes of mitral valve defects, and one of these is rheumatic fever, caused by β-hemolytic streptococci, which also frequently cause sore throat. Here, I would like to remind the reader of a certain episode in Gaugin's life, when the painter was hospitalized in Paris with a diagnosis of tonsillitis, and stayed there for close to a month. It would appear that Gaugin was ill with something more than tonsillitis, as putting a patient into the hospital for this cause is quite rare. It is probable that the cause of the Paris hospitalization was not just a throat infection, but also one of its serious complications, which could have been rheumatic fever caused by β-hemolytic streptococci. A frequent complication of the latter disease includes changes in the valves of the heart to cause a derangement in their function. In Gaugin's case, we are dealing with yet another damaging phenomenon, namely his habitual smoking and excessive use of alcohol.

Gaugin was a habitual smoker and as Bengt Danielsson writes, “He did not have a cigarette in his lips only then when he was smoking a pipe, and also had the habit, calling it absentmindedness, of filling his empty coffee cup with cheap brandy.” (61) I do not have to explain that this type of lifestyle is a huge burden on the body and a frequent cause of diseases of the heart and circulatory system. The cause of Gaugin’s heart-lung problems during his stay in Tahiti did not have to be lues, and most probably was not. Another, very important argument speaking against a syphilitic etiology of Gaugin’s heart-lung derangements is the fact of his putative infection with lues for a second time, several years later. The same authors, who maintain that Gaugin was infected with syphilis in Rio de Janeiro, write about a second infection, forgetting or not knowing, about so-called premunition or intercurrent infection immunity, which does not permit reinfection with syphilis by persons who had once been ill with it. Thus, if not completely cured from a first luetic infection – which, in Gaugin’s time, would have been impossible – a second one would have been equally so.

After remission of his symptoms, Gaugin quickly left the hospital, mainly due the high costs of the stay and of treatment. The painter returned to his hut in Mataiea, on the southern edge of the island where he had lived from the time of his leaving Papeete. His life gradually returned to normal. During the day he painted, fished, and gathered fruit, while evenings he spent in the company of young women from the village, who considered it an honor to sleep with a white man. None of them considered this as something immoral or disgraceful, because this type of behavior in the social code of the local population was equated to eating, taking a walk, laughing or singing, and was not treated as being in a category of sin, despite the activity for quite a time there, of Christian missionaries. (62) Gaugin himself was not sure whether he was acting morally, sharing his musings on the subject in his journal (the so-called *Journal for Aline*):

> In Europe, intercourse between men and women is a result of love. In Oceania love is a result of intercourse. Which is right? The man or woman who gives his [or her] body away is said to commit a small sin. That is debatable, and in any case sin is wholly redeemed by creation, the most beautiful act in the world, a divine act in the sense that it continues the work of [the] Creator. The real sin is committed by the man or woman who sells his [or her] body. (62)

Sleeping with his young neighbors, Gaugin certainly did not consider himself to be a sinner, yet he lacked a woman with whom he could not only go to bed, but who could make the bed, clean house, and cook a meal. Just before his health failed, he had established a relationship for a short time with a young girl named *Titi* (Breast), but the young woman was not of pure Polynesian blood (her mother was a Tahitian, but her father, an Englishman), and was *very playful*. She liked to dress well, loved dances, and often went to Papeete in order to play. She was not the type of woman that the painter wanted, and he set about looking for a *vahine* (partner/wife) in a different region of the island. When in Faaone, a small village, and invited for a meal by a family he met there by accident, he confessed that his goal for the trip, among others, was to find himself a *vahine*; his host proposed a 13-year-old girl by the name of Teha'amana (Tehura) (Fig.5c.8). The young woman came from the island of Tonga, and lived in Faaone with her foster mother. After a short conversation, which is reminiscent of marriage vows ("Are you frightened of me?" No." Do you want to live with me in my hut for ever?" "Yes." "Have you been ill ? No."), the girl's foster mother interrupted, asking that Teha'amana, after a week's stay with Gaugin be allowed to return home and make her own decision as to her future. And that is what happened. After staying a week with Gaugin, the girl returned to her foster mother, but only to announce that she was going to stay with the painter permanently. (63)

Teha'amana is one of the best recognized of Gaugin's *vahine*s (the painter had more), testifying to which is the large number of paintings for which she posed. Similarly to Gaugin, Teha'amana did not treat the marriage very seriously. Brought up in the Polynesian culture, she did not have a sense of fidelity to her *Koke* – as she called him. In the course of her stay with the painter, she had many lovers, with whom she met in the surrounding forest, when Gaugin thought that his *vahine* was occupied with gathering fruit or gossiping with her girlfriends, and soon became pregnant. We do not know who the child's father was, nor what happened to him, as there is no record of Teha'amana giving birth. (64)

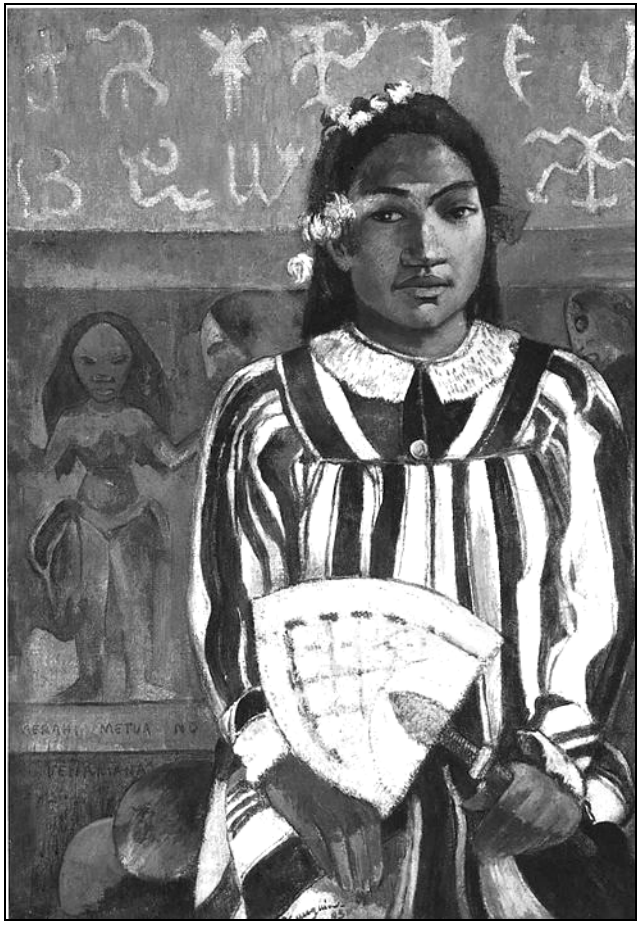


Figure 5c 8 The Ancestors of Teha'amana. Portrait of Teha'amana by Paul Gaugin (1893)

After the passage of about a year, Gaugin's Tahitian idyll began to fade, mainly for financial reasons. The painter needed money, but that was not forthcoming. Gaugin was counting on his friends in Paris to be able to sell at least a part of his paintings or ceramics, but not much came of it. To repair his financial state, the painter took a poorly paid job

with the civil administration of Papeete, but was not satisfied with it, and more and more frequently thought of returning to France. An additional reason for a decision to leave was the state of his health. (64) His heart problems returned (attacks of tachycardia, or rapid heartbeat), but fortunately without hemorrhages from his respiratory tract. The causes of these problems Gaugin attributed to a diet rich in fruit, vegetables and fish, and tried to supplement it with "European food" that reached the island exclusively in the form of preserves. It was expensive, poor in taste, and evaluating it from today's point of view, unhealthy.

Following unsuccessful attempts at obtaining a free ticket, Gaugin returned to his country on his own money. After a longish voyage undertaken in none-too-luxurious conditions, the painter landed in Marseilles on August 30, 1893, with only four francs in his pocket. On the other hand, he had a trunk full of paintings and sketches done on Tahiti, which he judged he would be able to sell. It quickly became apparent, however, that there were no takers for his paintings, while appreciation by a wider public for his art was far from what he had anticipated. As often happens in such situations, a change in luck was decided by accident. His 75-year-old uncle, who had lived in Orleans, died without issue, and left his entire fortune to Gaugin and his sister. Because testamentary formalities lasted a long time, the painter availed himself of the help of friends and of loans that he was able to make on the basis of his inheritance. He was also able to persuade the owners of the Durand-Ruel gallery to organize an exhibition of his works from Tahiti. Despite a special guide written by the already famous August Strinberg, in which that author clarified the principles of this new style in painting cultivated by Gaugin, the public was not in a state either to understand or appreciate his work. His unnatural colors were made fun of (yellow ocean, purple trees), while one of the English women, looking at a dog of a crimson color, even shrieked with emotion at the effect. (65)

However, the artistic elite in Paris, with the known poet-symbolist Stephen Mallarme at its head, reacted completely differently at a Gaugin exhibition; Mallarme wrote, "It is extraordinary that so much mystery can be put into so much brilliance." (66) A certain solace for the painter was the fact that although it was possible to sell only eleven canvases, one of the few purchasers was Edgar Degas, who bought two paintings and six drawings. From the financial standpoint, the exhibition was a failure; however, the artist retained a good opinion of himself, and in a letter to his wife boasted "For the moment many people consider me the greatest modern painter." (67) Having the appreciation of the artistic elite, Gauguin began to invite other creative artists, not just painters, to meetings that he organized every Thursday in his new home. After returning to Paris, Gaugin rented a not very large apartment on the first floor, where he also had his studio. In the same house, on the ground floor, lived the Molards.

Ida Ericson-Molard was a Swedish woman, who occupied herself with sculpture, while her husband William Molard, was a composer. The Molards had a daughter, 13-year-old Judith, who was the issue (whom William had adopted) of a short-lived relationship of Mrs. Molard with a singer in Stockholm. The Molards belonged to the Parisian bohemia, and their frequent guests received on Saturdays were such known people as Maurice Ravel, Edward Grieg, Claude Debussy, and Frederick Delius. For their Saturday meetings, Gaugin was also invited, and he quickly became friends with the Scandinavian marriage, and, in particular, with their 13-year-old daughter. On Thursdays, a similar group met at Gaugin's apartment, although, among his guests there were more painters. Among those were Alphonse Mucha, a painter of Czech origin; the Pole, Wladyslaw Slewinski; his old friend Schuffenecker; as well as others. One of the last was the well-known author and dramatist, August Strinberg, who wrote the guide for Gauguin's art exhibition. Strindberg,

who suffered from eczema on his palms, occupied himself with amateur chemistry; during the course of one experiment, he burned his already affected hands, causing him to land in the hospital. Here is a short account of what he saw there: "he was surrounded by what he called a company of spectres... a nose missing here, an eye there, at third with a dangling lip, another with a crumbling cheek." (68) This fragment from Strindberg's account is interpreted as an account of patients hospitalized there with syphilis, which disease, it has been attempted to attribute to Strindberg. However, the patients described by him did not have to be ill with syphilis, as these types of skin lesions could have been the result of tuberculosis, or malignancies, or other systemic diseases, and not necessarily of venereal origin.

Gauguin's marriage to Mette had been in a state of falling apart for a long time, and the chances of the couple growing closer were ever less. Their mutual communications during this time concerned mostly financial matters, which separated them even further. The painter behaved as a free person, while around him many women circulated, fulfilling or wanting to fulfill the role of a *vahine*. Shortly after returning to Paris, Gauguin met with Juliette Huet, the mother of his daughter, who did not want to live with the painter this time, being concerned that Gaugin could obtain paternal rights to her only child, whom she loved very much. This does not mean that she did not want to meet with him, but here, she met with a certain problem, as in the painter's life there now appeared a new 13-year-old girl of oriental beauty, who was called, "Annah the Javanese." (5c.9). Annah was offered to Gaugin as a model, and pleased him, as she reminded him of Teha'amana, left on Tahiti, although Annah was much different than Tache'amana. She did not like taking care of the house, was meddlesome and talkative, and appeared at Gaugin's house with a small monkey that she kept as a pet. It was Annah and her monkey that became the cause,

pregnant with consequences, of a mishap that befell Gaugin in Brittany.

In April 1893, upon the invitation of the Polish painter, Wladyslaw Slewinski, Gauguin left for Brittany. Slewinski rented a small house in Le Pouldu, in which he organized an artists' studio. A group of painters who were friendly with Gaugin were already there; during the day, they spent their time painting, the evenings in local restaurants, and the nights in the arms of girlfriends, whom they had brought with them. The cheerful company often visited surrounding villages, and one day a larger group traveled to a small fishing village, Concarneau situated not far from

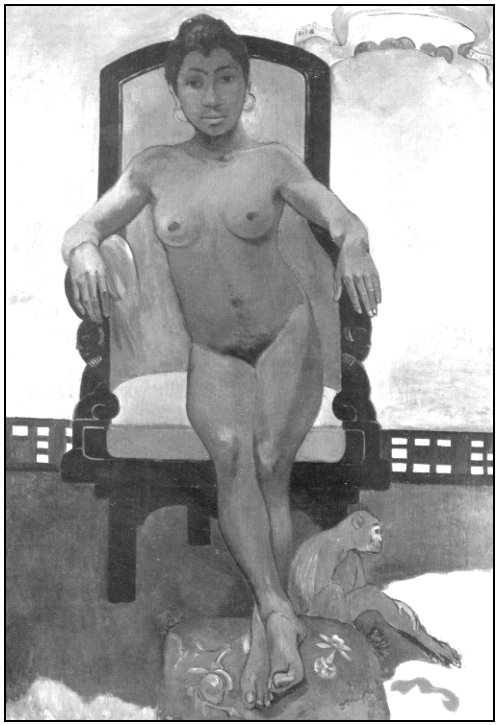


Figure 5c 9 Annah de Javnesse (1893 or 1894) as painted by Paul Gauguin

Pont-Aven. While the company walked along the main street, the attention of the people, mostly of the children, turned toward Annah and her monkey. At a certain moment, comments regarding Annah were heard, and then stones were thrown. When the painters tried to stop the boys from throwing stones, their fathers came to their defense, and this, as a consequence led to a fight among the adults. Gaugin, similarly to the other men, joined the brawl, which ended terribly for him, because he experienced a break in his right calf. This was an open fracture of the shinbone (69), although others write that it was a "compound fracture of the malleolus with dislocation of the foot." (70) Gaugin was transported to the hospital, where doctors informed him that the process of healing would be long and painful. After several days' stay, he was allowed to return to the hotel, where he was bed-bound in the company of ever-more-bored Annah. He was prescribed strong medications for pain, including morphine, whose action the painter enhanced with a larger amount of alcohol. In the meanwhile, an additional problem appeared. His landlady from his previous visit to Le Pouldu, Marie Poupee, refused to return the paintings and sculptures left with her, something on which he had counted, so Gaugin took her to court. Then he was informed that he would soon be needed at the trial brought by those injured in the fight in Concarneau. Annah lasted with him until the end of August then, left for Paris, while Gauguin stayed in Brittany as a result of the slowly healing leg and the court procedures. During this long and idle stay at the seashore, the painter became more and more settled in the conviction that his stay in France made no sense, and that only a return to one of the southern islands – this time he was dreaming of Samoa – was the only solution for him.

After his return to Paris, Gaugin found himself in an almost empty flat, as Annah, upon moving out, had taken the bulk of the furnishings – although, in contrast to Marie Paupee, she did not take the paintings hanging there. Annah,

as one can guess, was not particularly tied to Gauguin, and had romances with many other men, among whom were Stanislaw Wyspianski, whom I have already mentioned, for whom she posed, and whose mistress she was for a time. In a drawing by Wyspianski, Annah is presented somewhat differently than by Gauguin, namely as a pugnacious girl with an unruly tuft of hair falling onto her face. (71)

Gauguin did not like loneliness, and after Annah left him, consoled himself with the company of Judith Molard, the 13-year-old daughter of his downstairs neighbors. Young Miss Molard had a crush on the painter, who, from time to time, gave her painting lessons. The 45-year-old Gaugin treated the 13-year-old as something between a daughter and a pretty doll, with which one could play. He perceived the infatuation of the young Miss, but did not try to take advantage of it. Judith often sat in his studio watching how he worked, and was a witness to other of Gaugin's women – Juliet Huet and Annah, when both, meeting at the painter's, did not avoid spiteful comments. Completely in love with the painter, as she wrote in her memoirs, Judith would not have had anything against a greater aggressiveness from Gaugin, whose occasional caresses were restricted to fondling the growing breasts of the young girl. Judith lived through Gaugin's next trip to Tahiti with difficulty, and when on the day before he left, the painter invited her to the theater, she held his hand in her palms with feeling, looking steadfastly at his greying hair, not daring to touch it in a theater full of people. (72) Several days earlier, Judith asked the painter for a lock of hair as a memento; this was recounted as:

> She asked him for a keepsake and he gave her a lock of hair vaguely gold coloured, in a malachite pendant, he asked for a lock of hers - but not from her head – [from] the beard as he delicately put it, telling her he would keep it under his pillow to bring him beautiful dreams. (72)

Despite a clear consent, and maybe wishes from the developing young woman, Gaugin did not take advantage of her. He understood that it was not appropriate to take advantage of the youthful feelings of an inexperienced teenager, or, perhaps he did not want to incur the disfavor of her parents, with whom he was on friendly terms. Another reason for such a decision may have been the fact that at the time when he was saying good-bye, it was just after anti-luetic treatment, and it is more than likely that his doctors forbade him sexual contact because of the possibility of infecting his partner.

Gaugin became infected with syphilis most likely in January 1895, as Henri Perruchot reported in the following words:

> In January when accompanying Sequin (a friend of the painter's) to a dance hall near Avenue du Maine one night, he had been accosted by a prostitute. A policeman had warned him of the danger he would run in the arms of that particular girl, but he had merely shrugged his shoulders: 'At my age, one never catches anything!'

However, that night he caught syphilis. At the beginning of March, Gauguin went to Brittany for a few days, no doubt to finish off some last –minute business. Sequin, who was there with him, wrote to O'Connor (another painter) on the 7th, "The poor old chap is very ill. He has a syphilitic rash all over his body, and particularly on the wounds in his leg." (73) A generalized rash, which appears usually after 6 weeks from the time of infection, implies that, in March 1895, Gaugin was in the second stage of syphilis, in which skin changes may appear practically in every place on the body, characteristically including the palms and soles.

The disease and its cure delayed Gaugin's voyage to the other hemisphere by several months. The purpose of the trip also changed, as he decided not to go to Samoa, but, rather,

to Tahiti again, recognizing that he would need medical help, that only the military hospital in Papeete could assure. The wound on his leg did not want to heal, and the frequent return of symptoms of secondary syphilis did not help. Treatments for this disease at the end of the nineteenth century were less toxic than earlier, but were still of little effect, and relapses of skin lesions were observed in many patients.

Gaugin arrived in Papeete at the beginning of September 1905, and his first impression was not the best. Just after arrival, he realized that in the time he had been in France, Tahiti had undergone further Europeanization, which led him to the conclusion that, in order to find himself in a region of Polynesia untouched by civilization, he should travel farther and, concretely, to one of the islands of the Marquesas archipelago. He was unable to do this right away as a result of the state of his health, which required frequent visits to the doctor. The wound in his leg was not healing while on other places on his skin, there appeared ulcers and rashes, most probably associated with lues, which can continue usually for two-three years from infection. That the painter was not in his best state is attested to b the behavior of his former *vahine*, Teha'amana, who appeared when she first learned that *Koke* had returned to the island, and was prepared to continue the interrupted relationship. After Gaugin's departure for Paris, Teha'amana married, or, to say it more accurately, bound herself to some young man, with whom she had lived for some time.

Teha'amana remained with Gaugin for only one week, and it was said that she was with him that long only because the painter bestowed many presents on her. The girl was frightened by, and with difficulty hid her aversion to this once adored man, who, as described, was covered all over with running sores. (74) I will permit myself to remind the reader again that skin changes in secondary lues can mimic other

diseases, such as ecthyma, psoriasis, smallpox or pyoderma.

In recurrent secondary syphilis, there are symptomless periods when the patient appears normal, and it is most probably thanks to that that Gaugin was able to find himself another *vahine*. She was a 14-year-old girl, whom the painter named Pahura, although her full name was Pahura a Tai. Pahura was neither as attractive, nor as intelligent as Teha'amana, and it is probably for that reason that she agreed to stay with Gaugin. The painter built a house not far from Papeete, doubtless counting on a need for availing himself of the hospital. He found himself there in July of the following year, as a result of the bothersome, non-healing ulceration on his leg, and major pains associated with it. Notes from Gaugin's stay on the general ward have been preserved in hospital documents from this time.

We know that Gaugin had many health problems during this time, including ulceration over the calf associated with (concurrent) eczematization, bilateral conjunctivitis, inflammation of the joints, a post-traumatic wound on the right calf, as well as syphilis. In the hospital entries, the following information was found: "The patient weighed 71.5 kg, had a shoulder joint dislocation, and … was treated [with]: sulphur baths, zinc oxide salves, mercury ointment and injections of sodium cacodylic sodium as well as morphine." (75) Treatment did not last very long, as he was unable to pay the costs of his stay, but it probably helped, as Gaugin felt better, and began to paint again. Many of his significant paintings appeared during this time, including one showing Pahura in a pose reminiscent of Manet's "Olympia." In December 1896, a check from Paris arrived, which improved how he felt even more, as it allowed payment of his debts and the purchase of indispensible necessities for painting and furnishing of his house. Unfortunately, this positive state did not last long, as in April of the following year, he received a letter from Mette with the information that

his beloved daughter, Aline, had died of pneumonia, as well as a notice that he would have to leave the house in which he lived, because the lot on which it stood had been sold. Whereas the death of Aline affected the painter very deeply, the fresh news that his newborn daughter had just died did not have any great effect on him at all. Not many biographers mention this incident, although, in my opinion, it is worth noting they described Gaugin as a syphilitic.

So, shortly before Christmas 1896, Pahura bore him a new daughter. The child was weak, and died in a few days. (76) This news came from a cousin of Pahura, M. Poarai a Tai, and has its corroboration in January 1944 article by Eric Ramsden, "Death of Gaugin's Tahitian Mistress" (*Pacific Monthly*, Sydney). Knowing Gaugin's state of health at this time, one can wonder about the cause of the child's death. Did she die, as many other newborns, of one of variety of possible causes, of which there was no lack then, or did Gaugin perhaps infect Pahura with syphilis, and she then gave birth to a child with congenital lues? There is no information available to say that Pahura had symptoms of syphilis, nor that she was treated for it. All that we know is that Gauguin experienced a resurgence of skin lesions, which in secondary syphilis are very infectious.

One speaks of oozing ulcerations, which are commonly swarming with treponemes, being a huge danger for a sexual partner. However, one could have questioned a hypothesis of congenital syphilis in Pahura's child, by presenting as evidence the fact of her having borne a healthy son. That, however, is not an argument for excluding such an illness in Pahura, as Gaugin's son was born three years later, at a time when the chance of giving birth to a healthy child by a mother sick with lues was far greater.

The year 1897 was not a happy year for the painter. The news about his first daughter's death drove him into a depression, which deepened by the recurring skin changes, now difficult to hide from friends and neighbors. Some of

them gossiped and wondered if Gaugin might not be suffering from leprosy. His skin problems were joined by problems with his eyes, and in November, the painter experienced a mild heart attack. Gaugin began to think about death: "My journey to Tahiti was a mad adventure, but it has turned out to be sad and miserable. I see no way out except death, which solves all problems …." (77) Despite being depressed, however, during this difficult period, Gaugin painted one of his best-known paintings, entitled, *Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we Going?* after which he decided to finish himself off; equipped with a box of arsenic, he climbed up a mountain, on which he intended to commit suicide (Fig.5c 10) However, as he had little experience in this area, he took too big a dose of the arsenic, which caused violent vomiting, thus emptying his stomach of the poison.

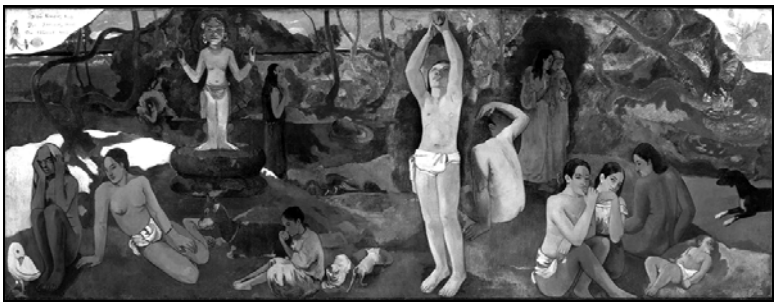


Figure 5c 10 Where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we going? Painted by Paul Gauguin (1897).

After more than a dozen hours of lying in the bushes, the unsuccessful suicide returned home on his own legs. He began to paint again, while to repair his small budget, he undertook journalism, writing mainly for satirical periodicals. This also was not enough for living expenses, and he obtained employment in the Public Works department in Papeete. In March 1900, the Ambrose Vollard auction house

in Paris signed a contract with him, in which it obligated itself in return for a certain number of regularly conveyed paintings to pay him a monthly stipend. From this, one can get the impression that Gaugin's painting slowly found buyers, which would indicate that having a constant income that could possibly increase with time. The artist would then be able to devote himself entirely to painting and to lead a peaceful life in Tahiti. Additionally, his age and worsening health could have suggested that the painter would settle down, but Gaugin would not have been himself were he not to try something new.

For some time, Gaugin had intended to move to a region of Polynesia less touched by civilization than Tahiti; the choice fell to the Marquesas archipelago, and, concretely, to the island of Hiva Oa. The painter hoped to find new vistas to paint and new models, which he began to lack in Tahiti. According to a befriended neighbor to whom the painter unburdened himself of his problems, it was actually a lack of women that was one of the most important reasons for relocating: "It was in fact the sores which made him leave Tahiti, because no woman there would sleep with him any more. The women of the Marquesas were poorer and more primitive and he would have better opportunities." (78) According to this same source, Gaugin was said to have replied that he had been told that in the Marquesas one could rent a model for a handful of sweets (candy). When he proposed to Pahura that she leave with him, she declined, and it is hard to be surprised. She was by then twenty-years-old, had a 2-year-old son, and did not intend to devote herself to an ageing and sick painter. The fate of her son appeared to be of little consequence to Gaugin, as he judged, appropriately, in fact, that Pahura would have no problems with eventually giving him up for adoption, should she wish to arrange her life differently.

Gaugin left Papeete on the September 10, 1901, and after a voyage of six days landed at the small port colony of

Atuona on the island of Hiva Oa. Even at the moment of disembarking, Gaugin realized that his hope of finding a civilization untouched by European influence was unrealistic. Among those greeting the ship's passengers was a French gendarme in uniform, some Catholic missionaries clad in dark cassocks, and also natives, who, as he imagined, should have presented themselves in half-naked attire, but were clothed in long dresses reaching to the ground. What hurt him the most was that the local women, who, as he expected would greet him in scanty costumes, were dressed in long dresses, closely covering their bodies. It shortly became apparent that the inhabitants of the island lived in a certain cultural vacuum and, although there were people among them who remembered the taste of human flesh, a large part of them took full advantage of the accomplishments of European civilization, which did not go well for them. In the course of 50 years from the appearance there of Europeans, the population of the Marquesas was reduced by close to 80%, largely due to the introduction there of formerly unknown infectious diseases such as smallpox, measles, tuberculosis, leprosy, and venereal diseases. One of the later plagues owed to Europeans was the appearance of alcohol and an epidemic of alcoholism among the adults. (79)

Gaugin decided to stay in Atuona, as it was the only place in the Marquesas that maintained regular contact with Tahiti, as well as being the place where the only doctor on the island lived. The last was very important, as the painter's health was failing ever more frequently.

Gaugin bought a lot and built a house covered with palm leaves, which was large for the local conditions; it had large living quarters, a large patio, and a studio workshop where he could paint. Very quickly he established contact with his neighbors, mainly women, organizing parties abundantly sprinkled with alcohol. Amusements would last until midnight and often longer, with at least one of the lady participants

usually staying until morning. His house, on which he hung a sign reading *Maison du Joie* (The House of Pleasure), was frequently visited by old and boring (female) neighbors, whereas, as we may remember, the painter rather preferred young women who had not exceeded fifteen years of age. In a short while, he found a family that had a 14-year-old daughter, *Vaeho*, and, with the help of gifts and bribes, managed to persuade her parents that it would be better for their daughter to leave school and to live with him. Besides Vaeho, there appeared in Gaugin's house a cook and a gardener (we don't know of what sex), employed for a small amount of money, which he now did not lack. (80) Gaugin began to employ models, among them one with red hair, which was rarely encountered among the inhabitants of this region of the world. Her name was *Tahotaua* and she had a husband, whom it bothered not at all that his wife not only posed, but also slept with Gaugin. On the Marquesas, and generally throughout Polynesia, polyandry was a quite common phenomenon, and husbands had nothing against other men taking advantage of their wives, as long as it suited those wives. Tahotaua appeared in one of Gauguin's portraits, entitled *Young Girl with Fan*, as well as on a photograph probably taken at the same time. Both the painting and the photograph are currently in the Folwang Museum in Essen, Germany, and show a young woman of very original beauty. (81, 82)

In July 1802, Gaugin found out that his steady partner, *Vaeh*o was pregnant, and in mid-September, he became the happy father of a little girl. Vaeho moved back with her parents, and Gaugin was left by himself. Accustomed to the company of young girls, he started to curry the favor of young students attending a school run by Catholic mission located near his house. This naturally did not please the school's administration, and its director, Bishop Martin, forbade the students to go to Gaugin's house. The painter considered this a declaration of war.

Bishop Martin reportedly did not observe all of the commandments, himself, including the one obligating him to celibacy. He had a servant named Teresa, about whom everyone *knew* that she was his mistress, and Gaugin contrived to embarrass him. He sculpted two life-sized figures, which he placed at the entrance to his property. One of them represented the Bishop, the only difference being that in place of the hat on the clergyman's head, there were horns; the second was a naked woman, looking for all the world like the Bishop's supposed mistress. It need not be added that neither Bishop Martin nor his subordinates were delighted with this, and it was a moment in which the war axe between Gaugin and the influential bishop was bared for good. This happened at the least advantageous moment, as just at this time, his health started to fail, whereas he should have been able to depend on having the greatest number of friends around him. In addition, the entire row, caused by the painter's appetite for young girls, made no sense, because his health had deteriorated to such a point that he would not have been in a state to play with them anyway. In autumn of 1902, severe leg pains appeared, associated with ulcerations. Gaugin could not sleep; he gave himself injections of morphine and took large doses of laudanum, which caused him to be constantly drowsy. (83) Unable to work, and not seeing any end to his sufferings, he began to consider a return to Europe. The friend with whom he corresponded, recommended against returning to Paris, explaining that "a return could damage his status as an already legendary artist working on the antipodes." (84)

Unable to paint, Gaugin began to write, and finished a book entitled *Before and After,* which is something of a type of diary. Additionally, he engaged in a polemic with the town administration, standing in defense of the original inhabitants of the island, supposedly taken advantage of by the authorities, and concretely, with one of its components, the local gendarmerie. It all ended with Gaugin being sentenced

to payment of a fine, as well as three months in jail. The painter filed an appeal of the sentence, but it no longer had any meaning. The legal skirmishes with the authorities' representatives were not without significance for his health. He was losing his balance, and after one of his court rows, began hemorrhaging from his respiratory tract. (85)

Gaugin was already a very sick man, practically an invalid. Ulcerations on his legs were oozing pus, the skin around them was itching, and he could neither walk, work nor sleep. The painter lived on morphine and laudanum. On the day of his death, the local pastor appeared at his bedside; he was called by a neighbor who had been taking care of the patient for some time, playing the role of nurse and physician, because the only doctor who had been on the island had gone to Tahiti. When the pastor appeared, Gaugin had experienced two bouts of unconsciousness. He lay helpless in his bed, not knowing what was going on around him. After examining him, the pastor-turned-physician, found a large abscess at the base of Gaugin's spine. He lanced and drained it, apparently providing relief to the patient. (86) After a short conversation, he left the painter, who appeared to be in a better state. When called again a few hours later, he found Gaugin lying in his bed, dead. Next to his bed was found an empty morphine syringe, as well a laudanum box, equally empty. To his surprise, he also found Bishop Martin and several monks from the Catholic mission there; despite the contentious relationship, they had managed to compose themselves for a friendly gesture, and came with the Church's last sacraments.

The last picture that Gaugin painted in the Marquesas bore the title, *Snow Scene in Brittany*. Could it be that the painter, who so often fled from European civilization, was homesick for Europe during the last months of his life?

VINCENT VAN GOGH (1853-1890)

Vincent van Gogh, one of the most famous European painters of the nineteenth century, did not have luck with women. He longed to love and be loved, but none of the women to whom he declared that love wanted to return it. Everything that he did in life, he did with passion. First, as a Protestant lay preacher and evangelizer among miners working under conditions that defied any norms and suffering great poverty, he passionately voiced the word of God; then, later, he devoted himself to painting, to which he gave himself up exclusively, working from morning till night. His paintings currently adorn the greatest museums on earth, or are the pearls in private collections, despite the fact that, during his life, he was able to sell only one. He yearned for love, but did not meet a woman who wanted to return it. He sought consolation in the arms of prostitutes, but there, also, found none. On the other hand, he did find something he was not seeking, namely two diseases: first, gonorrhea, then syphilis. However, the supposition that the latter was the cause of van Gogh's death is, in my opinion, unfounded, as, long before he became infected with lues, the painter had symptoms of mental illness, and it was the consequences of that, which led him to suicide.

Vincent Willem van Gogh was born in March 1853 not far from Breda in southern Holland. His father was the pastor of the Reformed Church of Holland, while his mother occupied herself with the home. Vincent was the second by birth, but the first healthy child born to the van Goghs, as their first son was stillborn. Vincent received the name of his grandfather, who, like his father, was occupied with theology. In the family home, two professions dominated: the van Goghs occupied themselves either with serving God or with art. Vincent's paternal uncle was a sculptor, while other family members either traded in works of art, or were pastors. Vincent tried all three occupations. First, he worked as an art trader, next he

dedicated himself to serving God, and finally he undertook painting.

Vincent began to draw while at school, and despite a later variety of undertakings, never stopped. In school he did not distinguish himself in anything, yet at age sixteen, and thanks to one of his uncles, he obtained employment in the firm *Goupiel et Cie*, which was occupied with the art trade (Fig. 5c. 11). Van Gogh must have discharged his duties well, as, after four years working at The Hague, he was sent to London, where the English branch of the company was located. It was in London, at age twenty that the future painter fell in love for the first time, the object of his affections being a Miss Eugenie Loyer, the daughter of the housekeeper where he lived. Unfortunately, Vincent was too late, as the young lady had already given her heart – and perhaps not only her heart – to the previous tenant, to whom she was secretly engaged. Vincent nonetheless tried to fight for Eugenie's favors, but was not successful. Jo Bonger, later his sister-in-law, felt that the young man was greatly affected by this first romantic failure, that he lived through this first disappointment with difficulty, and that this could have negatively affected his character. Supposedly, from this time onward, Vincent became very quiet and very religious, and began to show a tendency toward depression. (87) In a letter to Anthony van Rappard, written a year after this incident, van Gogh wrote: "It remains a wound which I carry with me; it lies deep and cannot be healed. After a year it will be the same as the first day." (88)

Figure 5c 11 Photograph of Vincent van Gogh (ca 1872)

At the end of 1876, Vincent returned to Holland, and after a few months of work in a bookstore in Dordrecht, he left for Amsterdam, where he began theological studies. During his stay in that town, he managed to become known as an eccentric and misanthrope, avoiding any entertainments of student life, and devoting his free time to translating the Bible into various languages, or to drawing. It is difficult to say whether this was the result of his romantic disappointment or of interest in theology, but during his time in Amsterdam, he did not seek the favors of any women. His studies did not go very well, and at a certain point, he rejected the study of Greek and Latin, considering these languages to be dead and not of any use to his intended further missionary work.

As van Gogh did not pass the required examinations, he was sent to do evangelical work in the mining center of Borinage in Belgium without a diploma. He found himself there in an environment of underpaid, hard-working miners, living under conditions defying any standards. He joined in with them, and tried to live as they did. He also did a lot of drawing, and from this period comes a series of sketches representing miners and their difficult life. The nature of his

missionary work, and attempts to live at the level of his parishioners did not please his church's superiors. Likewise, the miners, with whom he attempted to live in solidarity, and to whom he professed the Bible, considered him a crank. (89) In a short while, he was recalled, and returned to his parents, who were living in Etten, in Holland. It was then that his parents, probably for the first time, came to the conclusion that their son was ill, and needed psychiatric care.

During Vincent's stay in Etten, a cousin, Kee von Stricker, older than he by seven years, visited his parents. She was the daughter of Madam van Gogh's sister, and had an 8-year-old son. Kee had been widowed not long before, and sometimes accompanied Vincent during his trips out of town, watching him as he drew. The poor widow was shocked when van Gogh, without warning, proposed marriage to her. She answered, as cited by all biographers, with the words, "No, nay, never" (*nooit, neen, nimer*), after which she quickly returned to her parents. Even while Kee's husband, was alive, Vincent had visited the von Strickers in Amsterdam, and remembered the idylls represented by the picture of a loving family, about which he wrote in one of his letters: "When one sees them sitting together in the evening … They are devoted to each other and one can readily see that where love dwells the Lord commands his blessing." (90) In asking for Kee's hand, he surely saw himself in the role of her late husband, taking care of his wife and child. Vincent had long thought of establishing a family, and it had appeared to him that fate had provided a solution of which he had long dreamed. He was convinced that Kee was a woman he loved, and would always love. "She and no other," he would say, and could not understand why Kee had refused his proposal. In correspondence with his brother, with whom he exchanged hundreds of letters, he bewailed his fate, and sought advice and consolation. (91, 92)

Not discouraged by the refusal, he sent a letter to Kee's father, Pastor Stricker, in which he announced his coming to

Amsterdam, with the intention of meeting with his daughter. He emphasized that his intentions were serious, and that he would be an ideal husband for Kee. During his visit with the Strickers, Vincent found out that, upon learning of his coming, Kee had left the house, while Pastor Stricker explained to him in no uncertain terms, that he could not count on marriage with his daughter, whereas he considered van Gogh's pressing for a change in this decision to be improper and loathsome. In response, Vincent put his hand over the flame of a kerosene lamp, declaring that he wanted to see Kee, if only for the time that he was able to hold his hand over the flame. Reportedly, the Pastor, acting by reflex, quickly blew out the flame, Vincent, having instead demonstrated that his mental state needed treatment. (93)

The visit in Amsterdam and flat refusal on Kee's part radically changed the future artist's perception of the world, particularly his relations with women. In a letter to Theo, he wrote:

> That dammed world is too cold for me; I need a woman, I cannot, I may not, I will not live without love. I am only a man, and a man with passions; I must go to a woman, otherwise I shall freeze or turn to stone – or, in short, I shall have let events browbeat me. (94)

The consequences of this transformation were noticeable just two months later, when, in his next letter to his brother, he wrote that he had met a woman who suited him, and with whom he wanted to become involved, and next described her.

> She was fairly tall and strongly built; she did not have the hands of a lady like Kee, but the hands of a woman who does a great deal of work; but she was not coarse or common, and had something very feminine about her. She reminded me of some quaint figure by Chardin or Frere or perhaps Jan Steen.

> Well, what the French call "*une ouvriere*" (a prostitute). She had had many careers, you could see, and life had ben hard for her. Oh, nothing refined, nothing out of the ordinary, nothing unusual ... It is not the first time I was unable to resist the feeling of affection, aye affection, that special affection and love for those women who are so damned and condemned and despised by the clergymen from the lofty heights of the pulpit. I do not damn them, I do not condemn them. I do not despise them. (95)

The text of this letter witnesses to the fact that van Gogh had started to take advantage of the services of prostitutes, that he looked upon their profession with understanding and compassion, and even condemned those (clergymen) who condemned them. His attitude during this period clearly shows that nothing linked him with his church any longer, and that he did not agree with its opinions; he even criticized the lack of compassion in its representatives.

Not long afterwards, van Gogh met Clarise Marie “Sien” Hoornik, a homeless prostitute and alcoholic, with whom he began to live under one roof. When Vincent met her, Sien already had a 5-year-old daughter, and was expecting another child (about which Vincent most likely did not know), who was born six months later. This time, the painter’s partner was neither tall, nor well built, nor strong. Older than Vincent by three years, she was a pale, thin woman of mistrustful look, a raspy voice and a sharp tongue. Nevertheless, through Vincent’s eyes, Sien was “beautiful” – although the drawing representing her does not confirm such a judgment. Drawing Sien, van Gogh wanted to present the appearance of a weak woman fighting for her place in life, a scorned woman, toward whom compassion is due. This drawing, he named *Sorrow.*

Involvement with a prostitute was met with criticism from Vincent’s family and friends. Acquaintances of the time

began to avoid him; Theo tried to persuade him to end the relationship, while his father did everything possible to separate Vincent from Sien. The older gentleman voiced his opinion this way and that, saying that the behavior of his son was proof of his lunacy, and that he should get himself to a psychiatric hospital as quickly as possible. Vincent did, in fact, land in a hospital, but not in a psychiatric one, rather on a ward for the treatment of venereal diseases. He had become infected with gonorrhea, and the source was Sien, who was then in an advanced stage of her pregnancy. This fact was kept from the family, although Theo was informed of it. "I am in the hospital ... I have what they call the 'clap'," wrote van Gogh in a letter to his brother. (96) The Doctors assured him that his state was not serious, but that treatment would take a few weeks. I want to remind the reader that, whereas currently gonorrhea is treated with a single dose of antibiotics its treatment was neither easy nor totally effective at that time. It was long and painful, and complications were a daily affair, with one of the more common being narrowing of the urethra, causing difficulty in urination. Many patients suffered from gonococcal arthritis, mainly of the large joints (knees, ankles, or hips), which often ended in permanent crippling. Vincent was treated with urethral irrigations containing sulfates, which were among the most painful, as well as with tablets of quinine, doubtless for fever, which could have indicated that the infection was not limited to the urethra, but that he could have had what we would now call "disseminated gonococcal infection (DGI)." During his stay in the hospital, van Gogh was visited by friends, and also his father, who, finding out about all this, decided to reunite with his son. Sien also visited him, and, before long, found herself in the hospital, where she gave birth to a healthy son.

After returning home, Vincent felt completely well, but Sien's state of health, particularly her mental state, began to awaken many reservations in him. Their relationship worsened, while he feared that Sien wanted to return to her

previous occupation. Additionally, the painter himself began to come to the conclusion that taking care of an ill woman suffering from alcoholism was beyond his strength, particularly as he discerned that his work as an artist-painter was suffering as a result. After almost a year of living together with Sien and her children, Vincent decided to move out, and for a short time rented an apartment in Drenthe – a locality situated near the border with Germany. He did not feel well there, and soon moved back with his parents living now in Nuenen in southern Holland. There, he also did not feel comfortable, as his parents were putting pressure on him to get some type of paying occupation that would allow him to continue his artistic interests. This state of frustration potentiated his feelings of guilt about abandoning a sick woman and her children, to whom the artist had become accustomed, had taken a liking to, and somehow yearned after.

More or less a year after breaking up with Sien, a new woman appeared along his path – Margaretha (Margot) Begemann, who was his parents' neighbor. Margot was 12 years older than Vincent, and she first became interested in him. She lived together with her mother and three sisters, among whom was a distinct rivalry, based on which among them could find a husband first. Margot often was in Vincent's company, going for walks in the area, and conversing on a variety of subjects. It appears that she expected some initiative on his part, as she was still a young woman, quite pretty, and with a warm character. Yet, it was said that it was she who first expressed her love for Vincent, and the young pair began to dream about plans for marriage. This idea did not appeal to either Vincent's family or to Margot's sisters or mother. Margot's family considered him unsuitable for a husband, that he was too young for her, and that he was encumbered by his recent relationship with a prostitute; additionally, he had no stable source of income, and was, generally speaking, an irresponsible person.

Vincent's family, for their part, felt that their son should first find a stable occupation, and only then think about marriage. In such a setting, Margot took strychnine during one of their walks ; this was a poison favored by suicidal women at the time. Vincent tried to save her by inducing vomiting, then took her to a physician, who gave the unsuccessful suicide an antidote. Margot recovered after a time, but there was no further talk about marriage.

The interpretation of Miss Bergemann's behavior, similarly to its being a motive for suicide, was not clear to the end. It was said that Margot could have been expecting a child by Vincent, something that he categorically denied, asserting that he had never slept with her. Another version said that the doctor who saved her confirmed the presence of opiates in her stomach, which could be evidence that the lady was treating herself "for nerves." Vincent knew something about the subject, as, when writing about Margot, he spoke of her "critical nerve disease ... her neuritis, her encephalitis, her melancholia, her religious mania." (97) He did not feel very well after these happenings, while his father wrote to Theo, "We have had difficult days again with Vincent ... He is very irritable and over-excited … sad and unhappy … Melancholy had led to drink and drinking led to violence … There is a question whether we can go on living together." (97)

Nine months after the affair with Margot Bergemann, the senior Theodorus van Gogh died, the cause of his death most likely being a stroke. Despite the many things that differentiated them, Vincent was greatly moved by his father's death, and experienced a guilty conscience, the more so because his mother kept reminding him that it was his behavior and the problems he had caused that accounted for that death. She made up her own mind as to the psychological state of her son, and continued to maintain that the most appropriate place for him was a psychiatric hospital.

Due to the difficult atmosphere at home, Vincent moved away from his mother, and took up residence in the suburbs of Nuenen, from where it was closer to the locations where he was painting, where he could paint rustic landscapes and scenes of the lives of the villagers. It is from this period that came one of his better-known early paintings, titled *The Potato Eaters*, and representing the peasant de Groots family during their evening meal. One of the figures in this painting is a woman by the name of Stien (Gordina de Groot), sitting at the table wearing a wide, white bonnet (Fig. 5c.12).

Figure 5c 12 Vincent van Gogh. The Potato Eaters, Lithograph (1885)

Stien often posed for Vincent, a fact that was noticed and appropriately interpreted by the neighbors and friends of the girl. One day, the local minister appeared before Vincent (some biographers say that there were two), and notified him that the local community was opposed to his actions, and that he should not expect any of the parishioners to pose for

him any longer. Van Gogh was accused, although not immediately, of romancing his models, and this certainly referred to Stien, who as it soon became apparent, was expecting a child. After a while, it became clear that the father of the 17-year-old Stien's child was someone else, whereas the friendship of Vincent with Miss de Groot was of a purely platonic nature.

The unfavorable atmosphere that now prevailed in the area caused Vincent to leave Nuenen. In November 1885, van Gogh arrived in Antwerp with the intent of studying painting at the local Academy of Fine Arts (*Academie des Beaux Arts*). Very quickly, however, he got into a conflict with the director of this institution, whose teaching, in Vincent's opinion, was rather conservative. Vincent endured no longer than six weeks at the Academy, and later, on his own, started to study the works of the great masters, mainly Rubens, whose paintings he found in the local museum. Despite the fact that studying the works of the great masters was time-consuming, Vincent managed to find some free time, which he devoted to drinking absinthe and visits to the local bordellos, of which – Antwerp being a port town – there was no shortage. The consequences of such a lifestyle were not long in coming. Vincent became infected with syphilis, most likely at the end of 1885. Not all agree as to the diagnosis, some believing that the treatment used does not indicate lues. (97a) In none of the biographies available to me did I discover in which stage of the disease Vincent was when he went to a physician for the first time. I can only suppose that the first visit to Dr. Amadeus Gavenaille took place during an early stage of disease, that is, primary or secondary, in which the first skin manifestations of this lues appear, i.e. painless ulceration on the genitals in first-stage syphilis, or easily noticeable rashes on the skin or mucous membranes in secondary syphilis. Suggestions that van Gogh could have become infected in January 1882, I consider rather unlikely. They are based on the text of a

letter that he sent to his brother, in which he wrote that he had headaches and a fever, and felt terrible. (98) This is not the first time that I have met suggestions considering the moment of infection with syphilis to be based on the fact of development of fever, headaches and malaise. The truth is that in the early stage of secondary syphilis, usually after several weeks from infection, these types of symptoms can appear, but they are rare and described as unusual, which indicates that they can also be found in many other diseases. In the course of my multiyear medical practice, I have taken care of many patients ill with syphilis, and only a small handful presented at the clinic with these types of ailments. The majority of patients presented themselves with skin changes, which appeared on the genitalia or the skin of the trunk or extremities, or on the face. Here, I have to add, however, that there is a certain group of patients in whom skin changes either do not appear or are not very noticeable, and who find out about their illness by accidental (or intentional) blood testing for lues. This form of the disease we call latent syphilis, and one can only detect it with the help of appropriate laboratory tests. In van Gogh's time, such tests were not available, while patients with latent syphilis learned of their disease only in its late stage, when signs and symptoms of *tabes dorsalis*, general paresis, or the skin manifestations of third-stage disease appeared. A large proportion of patients with latent syphilis were completely unaware of their lues, and people died happily from other causes, unaware of the fact that they had once become infected with the pale treponeme.

Returning to van Gogh, it appears that he noticed some symptoms that inclined him to a visit to Dr. Cavenaille, who was a venereologist. Vincent was treated in accord with principles then in force, namely with mercury or, perhaps, iodine preparations. Vincent was also admitted to the Stuyvenberg hospital in Antwerp, where, as he noted in his sketchbook, he took *bain de siege* (seated bath or hip bath).

Mercury preparations, he took orally and/or in the form of rubs, whereupon, as he informed his brother, he suffered from almost all possible side effects that this type of treatment produced. Vincent wrote of ”greyish phlegm in [my] mouth, which was so filled with sores that [I] couldn’t chew or swallow food.” He had stomach problems, and felt very weak. His teeth loosened and began to fall out, and, just before leaving Antwerp, van Gogh had to pay a dentist 50 francs, a large sum for his means, to remove about a third of his dentition. (99) It was at this time (January 1885) that Vincent painted a skull with a cigarette in its teeth, which according to some biographers, was supposed to indicate that he felt like a dead man. Looking at this picture, I came to the conclusion that he probably did not have himself in mind, as the skull, from the teeth of which a cigarette sticks out, has a surprisingly full dentition, something that cannot be said of his own jaw – from which one-third of its teeth had been removed.

In March 1886, persuaded by Theo, Vincent moved to Paris. The capital of France was then the cultural capital of Europe, if not of the world, a city that attracted all kinds of intellectuals, artists, painters and scientists. The two brothers lived together, which, knowing Vincent’s character and his frequent pretensions against his brother, boded no good. Vincent enrolled for a course in painting with Fernand Corman, where he met many fellow painters, whose works currently hang in the world’s best museums. Among the students at Corman’s school, were his later friends, Emile Bernard and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec. (100) Besides these, van Gogh met many other painters there, including Paul Cezanne, Edgar Degas, Camille Pissaro, Claude Monet, Edouard Manet and Paul Gaugin. Many of them were just beginning their artistic careers, while some, such as Manet or Toulouse-Lautrec developed infections with syphilis similarly to Vincent, either before him or later. Vincent and Theo lived in Montmartre, an area inhabited mostly by artists,

a place where there were many small cafes, nightclubs, cabarets and of course, bordellos. A certain Italian woman, Agostina Segatori, many years older than Vincent, and one with a past, also had a club there. There, van Gogh exhibited then popular works of Japanese art which he had collected, as well as some of his own paintings. He arranged with Signora Segatori that, for the opportunity of boarding at her club (named The Tambourine) and an option to exhibit his own works there, he would pay her with paintings. Vincent not only ate there, but also may have slept with the proprietress. The arrangement functioned up to the moment when the owner declared bankruptcy, and closed the restaurant. As it turned out later, Agostina was mixed up with some clandestine activities. When they broke up, van Gogh had to break in to the already-closed club in order to reclaim the things he had left there. However, during this time, Vincent painted a picture of a naked woman with skin changes resembling syphilis. For many years it was considered to be a representation of Signora Segatori, but recent examinations have proved that the painting is of an unknown prostitute whom Vincent met on the street. (101) This painting is now the property of the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia.

In one of his letters to Theo from summer, 1887, Vincent wrote about Agostina warmly, sympathizing with her about her bad state of health caused, presumably, by a recent miscarriage or abortion. Vincent was very forbearing about it, suggesting that he understood why she had behaved that way, although this could have had more to do with the fact that the woman did not know who the father of her child was. One also cannot exclude the possibility that Segatori herself could have been ill with syphilis, or that the child's father (could it have been Vincent?) had recently had the disease, which, in van Gogh's opinion could have justified the performance of an abortion. (102) These are only

speculations, as the content of this letter can be interpreted in many different ways.

Residing together with Theo led to frequent conflicts, and the brothers, while having enough of each other, also were somehow needed by one another. Theo helped his brother financially (and not that alone) during the whole time, while Vincent tried to support his brother in his difficult moments. Both brothers had untidy sexual lives, and both took advantage of paid sex. At one point, Theo fell in love, and went through a difficult time when his offer of marriage was rejected. His chosen was Johanna (Jo) Bonger, the sister of Andries Bonger of the Goupil firm, at which both Theo and Andries worked. During the time when they were lodging together, the brothers mutually confessed the secret hidden for a time, that they were both ill with syphilis. As some biographers suggest, both consulted the prominent Parisian doctors, Louis Rivet and David Gruby, whose practice included, among other things, the treatment of those ill with lues. Theo became infected with syphilis from an unknown prostitute, similarly to Vincent, but the former's disease ran a difficult course and it was that, unlike in Vincent's case, which led to Theo's death.

The stay in Paris turned out to be the turning point in van Gogh's painting career. Thanks to Theo, who dealt in works of art, Vincent landed in an environment of artists rebelling against then-current modes in painting, and belonged to the so-called impressionists or neoimpressionists, who exhibited their works in the "Salon of Independents." Vincent changed his former customs regarding color, and his paintings became brighter. He was one of the first to begin using the technique of *pointilism*, otherwise known as *divisionism* or *chromoluminarism*, the originator of which was Seurat. This was a technique in which a multitude of small colored dots is applied to the canvas, which when seen from distance, creates an optical blend of hues. The style stresses the value of complementary colors – including blue and orange – to

form vibrant contrasts that are enhanced when juxtaposed. It was during this part of a two year stay in Paris that van Gogh completed close to two hundred paintings among which are found many masterpieces.

By the end of the year, the brothers had enough of each other to such an extent that Vincent moved away from Theo, and went to live in Asnieres, which was then a suburb of Paris. At the end of November 1887, Theo and Vincent met Paul Gaugin. Gaugin had worked on the building of the Panama Canal for a time, then lived on Martinique, before arriving in Paris to nurse his debilitated health. Gaugin appealed to van Gogh, who wrote about him that he had "savage instincts" and that for Gaugin, blood and sex prevailed over ambition. He added, "Gauguin interested him very much as a man – very much." (103) Vincent praised Gaugin saying that he would like there to be more men like he, "men with the hands and stomachs of women … Men with more natural tastes – more loving and more charitable temperaments – than the decadent dandies of the Parisian boulevards have." (103) Tired of his almost two-year stay in Paris, van Gogh decided to leave for the south of France, where, as he put it, "There is more light and space, and more clean air to breathe." At the time, he had problems with his health, and coughed a lot, something that was probably connected not only with the smoked-up atmosphere of Paris, but also with his own excessive smoking of tobacco. Yet another reason for leaving the big city was the new idea that took possession of him, that of organizing a Utopian, idyllic colony for painters, who could create their works far away from the city noises and in peace.

After arriving in Arles, Vincent became friends with the Danish painter, Christian Mourier-Petersen, and awaited the arrival of Gaugin, whom Theo invited to his house. It was this fact that gave rise to the oft-repeated gossip that something other than friendship connected Vincent to Gaugin, something more than simple friendship and interest in

painting. His stated interest in Gaugin "as a man," the description of his visit to the bedroom of the sleeping Gaugin, and his fury and disapproval when the latter decided to leave Arles, are supposed to attest to homosexual tendencies in van Gogh. Two paintings that appeared in this period are also used by some to support this idea. One represents Vincent's chair, on which lie a pipe and a bag of tobacco, and is supposed clearly to manifest such a need and Vincent's masculinity, while the other, also of a chair, but one belonging to Gaugin, and taken to be more affected, is plush, with a divan, suggesting a woman's boudoir to some, and is supposed to attest to effeminate tendencies of the latter. (104) The entire concept concerning putative homosexual tendencies of the two gentlemen appears to me to be too stretched and rather nonsensical, as both were unable to do without women, being frequent guests at local bordellos, and both were in love – if one can describe it so – with the same young prostitute from Arles.

Mutual work and being under the same roof augured nothing good for two people with strong personalities and explosive characters. Daily quarrels and discussions on artistic matters, together with the consumption of large amounts of absinthe, were transformed into frequent fights between the two. After one such, just before Christmas, an agitated Gaugin left the house. In his footsteps followed Vincent, with a razor in hand, but when Gaugin, ready for an attack, took a defensive posture, Vincent backed away and returned into the house. Gaugin spent that night in a hotel; Vincent, on the other hand, in a fit of rage, cut off a part of his own ear, after which he made for a bordello, where he handed it to a prostitute, favored by both men, named Rachel. After this event, van Gogh found himself in a hospital in Arles, where, after a few days, he had another attack of delirium, at which time he had to be dressed in a straitjacket and placed into isolation. Given the alarm by Gaugin, Theo traveled to Arles and spoke with his physicians. He could not

stay very long as he was on his way to Holland in order to pay a visit to the family of Jo, who, in the end, agreed to become his wife. In fact, he was no longer needed, as the mental state of the patient began to improve, and already by the end of the year, Vincent had calmed down, and began to paint once again

In March, Theo married Jo Bonger, which upset Vincent a bit, and he began to worry about the stipend paid him regularly by his brother. Here, I have to explain that, for a long time, Theo had been sending Vincent money for his upkeep, and the costs associated with his painting, in exchange for the pictures that Vincent executed, which both hoped would begin to sell. Van Gogh's concerns regarding further financing by his brother became unnecessary, as his new sister-in-law turned out to be a person friendly to the artist and an admirer of his talents, and had nothing against adding to the financing of his creativity.

Vincent's mental state gradually improved, although the painter was aware that he was not entirely well. In April, he wrote to his sister:

> As for myself, I am going to an asylum in St. Remy, not far from here, for three months. I have had, in all, four great crises, during which I didn't in the least know what I said, what I wanted and what I did. Not taking into account that I previously had three fainting fits without any plausible reason, and without retaining the slightest remembrance of what I felt. (105)

The content of this letter testifies that Vincent had improved from the physical standpoint, but was aware that his mental state did not yet permit him to return home; he saw that his place, at least for some time, was in a psychiatric hospital. It is significant that he made such a decision knowing that the local community was expressing its antipathy toward him in an ever-clearer manner, considering

van Gogh to be a person dangerous to his surroundings. After four months had passed since his first attack of delirium, Vincent was accepted to the ward of the psychiatric hospital in St. Remy, situated less than 15 minutes from Arles. On the information card, a physician from the hospital in Arles wrote:

> I, the undersigned medical superintendent of the hospital in Arles, declare that six months ago Vincent van Gogh, 36 years old, was affected by complete mania and general mental derangement. At the time he cut off his ear. At this moment his state of mind is much improved, but he nevertheless thought it useful to have himself treated in a mental institution. (106)

In the hospital in St. Remy, Vincent had at his disposal two rooms, of which one was a bedroom, and the other served as a studio. Almost from the first day of his stay in his new place, Vincent threw himself into a whirlwind of work, asserting that it was the best medicine for the state of his nerves. He was not mistaken, although the therapies ordered for him by the local physicians would be difficult to call treatment, from today's point of view. The institution specialized in hydrotherapy, and Vincent underwent frequent baths overseen by nuns. During recurring attacks of delirium, he was placed into special containers of water, such that only his head protruded and was doused with water cold as ice – which, as was explained, was to evoke a thermal shock that was supposed to act therapeutically. As the patient calmed down, warm water was added gradually, with the aim of consolidating that state. Baths were given daily, with the belief that they had a prophylactic effect. Endeavors such as this, to tell the truth, neither helped not hurt the patients; their real advantage was that they were subjected to a good washing, something that could not be said about patients in other medical institutions!

During his stay in St. Remy, Vincent was treated very well, equally so by the hospital personnel and the director of this institution, as the latter considered van Gogh's case unusual; other than the attacks of delirium, the patient gave the impression of being an intelligent person. (107) During times of remission, Vincent was allowed to move about the hospital freely, and even to leave the grounds, although with a male guardian. He could then paint the area of St. Remy, whereas when he felt worse and was in isolation, he painted only what he saw from the windows of his room. It was during this period that a series of his masterpiece paintings appeared – which the painter had hopes of selling, in order to cover the costs of his hospital stay. Unfortunately, despite help on the part of his painter friends, and attempts by his brother, he did not succeed in turning any of his paintings into cash.

In July 1889 Vincent received a letter from his sister-in-law (Jo), informing him that she was expecting a child. This news electrified him, as he liked her very much, and could not wait until he became an uncle. The approaching arrival date was anticipated with great joy, but also with great anxiety. Those in the know remembered the baby's father's syphilis, for which he had had treatment not too long before. Complications in pregnancy caused by syphilis occurred very frequently then, while stillbirths and premature births with congenital syphilis were not rarities. Theo's general state of health still wasn't the best: he would have strange episodes of paralysis of the facial muscles, during which his face would swell; he had coughing fits, and frequent mood changes were noticeable. (108)

Vincent also was ill, and this period (September, 1889) is considered the worst during his entire stay in St. Remy. The painter experienced periods of deep depression, and had several attacks of lunacy and suicide attempts. On one occasion, Vincent ate some paint and drank methylated spirits, which he found in the lamp that stood in his room.

During his hallucinations, he imagined that someone wanted to kill him, and did not want to leave his room, even in the company of his guardian. It took a long time for him to recover, and even when he had again started to paint, remained mistrustful of his surroundings. During this period, he painted a series of pictures of religious content, such as *Pieta* and *The Raising of Lazarus*. (109, 110)

On the last day of January, 1890 Jo gave birth to a healthy boy, to whom was also given the name, Vincent. Van Gogh was delighted and could not wait for the moment when he would see his namesake and godson with his own eyes. The state of his health improved so much that he started to plan a trip to Paris. At about this time, he received a letter from Jo, in which she wrote about her little son, and also informed him that she had had an opportunity to admire his paintings exhibited in the "Salon of Independents." This news built up Vincent's faith in himself, and confirmed his conviction that his mental state was so good that he could leave the hospital and visit his brother. Jo, likewise, encouraged him in this, although Theo did not share his wife's opinion, remembering the problems he had had with Vincent during their mutual residence under one roof. He did, in fact, agree to invite Vincent to his home, but for a limited period of time, and while actually trying to persuade him to move closer to Paris to live together with another painter, Camille Pissaro in Auvers-sur-Oise. Vincent appeared in Paris in a short while, and after a stay of several days at his brother's, moved to Auvers, although not with Camille Pissaro; rather, he moved close to the home of Dr. Gachet, a physician who occupied himself with homeopathy and the treatment of mental illness. (111)

Doctor Gachet was a widower, had a 15-year-old son and a 20-year-old daughter, who would play a certain role in Vincent's life. It appears that both the doctor and the painter were quite satisfied with their neighborhood. Vincent had a specialist at hand who could help him when he felt an attack

of his illness approaching, while Dr. Gachet, a lover of art and collector of artwork, met a new painter whose work he appreciated, and on whose advice he could count. Dr. Gachet was a painter himself, but, first of all, did engraving. He moved in a circle of artists, was not a stranger in the artistic community, and his frequent patients were Renoir, Cezanne and Pissaro. Vincent occupied himself in getting started with painting, again, and often took advantage of Dr. Gachet's garden, in which Marguerite, the doctors' daughter, took care of the flowers.

Dr. Gachet himself lived to see several portraits of him done by van Gogh. In one of these, he is sitting on a chair, propped up on his elbow on a table, on which, as appropriate to a physician, is found a plant called the "foxglove," from which is obtained digitalis, an alkaloid used in medicine until the present, mainly for diseases of the heart (Fig.5c.13). This painting was sold at auction in 1989, one hundred years after it was painted, for the sum of $80 million.

Van Gogh painted not only the doctor and his garden, but also his daughter, the 20-year-old Marguerite. The young woman was of middling beauty, but was able to play the piano, facts that Vincent immortalized on canvas. There are those who claim that this acquaintance with Marguerite may have been the beginning of the end for the artist. Supposedly, Gachet's housekeeper (actually the mother of his son) informed her employer that something more than just a friendly relationship linked Vincent and Marguerite; this is supposed to have induced the doctor to declare that he did not wish to see Vincent in the role of his daughter's paramour. (112) The gentlemen doubtless had a man-to-man talk, after which Vincent felt insulted and denigrated by a man whom he had until then considered a friend. Apparently, after this incident, van Gogh's mental state deteriorated dramatically, and he is said to have visited the doctor's house uninvited, creating rows and threatening his family. Finally, on July 27th in the afternoon, Vincent shot himself

with a pistol, and died the next day. It is unclear to what extent Dr. Gachet's reaction to van Gogh's romance with his daughter caused the latter's death, and to what extent it was a consequence of the painter's illness. The fact is that, according to the reaction of a witness to the incident, when Dr. Gachet was called to the mortally wounded artist, Vincent did not want to look at nor speak with him. (113)

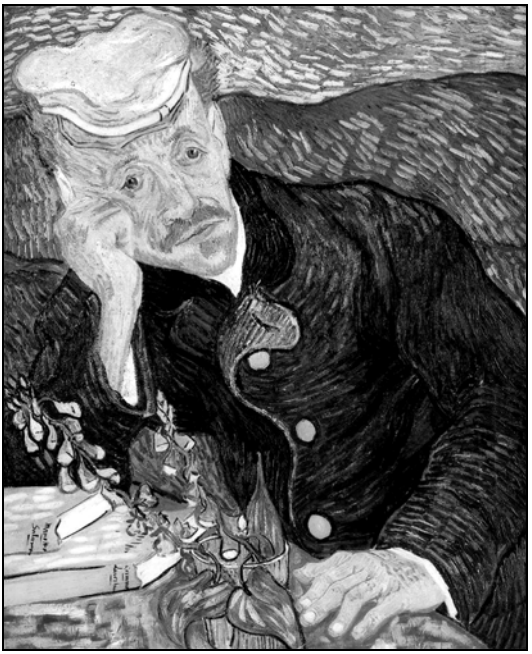


Figure 5c 13 Dr. Paul Gachet paited by Vincent van Gogh (1890)

Almost from the day of Vincent van Gogh's death, his biographers have wondered about the cause of his illness, and then, what the cause of his death was at the young age of thirty-seven. One of the hypotheses speaks of syphilis, but in my opinion, this disease should rather be found at the *end* of a long list of illnesses which might have destroyed the

painter's health. We know that van Gogh did suffer from syphilis; he was treated for it, not only in Antwerp, but also later, when, together with his brother, he visited Parisian physicians who took care of luetic patients. In no biographies available to me, in which are described the psychiatric signs or symptoms suffered by van Gogh, did I find signs of late syphilis of the nervous system, that is, of general paresis or *tabes dorsalis*. In the case of general paresis (GP), an increasing mental dulling of the patient appears as a dominant sign, whereas Vincent was blessed with high intelligence until the end. In *tabes dorsalis*, neurologic signs – impairment of movement coordination, ataxia, paresthesias, shooting pains, gastric crises, urinary bladder dysfunction, fecal incontinence, and decreased sexual potency – dominate. Aside from this last problem, which could have had a completely different cause, none of the above signs or symptoms occurred in van Gogh.

One sign, which can suggest syphilis of the nervous system is that of epileptoidal attacks (often described by physicians as "epileptic attacks"), which can be a sign of meningeal or meningo-vascular syphilis, but in these forms there are also other signs and symptoms – which the painter did not have. It should be remembered that Vincent van Gogh was unbalanced mentally from early youth, something that his parents had already observed. In other members of the van Gogh family, and particularly in his youngest brother, Cor, signs of depression occurred at an early age. Cor later went to South Africa, and there, ten years after Vincent's death, committed suicide himself. Vincent's sister, Wilhelmina (Wil), with whom the painter corresponded regularly, began to show signs of mental illness not long after his death, and spent the last forty years of her life in a psychiatric hospital in Holland. She made two suicide attempts during this time: one, during which she tried to drown herself by immersing her head in the toilet, and the second, when she tried to drive a crochet hook into her head.

Two of van Gogh's mother's brothers suffered from mental illness, while his mother, herself, had periods episodes of protracted depression.

The most likely diagnosis, although not encompassing all of the signs appearing in the artist, would appear to be bipolar disorder, (manic- depressive psychosis), in which patients in manic or submanic states can create wonderful works, while in the depressed state, they undertake suicide attempts. To the general deterioration of the painter 's health – who, by nature, was as strong as an ox – contributed his poor and irregular nutrition, overwork, abuse of alcohol (mainly absinthe), and maybe even contact with oil paints, of which many contained lead. It is said that Vincent had a habit of licking the tip of the brush that he used for painting, but this was doubtless not his main problem.

Just as Vincent almost certainly did not die as a result of lues, so his brother certainly did become its victim (Fig.5c.14). Theo experienced his brother's death with great emotion, and one can be tempted to state that the stress associated with the loss of a person so near to him exacerbated his own health problems, both physical and mental. Signs and symptoms that gradually began to appear had the characteristics of *taboparesis*, attesting to the "taking over" of his central nervous system by syphilis. In contrast to Vincent, who had mental problems almost exclusively, in Theo, in addition to mental symptoms, there appeared neurologic problems. After a row at the firm, in which he had worked for many years, Theo was hospitalized in a private hospital in Passy, while taking care of him was the doctor already mentioned by me in accounts of other famous, French syphilitics, Antoine Blanche. In addition to attacks of delirium and periods of lunacy, during which he would tear his clothes and throw furniture, van Gogh was calmed by the use of chloroform. Theo also had neurologic disturbances: he could not walk, had trouble speaking, was incontinent of both urine and feces. During those difficult days, Jo Bonger visited

him almost daily. Adoring her husband, she did not want to accept a diagnosis of syphilis, and questioned the methods of treatment. She talked herself into believing that her husband was having a nervous breakdown as a result of the loss of his beloved brother, and that his troubles would pass with time. She succeeded in transferring her husband from the hospital in Passy to the Willem Arnstz Clinic in Holland, not far from Utrecht. Due to his bad mental state, Theo undertook the train trip in a straitjacket, in the company of his wife and two male nurses. As Steven Naifeh and Gregory White-Smith wrote:

> They arrived at the asylum on November 18th in a wretched state: bubbling in a mash of languages, disheveled, incontinent, and barely able to walk. He could not answer questions about who he was, where he was or what day it was." (114) Later accounts of his worsening state of health appear, as well as signs typical of *tabo-paralysis*, known to readers from descriptions of this form of lues in other syphilitics discussed earlier. For the next month Theo lived the same life of confinement in Utrecht that his brother had lived in Arles and Saint-Remy. Long days of delusions, delirium and drug-induced stupor were followed by long nights of restless, haunted sleep, or no sleep at all. He sat for hours in his padded cell, conducting fevered, incoherent monologues – arguments with himself – in multiple languages. His mood swung wildly from "cheerful and boisterous" to "dull and drowsy," according to the asylum reporters. At other times, a sudden fury possessed his delicate body. He shook with tremors from head to toe in paralytic attacks indistinguishable from epileptic seizures. The look of his eyes, the timbre of his voice, his whole character, changed as if commandeered by some other entity. In these transformations, the cultured art dealer of refined

sensibilities clawed at his underclothes, ripped up the sheets on his bed, and tore the straw from his mattress. The warden had to wrestle him into a straitjacket to [calm] him." "Speech became increasingly difficult, as did walking, as the tremors invaded every part of his body. The muscles of his face twitched uncontrollably. He had trouble swallowing. Eating was a torment, and he vomited up most of what he ate. His bowels malfunctioned. Urination was painful, and attempts to insert a catheter failed. He couldn't feed himself or dress himself. After he was found asleep in the bath, he wasn't allowed to bathe himself for fear he might accidently drown. He had to be placed in a covered, padded "crib" at night so he could not harm himself. (114)

Figure 5c 14 Theo van Gogh (1888)

Theo van Gogh died on the 24th or 25th of January, 1891, half a year from the date of Vincent van Gogh's death. By today's criteria, this above, rather lengthy, yet detailed account of Theo's last days corresponds well to a diagnosis of general paresis, with elements of *tabes dorsalis*.

Differing courses, as also different clinical pictures of the disease in the two brothers illustrate how much we learned just in the twentieth century, including from the infamous experiments in Tuskegee and in Oslo. The results of those experiments clearly showed that the course of syphilis in different people, even brothers whose genomic structure overlaps by 50% can be different, and depends on many still unknown factors. Some, syphilis killed in a relatively short time, others lived with the disease for a long time, often dying from other, unrelated causes.

HENRI de TOULOUSE-LAUTREC (1864-1901)

Figure 5c 15 Photograph of Henri de Toulouse Lautrec

The reader of this book will readily notice that the majority of the well-known artists described by me became *heroes* of this book only because they frequented bordellos or became infected with syphilis from a street prostitute. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, a French painter from the end of the nineteenth century, who became infected with lues from a Parisian prostitute by the charming name, Rosa La Rouge, belongs among them.

That venereal diseases are connected with prostitution, every adult person knows, and it is difficult to understand why intelligent and well-educated people, who had to have recognized the imminent danger to themselves, were unable to overcome the temptations of easy, paid sex. I will remind the reader, however, that we are speaking of the end of the nineteenth century, when the prevalence of syphilis was unusually high, while its diagnosis (detection) was unusually low. The disease was practically incurable, and ended in death in every third infected person – a death, often with great suffering, which fanciers of easy sex could observe in members of their own families, and among friends, acquaintances and neighbors. Taking advantage of the services of prostitutes reminds one of Russian roulette, in which participants in the game (should) know that every few bullets in the pistol are real, and that one of the players can lose his life.

Toulouse-Lautrec was one of those fanciers of sex for money. It can be said that he even surpassed his friends in that respect, inasmuch as he not only frequented bordellos, but went a step further and took up residence in one; he treated the institution as a boarding house in which he not only slept and took his meals, but also worked there, painting scenes of the everyday life of his surroundings, of the women working there, and of their visiting clients. Among the prostitutes he had more-and less-favorite models, which he presented in a variety of poses, not excluding a painting of prostitutes getting ready for a medical examination, most

probably by a venereologist . Many paintings by Lautrec deal with pornography, presenting without restraint erotic scenes between men and women, and even exclusively between women. In addition to such erotic scenes, among his works are paintings representing scenes from the daily life of such institutions, full of appreciation and sometimes sympathy for the women employed there.

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec was physically handicapped, but this did not decrease his intelligence or talent in any way. He had a specific sense of humor, while his behavior was often – let us call it eccentric, for want of another term. Lautrec abused alcohol, and this, combined with syphilis, led to his mental degradation; the artist died very young, not attaining thirty-seven years of age.

Henri was born November 24th, 1864; his parents were Countess Adele and her husband, Alfonse de Toulouse-Lautrec-Monfa. The Count and Countess were the owners of an expansive estate, which included the castle Malrome, near Alba, where Henri, their firstborn son came into the world. The painter's parents were first cousins, as their mothers were sisters. (115) This doubtless influenced the fate of their first child, as Henri was the victim of a genetic disease, which had appeared periodically in the family. Its first signs were manifested at age thirteen, when Henri broke his right femur, and a year later, his left. Both fractures healed poorly, and shortly it became apparent that the boy was a victim of a disease that today's specialists called *pyknodysostosis*, or Toulouse-Lautrec syndrome. Among other causes of this type of crippling disease are listed derangements due to *osteoporosis*, *achondroplasia* and *osteogenesis imperfecta*. The genes responsible for the disease had circulated in the family for some time, as at least three close cousins of Henry suffered from dwarfism or congenital skeletal defects; one was wheelchair-bound all his life, because he could not, for some reason, move around on his own legs. (116)

After breaking both femurs, Henri stopped growing, or, speaking precisely, his legs stopped growing, although he retained normal development of other parts of his body. In many commentaries, it is stressed that nature compensated him for the lack of development of his lower extremities in a way, by endowing him with abnormally large genitals. (117, 118)

Not being able to participate, as a result of the disease, in the typical amusements of boys of his age, young Lautrec began to draw; his first works showed that he had a lot of talent, probably inherited from his forebears, as his grandfather, father, and also an uncle were talented draftsmen. As long as we are speaking about the influence of genetics on the painter's life, maybe I should add that Henri inherited a tendency to eccentric behavior from his father, which tendency became readily apparent in his later life.

Henri's father, occupied with hunts, travel, and other activities that can be called passing time pleasantly, paid little attention to his ill son, leaving him to the boy's mother, who took care of him practically his entire life. It was she who helped her son while he was studying in Nice, and it was she, who, at the suggestion of a painter friend, travelled with him to Paris, where Toulouse-Lautrec began to study painting, first under the direction of the famous Leon Bonnat, then, afterwards, at the artist school of Fernand Cormon, where many well-known artists of this period studied.

One of Toulouse-Lautrec's friends from this school was Louis Aquetin, a handsome and well-built man, who enjoyed favor with women. Seeing his successes, Henry developed a complex, which he tried to overcome with intensive work at the easel. With some help in this regard, along came another painter friend, who persuaded one of the models to "take care" of Lautrec. This was Marie Charlet, a girl of 16-17 years, who "ate at more than one restaurant," and about whom much could be said, but not that she was an innocent girl. It was even said that she was a nymphomaniac, and

slept with anyone who might be a novelty in sexual matters. And here, one can say, Henri found his own, or, as Henry Perruchot wrote:

> Marie Charlet found piquancy in the adventure; Lautrec's monstrous constitution filled her with delight. She went about boasting happily of the dwarf's qualities as a lover and nicknamed him '*Portmanteau.'* This publicity attracted the attentions of the abnormal and of nymphomaniacs to Lautrec. With Marie Charlet he felt disgust and contempt. Was this love? Was this what women were like? Or, at least, the sort of love and the type of woman he was destined to have? But he had no illusions. The vicious loves were but a new aspect of his wretched life. He was afraid of exciting pity; he inspired sadism. He could do nothing but acquiesce. 'One must know how to bear oneself' he said sometimes. Besides, Marie Charlet had revealed to him the strength of his instincts, which once freed, now no longer knew restraint. (119)

In the arms of Marie Charlet, Henri confirmed to himself that, beyond art, there were other pleasures in life, which he did not intend to forego. He moved out from his mother's home, and moved in with friends in Montmartre, then a new, but already fashionable district in Paris. This was the place where a variety of artists gathered: painters, sculptors, poets and writers, philosophers and students, but also every manner of crank, model and prostitute. At this time, also, there began to appear in Montmartre new coffee houses and bars, dancing halls, little theaters and cabarets. The atmosphere of the new district enchanted the new painter, who tried to take part in every attraction it offered. Although he continued to study at Cormon's, he distanced himself more and more from the master's advice, developing his own

style. He constantly needed new models, and so chanced upon his next model-mistress, Marie-Clementine Valadon.

Mademoiselle Valadon was a young woman of unique beauty, who also occupied herself with art (she drew well), of which not many people were aware. She was brought up only by her mother, who was unable to determine whom the child's father was. Marie, from an early age, earned her living as a seamstress, a nurse assistant, a waitress and a seller of vegetables at a nearby market. As a 15-year-old girl, she had tried a circus career, but after an accident she had during one of the rehearsals, had to resign from that profession. Lautrec was not the first painter for whom she had sat, while among masters of the paintbrush who had something to do with her, was Pierre-Auguste Renoir, who placed her in several of his paintings. Even as a model, Marie bore a son, to the fatherhood of whom no one wanted to admit. Among the candidates to the title were named a popular cabaret singer, a certain aristocrat-painter, and also the subsequenty famous, Spanish painter, Miguel Utrillo, who eventually (after eight years) decided to acknowledge the boy as his son. One cannot be too surprised at the hesitation of these gentlemen, as there was not yet any genetic testing then, whereas in today's times, DNA testing can prove or exclude paternity with virtually 100% accuracy. In the late 1800s, one of the criteria taken into consideration was the physical similarity of a son to his father, but only after attainment of a certain age by the child. In Utrillo's case, another criterion confirming fatherhood might also be talent, as both Maurice Utrillo and his father, Miguel, were famous painters. Marie had no objections when it came to sleeping with Lautrec, compensating the painter's physical frailty by other merits with which nature had reportedly endowed him. Their relationship went through various trials, as neither Lautrec nor Marie had vowed fidelity to one other. Henri "painted" other models besides Marie during this time, while Marie, who behaved very independently, working with or having sex

with him only when she, herself, wanted to. She did not react when Lautrec organized group meetings plentifully seasoned with alcohol, and willingly took part in rather specific jokes or amusing situations organized by the painter. One evening, Lautrec invited Marie to his flat for supper, and decided to make fun of his housekeeper, who had the reputation of being a woman of principle. He asked Marie to take off her clothes and to sit at the table only in her shoes and stockings, then burst out laughing at his maid, when she acted as though she didn't notice anything. The next day, the indignant housekeeper complained to Bourges, a friend and co-boarder of the painter, saying, "Monsieur Henri had insulted her." (120) Bourges, who was a student of medicine and rented the flat together with Lautrec, tried to explain to her, seriously, that, after all, nothing wrong had happened, as, during the aforementioned supper, Lautrec had had his own clothes on, and that, being a woman, the sight of a female body should not shock her. The relationship between Lautrec and Marie lasted some time, all the way to the moment when, for unclear reasons, Marie announced that she intended to kill herself. When it turned out that the entire story had been hatched, together with Marie's mother, with the aim, probably, of taking advantage of the painter, he immediately broke off with her.

Despite the fact that evenings and nights spent with friends in theatres, cabarets and bars took a lot of time and energy, Lautrec found time for painting. He painted scenes from places that he frequented, as well as the people he met there, beginning with famous artists appearing on the stage, such as, for example, Aristide-Bruant – the owner of the *Mirliton Cabaret*, creator of then-current hits – and ending with prostitutes, who took refuge there from raids arranged by the "morals police." One of these latter "girls" particularly caught his eye, probably as a result of the fiery redness of her hair; she soon became the painter's favorite model, and he painted her portrait several times. When one of these

portraits was hung on the wall of the *Mirliton Cabaret*, someone, who knew the woman well, tried to warn the artist, saying that too much intimacy with this "model" could end with a serious illness, Lautrec's reaction was a smile and a reply that, unfortunately, the warning came too late. This was 1888; Henri Lautrec was 24, and the model was *Rosa la Rouge* (Fig.5c.16).

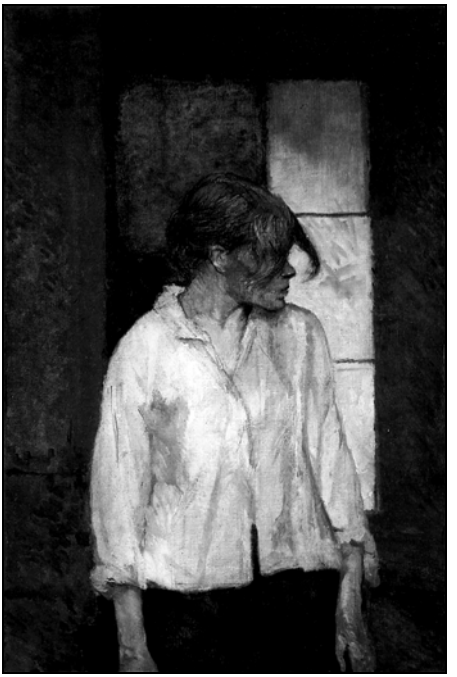


Figure 5c 16 Rosa la Rouge (1866-1887) painted by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec

We do not know with what, or for how long Lautrec underwent treatment. Medications used at that time, mainly mercury preparations and iodine, were noted for their poor efficacy, while those ill often interrupted or stopped treatment as a result of the unpleasant side effects. Henri Perruchot

wrote, "In obedience to Bourges, who looked after him, the painter submitted himself to energetic measures. He could be [in] no doubt that the life he led was much unsuited to his condition." Bourges constantly warned him that "More than anyone, the syphilitic requires a sufficient numbers of hours of sleep … he cannot overwork his intelligence and abuse his mental activity with impunity." (121)

After the treatment, which probably took place during the second half of 1888, Lautrec left Paris, and spent three winter months in Villier-sur-Morin in the company of a friendly married couple, the Greniers. Bourges inclined him toward this, after noting signs of depression in the artist, caused by the awareness that the disease that he had contracted would accompany him until his death. Another cause of depression could have been the secondary effects of treatment, which did not belong among the most pleasant. I am convinced that Bourges used all therapeutic methods available then, as he was personally interested in syphilis, as witnessed by the publication of a scientific work, entitled, "*L'Hygiene du Syphlitique.*" (121) We also have evidence that Lautrec himself was aware of the seriousness of the situation, as evidenced by the comment he is said to have made upon seeing the painting by Andre Gill, entitled *Le Fou* (The Fool). This painting shows a man in a straitjacket with the expression of a madman with eyes wide open and fearful. After seeing this painting, Lautrec is said to have told a friend, "That's what's in store for me." (122)

In the first weeks of 1889, Lautrec returned to Paris. Very clearly, he felt better, as he quickly returned to his former lifestyle, i.e. having good time, intensive work, and large quantities of alcohol. He painted women from shady society *(demimonde)*, including Rosa la Rouge, as though he wanted to show that he was not displeased with her; painted a known actor from the *Comedie Francaise;* and also decorated the hall in one of the cabarets with very original painting. In autumn, he participated in the "Salon of

Independents," where he exhibited three of his works, while, at the beginning of November, he took part in the famous event that was the opening of a new dance hall in the Montmartre district called the *Moulin Rouge*. From then on, this name would be inextricably associated with the Toulouse-Lautrec, who became as though an icon of this cabaret. Fascinated by its atmosphere, Lautrec was its permanent guest, almost from the opening. Every evening, he had a table that awaited him there, and also a cluster of loyal friends and unlimited access to alcohol. In just a short while, several of his paintings appeared on the walls of the cabaret, among them *L'Ecuyere du cirque Fernando* and *La Dance au Moulin Rouge*.

Frequenters of the Moulin Rouge, when describing scenes that remained in their memories would remember a small person, consuming drinks, sparkling with wit, surrounded by a gathering of friends and well-wishers, who appeared to be an inseparable attraction of the place. Lautrec in the Moulin Rouge, not only had a good time there, but derived inspiration and material for his work as well. Scenes from the Moulin Rouge constitute a significant portion of paintings that came from his brush during this period. (123) The greatest stars of the cabaret competed for his friendship. Among these were Louise Weber, better known as *La Goulue,* and Jane Avril – her real name was Jean Beadon – for whom Lautrec created posters; he also painted several canvases, for which they willingly posed. (124)

La Goulue, who had been on stage long before the appearance of the Moulin Rouge, acquired her nickname, "The Glutton," from her excesses (Fig.5c.17)

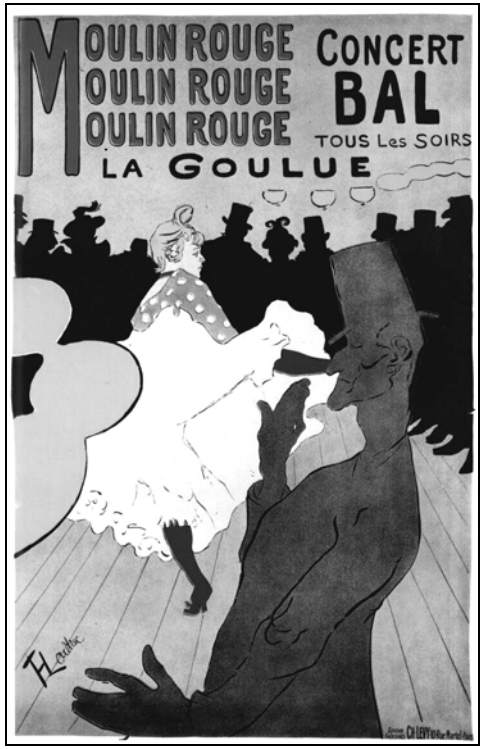


Figure 5c 17 Moulin Rouge: La Goulue (1891) by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec

> She was so greedy that, on occasion, she would even empty the dregs of the glasses on the tables. La Goulue was a foul-mouthed guttersnipe, whose conversation was a stream of obscenities; but as soon as she started to dance, to perform one those improvisations that were her secret, she was transfigured. She was not merely a dancer; she was the dance itself. (125)

La Goulue found herself in many of Lautrec's paintings, including the one called *The Quadrille*, in which, together

with another dancer, she demonstrated the "High Kick," so typical of her. This dance figure was appealing mostly to the male component of the audience, due to the exposition of intimate undergarments, which were seen under her upflung dress. I will remind the reader that even until not long ago, showing a bare leg to the level of the ankle was considered an act of uncommon bravery, while what La Goulue showed was a signal of ebullient sexuality. The higher the dancer raised her legs, the more popular she was. La Goulue and, later, Jane Avril were masters at this, and were able to knock the top hats off the men ogling them; these, in turn, hid their arousal with difficulty.

Jane Avril was of a somewhat different style than LaGoulue. Thin and tall, and of with movements filled with grace, she was as though an antithesis to the forceful and not rarely vulgar La Goulue. Jane's mother was a courtesan while her father was an unknown foreigner, supposedly an aristocrat, as sometimes rumored, and creating, by this means, a nimbus of mystery around her. Highly paid and valued by the cabaret's owners, Jane was the public's favorite for a long time. It was she, next to LaGoulue, who popularized the CanCan dance, fashionable since that time, which she presented, among others, in guest appearances in London. The character of Jane Avril has appeared in at least two films about *Le Moulin Rouge*. One comes to us from the 1950s the person of Jane being incarnated by Zsa Zsa Gabor; the other from 2001, in which the role of the dancer was played by Nicole Kidman.

Toulouse-Lautrec, also an admirer of her talent, made a poster, showing the dancer with a leg raised high, most probably dancing the CanCan. In addition, he executed a series of paintings showing Jane in various situations: dancing on the stage, leaving the cabaret, putting on gloves, wrapped up in an ample coat with her hands in its pockets, always remembering to portray her facial expression as melancholic i.e. that of a person absorbed in her own

thoughts. Jane did not hide her sympathy for the painter, and never refused him when he asked her to sit for him. They were often seen together in restaurants in Montmartre, where they would meet for coffee or lunch.

Dancing was not the only thing seen at the Moulin Rouge. Well-known singers and musical ensembles, circus acts and illusionists (magicians), and even an "artist" whose shows depended on making sounds, in various tones, from the rear end of his body – which would appear to show that the owners of the cabaret tried to meet the tastes of the most "sophisticated" portion of the public. Officially, *Le Moulin Rouge* shut down its activities at midnight, but that did not mean that the cabaret became empty at that time. Regular customers, like Lautrec, knew that was when the fun and games really started. Artists appearing for their own pleasure let loose the reins of fantasy, allowing themselves far more than they could do with open curtains. Lautrec took advantage of this, trying to immortalize these performances on the pages of his sketchbook. When everyone was already very tired and longed to go to bed, Lautrec would persuade his friends to continue the good times in other places, yet unclosed. During these escapades, the painter drank greater quantities of alcoholic drinks, slighting practically not a single one of them.

Unfortunately, these were the beginnings of his addiction to alcohol, as Henri now drank not just in the evenings or at night, but began in the morning, after having barely arisen. His biographer, Henri Perruchot described it thus:

"From being a pleasure, drink had become a necessity. He had hardly got out of bed in the morning before he started drinking. Vermouth, rum, white wine, Armagnac, champagne, cocktails; he would drink at any hour of the day." (126)

In autumn of 1891, Gabriel Tapie de Celeyran, Toulouse-Laytrec's cousin, appeared in Paris. Gabriel was a physician, who specialized in surgery, and who had obtained an assistantship with the already famous French surgeon, Jules-

Emile Pean. Dr. Pean, after whom a surgical instrument is named (he developed haemostatic forceps), headed a department at the Saint Louis Hospital in Paris. This is the same one in which, to this day, one can find a collection of *mulages,* representing currently unseen cases of skin diseases and, specifically, skin manifestations of 3rd stage syphilis. Tapie de Celeyran and Lautrec appealed to one another. Celeyran admired the artistic talent of his cousin, and was very sympathetic toward the latter's physical infirmities and his extravagant behavior, whereas Lautrec valued the physician's good nature, his agreeable character, and, what is germane here, his contacts in the medical world. Lautrec became interested in surgery and thanks to his cousin's help, obtained permission to observe surgical operations as performed by the famous surgeon.

Dr. Pean was a pioneer in certain categories of surgery, performing probably the first resection (removal) of the spleen, the first removal of a portion of the stomach, and removal of the ovary (oophorectomy), thus instituting, in some measure, a new division in surgery. (127) Lautrec treated his own presence in the operating room almost like a visit to the theater, observing and drawing in his sketchbook, not only the operations themselves, but also scenes accompanying them, such as the wiping away of sweat from the surgeon's forehead, describing in detail the washing of hands before an operation, as well as examination of the patient. In addition to numerous drawings, Lautrec completed two paintings dedicated to Dr. Pean, *Une Operations de Pean* and *La Tracheotomie*. His fascination with surgery and with the famous surgeon withstood the test of time, as, after several years, when Pean retired and funded the "Hospital Internationale" with his own money, Lautrec completed several works of art there, still astonished at the surgeon of whom it was said that he would "rummage in stomachs as if he were looking through his pockets for change." (128)

Halfway through 1892, Lautrec was still very active professionally, painting his beloved dancers from Le Moulin Rouge, and traveling to London and Toulouse, where he supervised the printing of one of his posters, until at a certain moment, he disappeared without a trace. He fell like a stone into water, while his friends and acquaintances did not know what happened to him. He was not seen at Le Moulin Rouge, nor in any coffeehouse in Montmartre, nor in the studio where he worked. The puzzle was solved after several days, when one of his acquaintances met the painter in one of the bordellos. Lautrec had simply moved in there. He slept, had his meals and painted there without leaving it. Asked for an explanation, he indignantly said "Bordel? What do you mean bordel? To the disapproving, he would exclaim, “They are the houses of the bord de l'eau. They need a lot of water, eh? Technique of ablution." (129)

Regardless of jokes on the subject of bordellos, of which there are many, it is worthwhile wondering what it was in them that was so alluring as to incline Lautrec to install himself in one. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the relationship of society to these institutions was different than in either later or earlier times, while the subject of prostitution at one point became fashionable, particularly among artists. Prostitutes became the heroines of theatrical works of such authors as Guy de Maupassant, Edmond Goncourt, or Huysmans. Courtesans were likewise the heroines of opera, as, for example, *La Traviata* by Verdi, or *Manon Lescaut* of Puccini, while many painters, not just Lautrec, immortalized their likenesses on canvas. Lautrec, nonetheless, outdid his colleagues in painting scenes from the bordello, which presented prostitutes in their natural environment, if not to say at work. According to him, these women were better models than the professionals.

> Models always look as if they were stuffed, while these women are alive. I wouldn't dare pay them to

> pose for me, yet God knows they are worth it. They stretch themselves out on divans like animals … they are so lacking in pretension, you know! (130)

Another explanation for his liking bordellos and their workers could be the fact that Toulouse-Lautrec – who, as a result of his lameness was discriminated against and made fun of, and not just once – found soulmates in women who had been discriminated against and ridiculed, even if for a far different reason. Nevertheless, one cannot exclude that Lautrec was an erotomaniac to some extent, and that the atmosphere predominating in bordellos excited him, and that he experienced pleasure looking at scenes of perversion or strange forms of sexual relationships. Yet another explanation of his behavior could be the fact that the painter loved practical jokes and shocking his friends in very varied, often strange ways.

Despite the fact that Lautrec had to pay for living in a bordello, (not excluding payments for sexual services), the painter felt himself to be a part of the institution, sharing his daily life with the prostitutes. He ate meals with them, played cards, took part in their conversations, and imparted his advice. He remembered birthdays, offering gifts, and inviting some of them to the circus or theater. He paraded on the streets with the women, or invited them to his loge at the opera, treating them like married men treat their spouses or girl friends.

But, above all, he painted them. He executed portraits of prostitutes or made paintings of their activities. In these there are prostitutes waiting for clients, in the course of their services, during their baths or asleep, often two in one bed. There are women in unmistakeable lesbian relations, which were not rare in bordellos, and scenes bringing to mind venereal diseases, which were the plague of these institutions, as evidenced by the painting already mentioned, i.e. the one representing prostitutes getting ready for examination by a doctor (Fig.5c.18).

Figure 5c 18 The Medical Inspection painted by Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, 1894

Lautrec painted not only what he saw in bordellos, but also the bordellos themselves – that is, he decorated the walls of these institutions with his productions. Being friendly with him, the Madam owner of the one on Rue d'Amboise asked Lautrec to decorate her salon and several other rooms, to which the painter readily acquiesced, painting leaves and garlands of flowers on the walls, as well as sixteen medallions in the rococco style and with portraits of women.

Henri's mother and his friends were equally alarmed at his new lifestyle, and tried, by various methods, to lead him

onto a better path. Friends invited him to meetings and social get-togethers, or even to their own homes for weekends, while his very religious mother engaged several nuns to pray for her son. She also asked priests for help, but Lautrec got rid of their sermons in a less-than-polite manner, telling one of them, "Oh yes, *Abbe*, don't worry; I am digging my grave with my cock." (131) Taking into account the painter's health, the reply cited could have had a deeper meaning, as Lautrec was aware of the fact that his syphilis could lead him to his death.

The extravagant (to say the least!) lifestyle of Lautrec had no greater influence on his creativity than that the majority of his works are of scenes from the life of a bordello, or portraits of the prostitutes working there. At the same time, his posters grew in popularity, and the painter received orders for them, mainly from cabaret artists with whom he was friendly. Supposedly, they were so popular that they would disappear right after being hung, stolen by admirers of his talents, or taken by the artists' fans. In addition, a new passion appeared in his life – lithography – thanks to which his work could be copied in any quantity.

At the start of 1893, Lautrec took part in an exhibition organized by Maurice Joyant, a friend of the painter's, at which were displayed thirty of his works, not only paintings, but also posters and lithographs. Reviews by the press were very flattering, while the known painting authority, Edgar Degas, is said to have remarked, "Well, Lautrec, it is clear [that] you are one of us." (132) The same Degas could also be less polite to his younger friend, at another time saying, "The gentleman is wearing trousers that are too big for him," while many years later, just after Lautrec's death, in commenting on his creativity, he is said to have remarked, "It all stinks of the pox." (133) This does not speak well for the author of these words, who, despite his well-known misogyny, also was interested in life in the bordello. (Reported by Joyant). (132)

Lautrec had a different relationship with women than Degas; he was understanding of their weaknesses, saw their problems, was sympathetic, and often helped them. One day, he and friends visited a woman who, as he expressed it, "Was more famous, in her time, than the President of the Republic." This was Victorine Meurent, a former model who, thirty years earlier, had posed for Manet's *Olympia*. Old and now in ill health (she was an alcoholic) Victorine supported herself playing the guitar and dancing "monkey dances" on the terrace of a coffee house. Some maintain that Lautrec visited her, not only to help her, but equally, to see how she, a person sick with alcoholism looked, aware that his dipsomania could one day lead him to a similar state.

At one point in his life, Lautrec befriended a group of literary figures gathered around the periodical, *Le Revue Blanche,* established by the Natanson brothers, Alexander and Thaddeus. They were Poles living in France who moved about in artistic-literary circles. Thaddeus Natanson particularly appealed to Lautrec, but his wife Misia, who was half-Polish, even more so. Misia's father was the famous sculptor, Cyprian Godebski, monuments of whose work stand in Krakow and Warsaw to this day, (134) while her mother, Sophie Servais, was the daughter of the famous viola-cellist, Adrien-Francois Servais. Brought up by the parents of her mother, who died in childbirth, Misia, from her youngest years, also moved about in the company of artists, mainly musicians. Among them was Franz Liszt. Later, in school, her teacher was Gabriel Faure. (135) At age twenty-one, Misia married Thaddeus Natanson, and it was in his house that Lautrec met her. The Natansons would frequently hold receptions for artists, such as Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Claude Debussy, Marcel Proust, Steven Mallarme and Andre Gide. Lautrec, who also would take part in these receptions, felt best in the role of bartender, serving cocktails of his own recipes. Misia, unusually pretty and possessing sex appeal, was a precursor for literary figures in

the novels of many writers, or posed for paintings, while the composer, Maurice Ravel, dedicated several of his works to her. Lautrec put her in several of his own paintings, e.g. *Misia reading a book*, *Misia at the piano*, as well as on a poster advertising *La Revue Blanche,* published by her husband. Pierre-Auguste Renoir, for whom she dared to expose her breasts (while not doing such a favor for other artists), also executed a portrait of her, which, of course, gave rise to gossip.

Among Russians who benefitted from Misia Sert's hospitality or assistance was Sergei Diaghilev, the founder of the Ballet Russe, but he was not the only one. Another famous artist helped by Misia was Igor Stravinsky, an episode about whom Artur Rubinstein, the famous Polish pianist, recorded in his memoirs. (137) One evening, Stravinsky telephoned Rubinstein with a request for an immediate meeting in regard to an unusually important matter. When the latter proposed a meeting the following day instead, the famous composer indicated that he had to meet with him that same day, as this was a matter of unusual importance for him. When the two gentlemen met later at a restaurant, Stravinsky announced that he had no money for living, and that he needed immediate financial help, as well as rapid medical help, since he had just discovered that he was impotent! Hearing the details pertaining to both problems, Rubinstein declared that, in the first matter, Misia Sert could help him, since, as he put it, "She is a woman of great resources … and he had no doubts that when he talks to her, she will find a way to give him solid financial help." (138) As concerned the second problem, however, he didn't believe that Stravinsky's self-diagnosis was accurate, and suggested a visit to the bordello on Rue Chabanais, to which Stravinsky expressed agreement.

> At this famous institution I said to the *sous-maitress*: 'Call Madeleine.' And when this beauty arrived I told

> her, 'Madeleine, take care of this gentleman.' It was the first time that I did not participate, but simply waited. After half an hour, Stravinsky appeared in triumph and said appreciatively: *Cette femme est genial.* So ended a difficult day. (139)

I cited this fragment from the memoirs of the famous pianist to show that Misia befriended not only famous people of her epoch, but could also be a direct help to them. In Stravinsky's case, this role was later taken on by her friend, Coco Chanel, foundress of the Chanel perfume brand, who invited Stravinsky, together with his family, to her villa in Paris; there, she ensured everyone room and board, and assured the composer that "Madeleine's help" would no longer be needed by him! Another reason that I cited this fragment from Rubinstein's memoirs is to show yet another role that bordellos played in those times, namely of an institution providing diagnostic-therapeutic services in a then-poorly-known field of medicine that sexology is today.

During her friendship with Lautrec, Misia was the wife of Thaddeus Natanson, which did not interfere with Lautrec's adoration of her, something he did not hide. Misia played the piano for him – Beethoven's "Ruins of Athens," his favorite work – while during her rests in the garden, they would sit under the tree, she with book in hand; Lautrec would tickle her bare feet with a paintbrush, explaining that he "noticed imaginary landscapes there." (140) Misia had nothing against posing for Lautrec, but once, irritated by something she saw, asked him why the women in his pictures, not excluding herself, were so ugly. "Because that is the way they are," the painter was said to have replied. (140) The women remembered the slight, and took their revenge with a similar "compliment" describing the painter's appearance during a visit to one of them (the singer, Yvette Guilbert):

> 'A puppet,' the maid exclaimed as she hurried to warn her mistress of the unexpected visitor. And Yvette

> Guilbert was herself taken [a]back. She could find nothing to say at the sight of the huge, dark head, the red face and black beard, the greasy oily skin, the nose broad enough for two faces, and a mouth that gashed across the face, from cheek to cheek, with huge, violet-rose lips, that were at once flat and flaccid ("*Le Chanson de Vie*," Yvette Guilbert memoirs). (142)

It must be added, however, that, despite her first impression, Yvette and Lautrec became friends, and the painter made well over a dozen lithographs of her, which appeared in an album dedicated to the singer. Similarly to other women, Yvette was portraited as unusually unattractive, while her mother, after seeing the album, encouraged her daughter to go to court with a citation for defamation.

The growing popularity of Toulouse-Lautrec as a painter, poster artist, lithographer and illustrator gathered an ever growing circle of admirers; he, however, if it can be put so, gathered with other admirers of drinks around the coffee houses and bars where alcohol was served. The favorite places to which the painter invited friends were the *Cosmopolitan* and *Weber* coffeehouses, and the *Irish and American Bar*, on Rue Royale. In the latter two, Lautrec started to appear in the company of two new admirers, the English dancer, May Milton, a friend of Jane Avril's, as well as the Irish singer, May Belfort. May had a more girlish appearance, and the painter named her the Orchid, although Maurice Joant called her the Frog. Looking at her portraits, one can conclude that both gentlemen were right; however, depending on which painting, one can have various appraisals of the beauty of the model. Lautrec painted five portraits of May, as well as a series of lithographs, and a "splendid crimson" poster, which, as a result of its vivid color, attracted the attention of the inhabitants of Paris well. (141) The painter attempted to bed May several times, but

apparently the lady was steadfast and remained just his model.

His frequent presence in bars and coffeehouses where alcohol was served did not serve the artist well; Taddeus Natanson observed that "the hair of his moustache had little time to dry." Yet even though Lautrec was merely drunk in the full sense of the word, it was said that even the smell of a coctail would suffice to restore him to the "magic enchantment of alcohol." (143) During receptions at the homes of friends, Henri especially liked the role of barman, preparing in the course of a single night hundreds of drinks for guests - not forgetting himself, of course.

Overwork, lack of sleep, and excessive alcohol and sex began to affect Toulouse-Lautrec's health. There began to appear sudden mood swings, such as one in which, following an amusing episode at which the painter laughed himself to tears, then fell into a deep depression and didn't speak to anyone for a long time. He was able, without any reason, to twist the fingers of the person whom he was greeting – which was forgiven by his friends, but not always by people newly met. There were periods when his utterances would become incomprehensible, not only to strangers, but also to friends, who knew his manner of expressing himself. Time spent with wineglass in hand as well as periods of alcoholic intoxication, during which he was unable to paint, began to reflect on his productivity, causing the number of paintings, lithographs and posters executed by him to diminish.

This was not yet the worst period of his life; despite clear signs of alcoholism, the artist could become interested in new things. This was a time of resurgence of bicycling, which fascinated the painter. Although wanting to be, he was not himself a bicycle rider, yet was a frequent guest at bicycle contests, immortalizing scenes of races in his paintings, as well as executing portraits or lithographs of their winners. I will add that the popularity of bicycling influenced a change in fashions for women, in that they began to wear trousers,

called “Zouave trousers” – which was an unusual occurrence at that time, and about which Parisian newspapers commented, comparing the new fashion to the arrival of a “third sex.” (144)

In mid-1895, Lautrec, together with Joyant, traveled to London. Henri enjoyed England and felt very well in that country. He had many friends there, among them the painter Charles Conder, who belonged to a group of artists associated with Oscar Wilde. (145) This was not a good period in the life of that British poet and dramatist, as in March of the same year, Wilde was accused of sodomy and awaited the trial, which, as we may remember, ended in his being convicted and sentenced to prison. Lautrec was impressed with Wilde during his meetings with him; although the latter refused to sit for him, Lautrec painted his portrait from memory. After returning to Paris, he submitted a drawing representing Wilde, seated on the bench of the accused, to *Le Revue Blanche*. The painter belonged to a large group of French intellectuals who expressed their solidarity with followers of Wilde in England, and who considered the judgment of the London court to have been highly unfair. The figure of Oscar Wilde also found itself in decorations done of *La Goulue*, by Lautrec, which significantly increased the interest of viewers of her performances.

Toulouse-Lautrec was not only full of understanding and sympathy toward male homosexuals, but was equally interested in women “loving differently.” This was the period during which he did a series of lithographs for Cha-U-Kao, a dancer from Le Moulin Rouge, who passed for a lesbian. Lautrec had already painted her earlier, dancing a waltz in the arms of another woman. (146) His interest in lesbians caused him to be a frequent guest at the bar, *La Souris*, situated near Place Pigalle, where women of persuasions similar to that of Cha-U-Kao would meet. Henri Perruchot described it thus:

> Here at "La Souris" – “La Touris," as he pronounced it – he [Lautrec] mingled with his accustomed ease among these women, some of whom were strapping and manly types with short hair and high stocks, while others were languorously and exaggeratedly feminine, and dressed in the brightest of colors. Wearing their vice like flowers in their hats …, [c]ouples fondled or quarreled. Some play cards, some dice, and they all chattered. They all smoked too. The ashtrays overflowed with the lipstick-stained butts of Turkish cigarettes and even big cigars. To the odour of alcohol, musk, amber and patchouli were added the ether and morphine of the drug-addicts. (147)

Although men were not entirely welcome in *La Souris*, Lautrec, as a result of his physical defects, or maybe because of his rising popularity, was tolerated, and even liked. Many regulars of the place willingly posed for him, while some of them found in him a confidante for entrusting their problems to him. Just being in a lesbian environment did not entirely satisfy the erotic interests of the painter, to which testifies the following citation from his biography:

> From time to time he organized ‘lascivious spectacles ... sapphic occasions.’ And on one occasion he took a lesbian, nicknamed *Le Crapaud*, from La Souris to a brothel in the Rue de Miromesnil. There he threw her into the arms of the other women, and, as a passionate spectator, watched their gambols. (147)

This type of behavior on the part of the painter may appear to today’s reader – who has access to the Internet – to be difficult to understand, but at the end of the nineteenth century, nobody dreamed that such scenes could be watched by clicking on an appropriate computer key.

From among the three passions of Lautrec – painting, sex, and alcohol – the last was the most dangerous. The painter drank ever more frequently, and always more. His friends saw this, and tried to help. Misia and Thaddeus Natanson, who bought some property outside Paris, invited Henri for short, and for longer stays, organizing the plan of the day so that the artist had as little occasion to drink alcohol as possible. All drinks containing alcohol were removed from the house, leaving only small quantities of wine served for lunch. Excursions around the area were organized, including swimming in the river and boating. Discussions on literature, invitations to interesting friends, in a word, everything, was done to minimize the painter's contact with alcohol. To everyone's surprise, Lautrec handled the absence of alcoholic drinks very well, while the hosts were happy that they were helping their friend to escape the bad habit. Unfortunately, it turned out to be a delusion, as, at the garden's end, the Natansons had a small gate leading to the street, near which there was a small inn with a well-furnished bar.

After returning to Paris, Lautrec no longer had to steal through a gate in the garden to satisfy his thirst for alcohol. More and more frequently, he was seen in the local bars, heavily drunk, making a row with the guests, or simply dead drunk and sleeping on a bench or under a table. One of his friends saw him in such a state at *La Souris* "among a crowd of women dressed in men's clothes. It was a distressing sight. Saliva trickled down the thin cord of his pince-nez, and fell drop by drop on to his waist coat." (148) His friends did not cease in their efforts to turn the painter's attention away from alcohol, organizing business trips to other towns or abroad, something that began to irritate Lautrec.

> This behaviour was more than ever marked by irritation, ungovernable range, and certain wildness. His eccentricity was becoming comparable to his father, and he was liable to fall heavily asleep

> anywhere and at any time for two minutes or for two hours. This restlessness was no longer due to excessive vitality. Alcohol and the disease he had caught from Rosa La Rouge, which had been completely neglected during the last four years, were corroding and undermining him ... His friends were anxious. But what could they do? Lautrec was becoming more intractable and more difficult to manage every day. Bourges, who had published his "*Hygiene de Syphilitique*" that very year, advised a long cruise; it would afford, so the doctor thought, a sedative, tonic and restorative treatment. (149)

It was difficult to dismiss the lack of logic in this type of advice, although one can sympathize with the doctors for having so little to offer their patients. Lautrec tried travel, considered treatment under conditions of confinement, stopped drinking cocktails, and limited himself to port – all of which some attribute to the painter's short-lived ardor toward his young cousin, Aline, who had just left the convent. Unfortunately for him, the girl's father quickly put a stop to all hopes for romance, and Lautrec quickly returned to his previous habits. To changes in the painter's psychologic state were added neurologic problems. Lautrec, who already had been a weak walker, now moved about with difficulty; disturbances occurred in his speech, he began to stammer, and became incomprehensible. In the winter of 1898, his state of health clearly deteriorated. Visual and auditory hallucinations appeared; he imagined that he was being attacked by flies, and genuinely feared that they could cause him harm. He went to bed at night in “button hook” out of concern that insects could attack him at night, and ordered that the painter's studio in which he worked had to be sprayed with “paraffin” (oil) out of concern, not only for insects, but also unseen microbes. A person was hired to look after Henri 24 hours a day, and whom the painter, as evidence that he had not lost his sense of humor, called

“commissioner of his district.” Unfortunately, this “keeper” also liked alcohol, which resulted in Lautrec – who had a stronger head – leaving the drunken “keeper” in one bar, while he, himself, would make his way to another

Lautrec tried to work, and friends like Jane Avril ordered paintings and posters from him attempting to occupy him in some way in order to weaken his attraction to alcohol (Fig. 5c.19). Unfortunately, in this area of the artist's life, the disease caused a disruption, as the works that came from his hands during this time are clearly strange – as though marked with the stamp of mental illness. Hallucinations appeared ever more frequently: "He tried to fight a cardboard elephant; a pack of terriers yapped at his heels; and monstrous, headless animals prowled about the room trying to drive him against the bed and crush him. In a sweat of terror he would hide under the bedclothes.” (150) At this point, one can ask to what extent, and for which symptoms alcohol was responsible, and which of these one can attribute to long-untreated syphilis. I fear, however, that it is not possible to divide them, as the majority can appear equally in third-stage syphilis (general paresis) as in the disease of alcoholism, *delirium tremens*.

All wondered how to help the ill Lautrec, and in the end, his family and friends came to the conclusion that only treatment on a closed ward could give him a chance for recovery. After consultations with many specialists, the artist was placed in a psychiatric institution in Neuilly, near Paris. The hospital was very expensive, located in a seventeenth century building surrounded by a beautiful park, and, for the patients, there were expensively appointed flats with several rooms, private bathrooms and a private garden. Lautrec arrived there at the end of 1899, and even after a few days' stay, his health began to improve. Hallucinations ceased, and it began to reach him that he was in a closed institution, and supervised by a personal attendant (male nurse) 24 hours a day. Upon realizing this, he was shocked, scared

and desperate. He collected his thoughts with difficulty and wept frequently, but, not having a choice, quickly resigned himself to his new situation. Lautrec's health, however, continued to improve, the return of his psychotic symptoms was ever rarer, and approximately a month later he was already so calmed that he could go out for walks in the garden in the company of his attendant.

Figure 5c 19 Painting of Jane Avril by Toulouse Lautrec

Along with improvement of his mental state, the fact of Lautrec's compulsory isolation became increasingly painful to him. He tried to paint, sketched patients as well as hospital staff, and quickly fell upon the idea that the fact that he was able to work would be an argument, which could convince the doctors that they could let him go home. These were in no hurry to decide, however, probably considering that a longer period of convalescence was needed to give the

patient a better guarantee of return to good health. In letters to his friends, as well as to people visiting, Lautrec tried to give them to understand that he was already completely well, and would ask for their intervention in the matter of leaving the hospital. Finally, as a result of pressure on the part of the family, as well as of the endeavors of the painter himself – who was painting more and more, wanting to prove his return to health – and after a council that took place in mid-May, Lautrec was permitted to leave the asylum. However, a *caveat* was noted that,

> Owing to his amnesia, the instability of his character and lack of will-power it is essential that Mr. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec should be subject in his life outside these premises to material and moral conditions of continual supervision so that he may not have an opportunity of relapsing into alcoholic habits and so pave the way to a relapse of a more serious nature than his previous symptoms. (151)

Happy for his recovered freedom, Lautrec agreed, without objection, to an "overseer," employed by his mother, who was to take care that the painter would not fall back into bad habits. He was a distant cousin, a person of gentle nature, delicate and tactful, understanding of Lautrec's difficult situation, and full of desire to help him. A great merit of the new guardian, in comparison to the former one, was a stomach problem that allowed him to drink exclusively tea. Lautrec liked him almost from their first meeting, and, with a sense of humor typical for him, called him "my bear leader." After a short stay at the seashore, the painter returned to Paris in the autumn, where he began to paint and make lithographs again. It appeared that he had fully regained his strength, equally physical as psychologic, although his friends noticed certain changes. Maurice Joyant wrote, "In this human mechanism there was something 'broken.' Lautrec's curiosity was destroyed. He could laugh and joke

but it was no longer with the laughter and the vitality of the past. It was as if he were forcing himself to resemble the old Lautrec." (152).

The period of convalescence after hospitalization lasted about five-six months, during which it appeared that the painter had a chance to return to normal life. He painted a great deal, and experts maintain that after leaving the hospital Lautrec changed his style, paying more attention to colors, which now became more subtle and warmer.

This state did not last too long, however, as Lautrec again started to drink. His kindhearted guardian, who was full of good intentions, did everything to eliminate Lautrec's contact with alcohol, but the latter turned out to be crafty. The painter had long used a cane, but now acquired a new one with a silver pommel, which he bought at an Italian antique dealer's. He made no mystery about this, but did not reveal to anyone that the cane had been hollowed out in the middle, so that he could put a half-litre of a liquid of his choice inside. Similarly, the silver pommel was not a simple decoration; after unscrewing it, could serve as a liquor glass. I do not have to add that the liquid with which the painter filled the cane was not mineral water, but any alcoholic drink that he desired! The situation began to be dangerous, because Lautrec treated his return to his bad habit as something that had to happen, and consoled himself with the thought that this was the beginning of the end. His family and friends tried to convince him that not everything was lost, and Joyant began to make efforts to obtain the medal of the Legion of Honor for him, judging that maybe this prestigious distinction could change his attitude toward life. When both friends appeared at the office of the appropriate minister, who was a fan of Lautrec's works, and began to talk on the subject of the distinction, Lautrec interrupted the conversation saying, "Have you considered, Monsieur le Ministre, how odd the red ribbon will look when I go to paint a brothel?" (153) Lautrec did not receive the medal, and it was not because he didn't

fulfill all the criteria named by Andre Gide (he was under forty years of age), but because it was of no special consequence to him.

The year 1900 and the beginning of 1901 marked a period of decline in the painter's life, both from the point of view of art and of his health. Lautrec painted less and less, and ever more slowly, while the quality of his paintings underwent a distinct deterioration. His creativity during this period became average, one could no longer see what was there formerly, i.e. the talent of a true artist. And, in regard to his health, it was even worse. Lautrec did not eat much, lost a lot of weight, and his clothes hung on him as though on a hanger. Visits to the bordellos became limited, but not because of any disturbance in potency, as one could have imagined, but, rather, for financial reasons, as his family greatly reduced their material assistance, while his income from the sale of his paintings significantly declined.

In March 1901, the painter underwent a greater crisis. Signs of paranoia appeared, while his legs, already poorly functional, completely ceased to obey his commands. The treatment that he undertook – electrical stimulation and certain doses of *nux vomica* – seemed to help a little, but his physicians forbade him alcohol and sexual relations, which did not help his psychologic state. A month later, in mid-April, Lautrec appeared on the streets of Paris, shocking those people who knew him. He was but a shadow of his former self, frighteningly thin, and moving with difficulty. He tried to work, but probably saw that this no longer made any sense. Losing his desire to paint, the artist lost his desire to live. He closed his studio and left Paris. In mid-1901, as his biographers write, an "attack of paralysis" occurred. His mother, whom his guardian informed of this fact, took her son to Chateau de Malrome, where she lived. After a short period of improvement of the state of his health, during which Lautrec again tried to paint, deterioration appeared anew. "The paralysis gradually spread through his body. He could

neither walk nor eat. He was taken out in a carriage into the park. At meals, he was brought to the table in a wheelchair. "(154) Periods of loss of consciousness appeared, and the painter did not really know what was happening. Henri Toulouse-Lautrec died on the morning of September 9, 1901.

As always in this book, I put the question to myself of how much syphilis, with which the painter became infected at the age of 24, caused his death, and how much other diseases were responsible. The answer, particularly in the case of Lautrec, is very difficult to determine with certainty, as the painter was a cripple from his early years, and then, for a long time, suffered from alcoholism. The gamut of manifestations of the latter disease is very wide, and in many ways can overlap with those of tertiary syphilis (general paresis, *tabes dorsalis*, or meningo-vascular lues). Also, one cannot exclude that the “paralysis,” which afflicted the painter in the last year of his life could have been the result of cerebral attack or stroke (hemorrhagic, thrombus, etc.) related neither to syphilis, nor to prolonged alcoholism. So, what the immediate cause of the painter's death was, I have to leave without any definitive answer.

CHAPTER 7

FEAR, SHAME … AND MORE

From the beginning of the syphilis pandemic, the disease evoked fear, about which it is hard to be surprised. Its then-unknown cause, violent course, skin changes that disfigured the patient's appearance, and severe pains, as well as a lack of response to all attempts at treatment were a sufficient reason to produce fear in patients, and panic around them. This consternation was also communicated to physicians, who were helpless in regard to the new disease, and, not knowing the method of its spread, fled from the sick, fearing infection. The renowned humanist of the time, Erasmus of Rotterdam considered syphilis as the worst and most damaging of the diseases that had befallen mankind at the time, as it "concentrates in itself everything that was appalling in other diseases: pains, contagiousness, danger of death, difficult and loathsome treatment, which does not bring a full return to health." (1) Erasmus, himself the grandson of a physician, was fearful of syphilis, and refused a meeting with his friend and intellectual contemporary thinker, Ulrich von Hutten, who was ill with lues. Von Hutten, who was involved in the Reformation, had to leave Germany, and had difficulty in finding a place where he could live and work. These difficulties resulted not only from the fact of announcing himself to be sympathetic to the Reformation (and was therefore looked at askance by the Catholic majority), but also, perhaps mainly, because he was ill with lues, and, despite multiple treatments, had reached the stage of frequent recurrences of the disease. Zwingli, one of the Reformation leaders in Switzerland, came to his help, allowing him to settle away from the city, on the lightly

inhabited island of Ufenau in the Zurichersee, where von Hutten died at age thirty-five, and where, to this day, is found his grave, frequently visited by tourists (Fig.7.1 and 7.2).

Figure 7.1 Ulrich von Hutten

Figure 11.2 Ulrich von Hutten is burried to the right of the chapel on the Ufenau Island. Photo: E. Mroczkowska

The first observations indicating that syphilis could be transmitted sexually added feelings of shame to the fear of the disease. The sphere of human sexuality had always been one of bashfulness and great privacy, while infection with

syphilis or other venereal disease was proof of breaking certain moral maxims, i.e. marital infidelity, utilizing paid sex, loss of virginity or abandoned celibacy. Shame accompanied lues from the beginnings of the pandemic, and much of this remains to this day.

An early view that disease can be a sign of God's anger and a punishment for not keeping his commandments added a sense of guilt to the feelings of fear and shame. Many of the diseased tried to appease the Creator for sins committed, by practicing self-flagellation or by taking part in processions or pilgrimages to holy places or by offering generous gifts to the Church. The belief that syphilis could be a punishment meted out by God underlay the bases of the name given to this disease, for the genesis of which we are indebted to the sixteenth century poem authored by the Italian poet, Girolamo Fracastoro, under the title of "Syphilis sive Marbus Gallicus" (Syphilis, or the French Disease). The protagonist of the poem is a shepherd named Syphilus, who broke his word to the god, Apollo, for which he was punished by a terrible disease. It is worth noting that from the time of appearance of the aforementioned poem, until use of the term syphilis became common, 100 years passed, although the term really did not begin to be commonly used until the eighteenth century. Girolamo Fracastoro is a figure of interest in the history of medicine as he was not only a talented poet, mathematician, astronomer and geographer, but, first of all, a physician. His work from 1546, under the title of *De Contagione* (On Contagion), is the first serious description of typhus fever, while this author of the poem about the shepherd, Syphilus, also undertook treating the disease, which owes its current name to him. The recent discovery in the collection of the National Gallery in London of a portrait of Fracastorius by Titian, known for his numerous portraits of sovereigns and representatives of the higher aristocracy of this period, gave impulse to suppositions that this sixteenth century painter also was a

patient of Fracastoro, who was supposed to have treated him for syphilis, the portrait mentioned supposedly payment for services bestowed. (2) This hypothesis, however, appears to me to be of little probability, taking into consideration the long and productive life of Titian, who died at close to 90 years of age.

As I already mentioned, fear of syphilis was associated not only with the disease itself – which had a significantly more stormy course initially than now and often ended in death – but equally, with the fact of little effectiveness in its treatment, which, not uncommonly, was worse than the disease. People were afraid of those ill with lues, while centers that undertook their treatment – I do not want to call them hospitals – were usually located outside the perimeters of towns, in order not to infect their inhabitants through contact with the sick. The average period of stay in such an institution did not exceed two months, although some patients were held longer there, even over a year, while the mortality among patients with syphilis was 16-24%, which is not at all a bad outcome for those times. (3) It seems that, by the end of the sixteenth century and in subsequent years, syphilis had an apparently less dramatic course than at the beginning of the pandemic. This could have been related to a lesser virulence of the germ, which, as the result of multiple passages from patient to patient, was becoming ever less aggressive, as well as of a certain tidying up of methods of treatment, which were becoming more varied and less toxic for the patient.

To the same extent that fear of lues was no longer the same as earlier, feelings of shame and the accompanying wish to hide its signs, plus the fact of the disease, became that much more important. Many ill persons manifesting skin lesions on exposed parts of the body did not leave their houses until they had remitted. Tons of powder masked blemishes on the face, while huge hats covered lesions on the head. At the cusp of the sixteenth and seventeenth

centuries, there appeared in France a mode for wigs, which permitted hiding signs on the head, such as rashes or balding associated with secondary syphilis, or of subsequent treatment with mercury. Not all are of the opinion that the mode for wigs was the result of constantly increasing numbers of those ill with syphilis, and stress that usually famous and influential persons dictated what is *en vogue*, styles that the rest of the people then tried to imitate. Examples of monarchs from this period who wore wigs were Elizabeth I, Queen of England, and the King of France, Louis XIII, the latter starting to wear a wig when he lost his hair while very young. The mode for wigs was supported by Louis XIV, who not only had poor hair, but even worse teeth, which he lost completely even before completing age 40. In several places, I found information that the last-named monarch could have lost his hair and teeth as the result of anti-syphilitic treatment – this was not confirmed in more serious works, however. Besides the mode for wigs, which sovereigns and those suffering from syphilis made popular, there were also other reasons for wearing them; let us call them of a hygienic nature. One of these was the need for getting rid of the then very common, head lice, as well as of pubic lice (the latter of which are currently on the list of Sexually Transmitted Diseases). Shaving the head and wearing a wig allowed its owner to save a lot of the time associated with combing out or catching lice, while if any of these parasites were found in the wig itself, one could get rid of them by immersing it in boiling water. In the battle with pubic lice, loin (pubic) wigs, popularly known as “merkins,” turned out to be very practical. Apparently, they were known even from the mid-fifteenth century, while from the time of the beginning of the syphilis pandemic, they were used mainly by prostitutes, who by this means were able to hide from their clients the signs of syphilis in the genital region. This type of wig (merkin) is also in use today, mainly by women of the Far East, and treated as genital adornment,

with the goal of heightening the sexual attractiveness of their wearers. Somewhat different merkins, are used by male actors taking part in erotic scenes, in order to hide signs of arousal that cannot be shown on the screen.

Returning to head wigs, this mode ended at the end of the eighteenth century, mainly as a result of the French Revolution and its condemnation of everything associated with the aristocracy. In England, however, extinction of the wig mode is associated with the introduction, by the British government, of drastic increases in taxes on the powder with which they were sprinkled. If that, in fact, was the case, it would be yet another proof that the syphilis epidemic had little connection with the mode for wigs, although in the nineteenth century the number of cases of lues did not decrease; on the contrary, they rose.

Writing about the fear of syphilis, one cannot close one's eyes to the fact that it was unscrupulously taken advantage of by charlatans taking care of the sick, but also – and I acknowledged this with shame – by some physicians. It had to do, first of all, with obtaining patients, on whom unnecessary procedures were performed, or to whom were sold useless medicines produced by the culprits. For this purpose, they published hair-raising accounts of the sufferings of those ill with syphilis, while simultaneously telling people that they possessed medicines, which in an almost miraculous manner would relieve them of their sickness. The authors of this type of texts took advantage of the need to maintain private the fact of having the disease, underlining that, inasmuch as the medicines recommended by themselves could be taken in the quiet of the home, the patient's full privacy would be guaranteed. One of such authors was J. Smyth MD (about whose qualifications there can be doubts), who, in his publication, lauded a substance patented by himself, called "Smyth's Specific Drops," as a tested treatment for venereal diseases as well as those of nervous origin. (4) Another businessman advertising his

products was the French physician, Nicholas Christier de Thy, who sold his medicine in England under the name of "Water of Safety," advertised as being effective even in the most advanced manifestations of venereal diseases. (5) To patients who did not fancy treatment with mercury, Dr. Isaac Swainson recommended an alternative treatment with a "Velnos Vegetable Syrop" that lacked this metal, asserting that he "could cure the most extreme cases of penis ulcerations in patients who had been condemned … to the knife by surgeons." (6)

A great deal of knowledge on the subject of venereal diseases in eighteenth century London we owe to the memoirs of James Boswell, a Scottish lawyer and intellectual, whose stay in the capital of the British Empire was associated with multiple infections, most likely only with gonorrhea (Fig.7.3). Boswell wrote about himself that "I am of a warm constitution: a complexion, as physicians say, exceedingly amorous, and, therefore suck in the poison more deeply." (7) Regardless of any apparent inborn susceptibility to venereal diseases, Boswell did everything to infect himself multiple times! As he wrote in 1760-69, he had sexual contact with three well-born women, four actresses, romanced the mistress of J.J. Rouseau while having three of his own, and also added relations with at least 60 street prostitutes in between. (8) Boswell is said to have been infected with gonorrhea, and that, from 13-19 times, which appears to me rather exaggerated, although some of these infections could have been relapses or complications of the same infection. Testifying to this is the fragment of his memoirs cited earlier, in which he wrote:

> I have had two visitations of this calamity. The first lasted ten weeks. The second, four months. How severe a reflection is it! And, O, how severe a prospect! Yet let me take courage. Perhaps this is not

> a very bad infection, and as I shall be scrupulously careful of myself. I may get rid of it in a short time. (7)

Boswell's reaction regarding the course of the disease may indicate that its author most likely had gonococcal epididymitis (note from memoir dated February 4, 1763): "I had been very bad all night, I lay in direful apprehension that my testicle, which formerly was ill, was again swelled." (9)

Complications of gonorrhea in the pre-antibiotic era were very frequent and, most probably, Boswell was a victim of them, although manifold infections with gonorrhea as are attributed to him may have been re-occurrences or complications of the same infection. Boswell was lucky, as he probably, did not infect himself with syphilis, something indicated by the methods of treatment used by his physician, a Dr. Douglas. Boswell himself, as an experienced patient, was able to diagnose his gonorrhea, writing, for example, that he "had a meeting with Signor Gonorrhea," (10) not calling his ailments syphilis or the then still popular alternate name for syphilis, "the pox." Another thing, though, is that in Boswell's time, the two diseases were not differentiated well, and gonorrhea was often considered to be a milder form of syphilis.

Boswell, in opposition to other authors of the time, was aware of the fact that, if ill with a venereal disease, one could infect a sexual partner. (11) Not all were as smart, while some frankly considered that the source of the infection were exclusively women, first of all prostitutes for whom "venereal disease is a permanent state, while for men it was something foreign and temporary." Some went even farther in their misogyny, suggesting that women are capable of regenerating syphilis and conveying it to men:

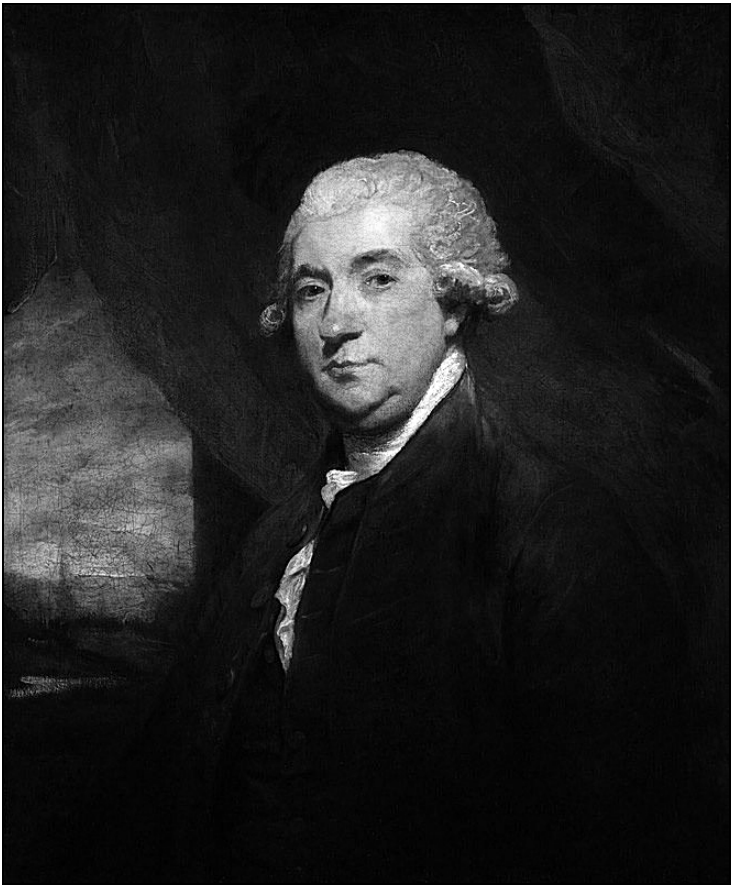


Figure 7.3 Portrait of James Boswell of Auchinleck (1785)by Joshua Reynolds

Women's sexual passivity and the 'delicate' nature of their sexual organs both of which were governed by nature and determined by the biology of their bodies, were thought to make them actually capable of generating syphilis and transmitting it to numerous

> men. The uteruses of loose women naturally labored to produce disease rather than progeny. (12)

In addition to this sort of fantastic ideas, there also appeared, at the same time, completely sensible opinions declaring that infected women were symptomlessly ill (asymptomatic) more often than men – which recommends that men be particularly careful in contacts with prostitutes.

Such opinions Boswell voiced also, publishing maxims of the type: "To avoid the 'plague of Venus', men need to be more careful consumers." (13,14) Unfortunately, despite the fact that he himself used condoms (made from animal intestines), he did not protect himself against numerous possible infections—luckily for him probably only with gonorrhea.

The first half of the nineteenth century did not bring any major changes in the perception of syphilis, either among those infected or the public at large. About how those ill, their families and friends reacted to the news of having become infected with syphilis, I wrote especially in the biographies of the nineteenth century artists who were sick with the lues. Some of them accepted the fact with blusterous resignation or reacted with dark humor at the news of what they were ill with. Although, among their closest friends they did not hide – or could not hide – the fact of their infection, very scant information about their health reached public knowledge, and everywhere, referring to the illness by its name was avoided like fire, euphemisms being depended on instead. I will only recall the journal of the brothers Goncourt from the nineteenth century, whose many objects of description suffered from syphilis, and in which are found accounts of its signs or symptoms – yet the name of the disease, which would have informed the reader of what a described person suffered from or died of, is nowhere to be found. Avoidance of the name, syphilis, itself applies not only to literature or letter writing, since, I will remind the reader, even in private letters written about an ill person, the name of the disease

was avoided. The same applies to medical documentation, in which a diagnosis of syphilis was usually not given or was in time removed, so that in medical records available today, one can rarely find the name of this disease, despite everyone knowing of what a prominent artist suffered or died. Even in death certificates, the name, syphilis, was not always used, rather being limited to formulas saying that the cause of death was cessation of heart function, or a cerebral hemorrhage, thus avoiding the name of the underlying disease.

Physicians treating those sick with lues tried to protect their patients from defamation, of which the best proof was the custom of not bowing to patients on the street, in order not to expose them to gossip. This was particularly important in small communities, as everyone knew what illnesses a physician would be treating. An example of a physician who was concerned about the good name of his patients was Dr. David Gruby, mentioned earlier, who treated Guy de Maupassant, and, even before that, Heinrich Heine, the German poet living in Paris (Fig.7.4). Dr. Gruby, who first diagnosed syphilis in Heine (the poet had been treated earlier for something else), visited his patients travelling in a carriage without windows, with but one opening in its roof. (15)

Figure 7.4 Portrait of Heinrich Heine (1831) painted by Moritz Daniel Oppenheim

During the second half of the nineteenth century, several bits of new information about syphilis appeared. Thanks to the work of Alfred Fournier, patients with *general paresis* and *tabes dorsalis* learned that their symptoms and signs were caused by syphilis. At that time, almost every 5th patient in psychiatric hospitals was there as a result of *general paresis*, while signs of *tabes dorsalis* were attributed to such diseases as rheumatism, gastric ulcer disease, a variety of diseases of the visual apparatus or neurologic problems not associated with syphilis. Confirmation of syphilis as the etiology of

general paresis and *tabes dorsalis*, in association with the mistaken concept of "genetically transmitted congenital syphilis," increased the already great fear of the disease. At more or less the same time, there appeared a new theory, which, had it been shown to be accurate, could have produced true panic among those sick with lues. This theory stated that leprosy was the fourth stage of syphilis! It gained adherents during the second half of the nineteenth century, mostly in America, and produced a certain degree of consternation, equally in the medical world as among patients. Both syphilis and leprosy belonged among diseases stigmatizing patients, who not only feared and were shamed by them, but were also the objects of a certain type of harassment. Particularly leprosy, known from biblical times, was a disease that engendered a general fear, which caused those with leprosy to be banned from society and isolated in closed facilities, often on distant islands, the so-called leprosorias. In the 1980s, I was a member of a group testing the effectiveness of a trial vaccine developed with funding by the World Health Organization (W.H.O.). As a result, I received additional education and training at the National Hansen's Disease Center in Carville, Louisiana, where I saw cases of the disease (which is rare in the U.S.A.), and learned about its history, methods of treatment and prevention. On the grounds of the Carville Center, there still lived long-term patients of this institution under a *de facto* form of voluntary isolation, which was a help to sick people discarded by society. That even modern society greatly fears, yet knows very little on the subject of leprosy (Hansen's disease), I learned from my own experience. Thus, having as an assignment the testing of the value of a new, trial vaccine containing killed leprosy bacteria, we were to evaluate whether giving it to selected volunteers would increase resistance to the disease, as measured by the so-called lepromin skin test. The first volunteers were physicians taking part in the experiment, which required mutual injection

of the appropriate dose of test vaccine into the skin. The local reaction to the injection was the appearance of discoloration and small scars on the upper arm, which, with time, would become reduced, or completely disappeared. By chance, at the time, I was invited with my family to lunch at some friends, who lived in an apartment complex with a large swimming pool. While swimming in the pool, which had a large number of people in it, I was asked by one of the swimmers where I had got three small, but easily visible scars. I replied truthfully that they were scars from a vaccine against leprosy, which evoked a certain degree of consternation. After a short time, I noticed that my daughter and I were the only ones swimming, while the people sunning themselves on lawn chairs all around had started to leave. After a few days, my friend who invited us telephoned me with the information that he had received a visit from the manager of the apartment house, to whom one of the tenants had turned with the complaint that people who had contact with leprosy were being invited to the pool that was used by both adults and children! I cite this story only to show how badly, even in the tw^{entieth} century, people feared leprosy – and do so still – despite the fact that the disease has been curable already for several decades, while also acknowledged as one of the least infectious of the bacterial diseases.

The idea that leprosy is the fourth stage of lues, I came upon in a film that I saw on a religious television channel. There was a scene, in which a priest undergoing medical examination was ordered to raise his habit and lower his trousers, while the examining physician looked for signs of some disease – one can conclude venereal – in the area of the genitals. This intrigued me, and I then saw the film in its entirety, thanks to which I learned about the concept that leprosy is or could be the fourth stage of syphilis! I am overlooking an error in the scenario, which probably had not had the benefit of a consultation with a venereologist,

suggested by the fact that looking for signs of third or fourth stage syphilis in the area of the genitals makes no sense, as only in early syphilis do signs of the disease appear in this area, and they remit without leaving any trace. Regardless of the apparent error that I mentioned, the film brought to my mind a certain truth, which could have been very alarming for those with lues, who could have felt threatened by the prospect of being isolated in a manner similar to that imposed on those ill with leprosy. The film that I mentioned was *Father Damian*, which described the history of the work of the Belgian priest, Joseph de Veuster (Fr. Damian), who devoted his life to those suffering from leprosy and isolated on the Hawaiian island of Molokai. Working closely with the sick, he became infected with leprosy, and died as a result of it. In 2009, Fr. Damian, who is called the "Apostle of the Lepers," or the "Leper Priest," was canonized by Pope John Paul II, becoming one of the few "American" saints. Although of Belgian origin, St. Damian is characterized as the 10th of the few American saints, having lived, worked and died within the U.S.A. I will remind the reader at this point that another – although not saintly – person, also accused of having leprosy, was Paul Gaugin, whose skin changes, at a certain stage of his disease, were suggestive of that disease. Or maybe, the idea that leprosy was the fourth stage of syphilis could have already reached Tahiti?

Fortunately, the hypothesis of leprosy being the fourth stage of syphilis did not find confirmation in the facts, and those ill with the latter avoided compulsory isolation in syphilisorias, although their status otherwise did not undergo any real change as a result. They continued to be treated as different from other ill people, as they were considered to have been responsible for own disease, and that what had befallen them was a deserved punishment. It wasn't enough that hospitals in which syphilitics were treated were situated at a distance from the town centers, but even the wards and their furnishings were far worse than those in which others

were treated. This was not just in the early times of the pandemic, but also in modern times, as there has hardly been an instance of a venereology department that I have been able to visit, and that in various countries, where they were not customarily situated in distant, less representative parts of the hospital building. Outpatient venereal disease clinics have often been situated in buildings close to police stations, or, in the case of a clinic for prostitutes in one of the European capitals, in the building that also housed an "alcohol recovery room."

Another proof of the inferior treatment of those ill with venereal diseases was the avoidance by highly placed persons of visiting wards treating them. The custom of visiting the sick in hospitals has a long history, while those doing the visiting were commonly kings or their consorts wives, or representatives of the highest aristocracy. This type of activity augmented popularity among their subjects, or provided a sense of satisfaction in performing good deeds. Yet, one count on the fingers of one hand the visitation of wards of those sick with venereal diseases, even though this former type of activity did not stop during times of other epidemic infectious diseases. The Empress Elizabeth (Sissi), wife of the Emperor of Austro-Hungary, Franz Joseph, liked to visit the sick in hospitals to speak with them and to bring them presents. She was even so brave that at the time of the cholera epidemic of 1874, she visited the hospital in Munich, where she squeezed the hand of one of the patients, which was considered very risky because of the possibility of infection. (16)

I did not, however, find information anywhere saying that Sissi visited wards for syphilitics, although one could have expected that from her greater sympathy for people touched by this particular disease. Sissi wrote poems, while her poetry guru was Heinrich Heine, whom she tried to emulate. In her villa on the Greek island of Corfu, she placed a statue of Heine, who was described by those who saw him as

having visible signs of the disease. Heine became infected with syphilis even in his youth, while the last years of his life he spent confined to his bed as a result of a serious form of *tabes dorsalis*. (15)

Speaking of the overt discrimination against the venereally diseased, it has to be added that even the specialization of dermatovenereology has often been considered as something inferior. Frequently, Jewish doctors, for whom it was difficult to specialize in other areas of medicine undertook the specialty. In fact, because among venereologists there were many Jews, the popularity of this disease among adherents to Judaism, resulted on their being blamed for the spread of the disease in Europe, even at the beginning of the pandemic and German Nazis claimed syphilis and typhus to be diseases spread by the Jews. An important role in this propaganda must be attributed to Hitler, himself, who, in *Mein Kampf*, the bible of the Nazis, blamed the Jews for the dissemination of disease and repeated mistaken views of the inescapable hereditary nature of syphilis, the inevitable consequences of which would reach to the 10^{th} generation. Hitler's hatred of the Jews was said to have originated from the fact that in his youth, some Jewish prostitute was supposed to have infected him with a venereal disease, most probably gonorrhea.

I cannot say that discrimination against those venereally ill was the typical characteristic of totalitarian regimes, although there seems to be something to that. Visiting institutions treating those with venereal diseases in Moscow in the 1980s, I learned that, in the USSR (Union of Soviet Socialist Republics), those ill with syphilis were treated differently than other patients. First of all, in the (former) USSR, statistics pertaining to venereal diseases were not released to the public. These data were secret, and known only to select officials on the level of the Ministry of Health and, doubtless, the KGB. The physicians with whom I came in contact had some knowledge on the subject, but were not

able to share their private observations with me, as only rarely did I have the opportunity to be with them privately. The method of treatment of syphilis in the USSR was different than in Europe and America at that time, as these diseases were treated with multi-week injections of crystalline penicillin several times daily. When I asked, somewhat in jest, whether the patients, mostly young people, weren't bored with being in the hospital for the long time required, the response was, no, as the patients had the obligation of working in the hospital, which filled their free time. I must have had a very surprised look on my face, as my respondents began nervously to explain that these were light tasks, which did not interfere with the treatment process. To my question why crystalline penicillin, which must be given intramuscularly several times daily, was used, and not procaine penicillin, which is given once daily, or long-acting Benzathine Penicillin G , which is given once weekly, I was told that it was done for the good of the patient, something that could not be said about capitalist public health, where the period of treatment was the shortest possible, in order to "get rid of the patient cheaply!" The fact is that crystalline penicillin enters the cerebrospinal fluid better than procaine penicillin or long-acting penicillin, but it is also true that this does not translate in any way into an increased number of late syphilis cases in countries where lues is treated with one or three injections (depending on the stage of the disease) of long-acting penicillin. The backwardness and archaic methods of treatment I found in the former USSR were caused by a certain isolation of the medical community there, as Soviet physicians rarely took part in international educational conferences – to which party activists or staff bureaucrats were the ones most often sent, and not professional physicians. During private contacts, my Soviet colleagues showed themselves to be wise and intelligent people, who were aware of the backwardness in which they remained in respect to the West, and questioned me about

modern diagnostic and therapeutic methods that existed then in Western Europe and the U.S.A.

Writing about the relations between those ill with syphilis and the rest of society, one cannot ignore the role of prostitution in the spread venereal diseases. Boswell and his contemporaries wrote about this, as did authors both earlier and later. (17,18,19) Many defenders of this oldest profession in the world explained that prostitutes are necessary, based on their services, as were then considered to prevent the dangers of onanism! (20) Concerning the relationship of society to prostitution in the nineteenth century, the chapters of this book devoted to known artists from this period who were ill with syphilis, are quite informative. Most of them sporadically, and some, regularly, availed themselves of the services of prostitutes, and unfortunately, many of them paid for that with a loss of health and, often, of life. Naturally, the great artists were not the only clients of women employed in prostitution, and practically every male could buy sexual services that they could afford. I wish to stress that male prostitutes bestowing services to homosexuals were a rarity then, as were male prostitutes bestowing services upon women, about which practically nothing is written. Neglected wives made do in more traditional ways, romancing valets, neighbors or friends of their husbands, who at the same time frequented bordellos.

Over the course of history, a variety of attempts to liquidate or limit prostitution have been undertaken, but all actions in this direction have ended, sooner or later, in failure. One of the most important reasons for these types of undertakings was the fact that prostitutes were and still are a source of infection with venereal diseases. Over the course of centuries, the relationship of the law to this oldest profession in the world ranged, often radically, from very restrictive, brutal rules, to complete absence of control. Current jurisdiction relating to prostitution is also extremely

varied, even in countries that are similar from the point of view of tradition or culture. In the U.S.A., for example, with the exception of one state, prostitution is punishable—the prostitutes being punished in all states, while both prostitutes and their clients in some. It must be admitted that the guardians of the law apply these rules with great reluctance, recognizing the low effectiveness of their actions. In European countries, prostitution is generally legal, and in some of them, for instance, most recently, Germany and Switzerland, there are attempts to make life easier, not only for the prostitutes and their clients, but also for the inhabitants of neighborhoods in which such services have been bestowed. A good example of such an approach are actions by the authorities in Zurich (Switzerland), in which, in order to move prostitutes from the center of town, they constructed “accommodations “ something of the type of open garages, where one can park a car, have a place to lie down, a small table, a toilet and a bathroom with a shower. The room is equipped with an alarm system that the woman can use, in case the client were to threaten her in any way. On the walls of these rooms hang posters reminding of the advantages of using condoms, while in the neighborhood nearby, volunteers work in shifts, ready to provide assistance in case the prostitute or her clients were to need help. In some European countries, prostitution is taxed, which assures these women health insurance, as well as a right to a pension. In the majority of European countries, deriving advantage from prostitution by a third person (pimping) is punishable, as are utilizing underage prostitution, forcing into prostitution and human trafficking.

Hundreds of volumes have been written about prostitution, but this subject interests me solely in its epidemiologic aspects. It is obvious that for this group of women, venereal diseases are occupational diseases, and all actions must be undertaken that will allow the limitation of infections in this environment. One should put stress on the

use of condoms and create organizational forms facilitating access of prostitutes to public health units that undertake the treatment of diseases transmitted by the sexual route. Very important is the conduct of informational campaigns to educate prostitutes about the signs and symptoms of venereal diseases, and enable them to identify signs of disease in their clients and themselves, and encourage early consultation of a physician. I believe that all attempts at penalizing women working in prostitution are unnecessary, and as history has already shown, are ineffective, while attempts at including criminal law only make control of prostitution more difficult, and are taken by these women as unnecessary harassment.

Looking at matters related to sex, it is not difficult to note that attempts at placing them into the arms of the law do not always end happily; even in countries considered modern and observant of human rights, one can find anachronistic or bizarre legal rules, and laws, which, fortunately, are not always observed. No one will be surprised if they read that in some countries of the Near East women, and more rarely men, are punished for such transgressions as fornication, cohabitation, adultery, and oral or anal sex. I think, however, that many readers will be surprised when they learn that even in highly developed country, one can go to prison for the same things. Depending on the state, severe punishments are threatened even for oral or anal sex with one's own wife, and for sex between cohabiting homosexuals. (21) The following is an example how this laws are observed: Among my patients at the V.D. clinic I had two homosexual policemen, who would come from time to time for a checkup. They were dressed in civilian clothes, but in conversations with me, they did not hide their profession. During one of their visits I decided to test their knowledge on this subject. While taking their medical histories, I asked the standard questions about the dates and types of their last sexual contacts, to which I received replies that had to be

noted in their medical records. They stated that they had both oral and anal contacts, exclusively with men. When I showed them a publication containing information that, in the state where they were living, they were subject to up to five years in jail and/or a fine of $200 for their type of sexual activities, they did not want to believe their own eyes. I calmed them, by saying that the information they were giving me was covered by privacy within the physician-patient relationship, and that I had not the slightest intention of taking it to the police! I did add, however, that, regardless of the physician's confidentiality obligating us both, upon receiving a court order, our clinic would have to provide access to the information given by them. They did not seem especially worried by this, but probably came to the conclusion that it was not worth the risk, as I did not see them again. I also checked the status of legal requirements with the administration of our clinic, asking the director whether I would be required to inform the police myself, or whether I should delegate to one of the staff the fact that I had patients who had volunteered that they practiced oral and anal sex. The director looked at me very strikingly, as though to check whether the one asking the question needed psychiatric help, as every other patient of our clinic provided this type of information. When I showed her the publication saying that in our state such a law was in force, she was as surprised as the policemen just mentioned. She affirmed that at some time, in some place, she had heard something about this, but that it appeared to her that it did not actively pertain to our state. I asked some attorney friends, among whom some were equally surprised, while others knew something about it, and explained to me that this law had been passed over a hundred years ago, was currently not enforced, and was thus known as a so-called “dead law.” I wish to calm the readers that such draconian laws are not in place in every state, and where they are, they are generally “dead.” This does not change the fact, however, that should a sexual

partner, or even a husband or a wife want to put his or her "other half" in jail, all that would be necessary would be to document the performance by one of them of the relations mentioned earlier (oral or anal), or as is described in legal language, of an "abominable and detestable crime against nature" (21) in order to be rid of a partner for some time. As a conclusion to this description of an attempt at control by law within the sphere of sexual life, I will remind the reader that in over a dozen states, the law obliges punishment for sex "between a man and a woman who are not married to one another." (21) I understand that this information may produce anxiety in some of my readers, but will try to calm them by suggesting that these are usually "dead laws." Yet, how else can one understand the old Latin proverb, "*Dura lex sed lex*?"

As a conclusion to considerations on the subject of the fear and shame of syphilis, I wanted to share my own observations on this phenomenon, i. e., the observations of a physician dealing with venereal diseases at the end of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first centuries. As I already wrote, the introduction of penicillin to the treatment of syphilis made it one of many diseases that can be relatively easily and quickly cured, under the condition that therapy is begun in the early period of the disease. Unfortunately, that is not always what happens, as patients who learn about their disease many years after infection by accident, or sometimes by appropriately applied serologic testing. There are not too many of these patients, and they most often are without signs of late syphilis, inasmuch as modern use and abuse of antibiotics results in its inadvertent treatment, although not always cure, by chance. The old belief in the incurability of this disease has gone into oblivion, although, in rare cases, may remind us of itself.

The diagnosis of syphilis (lues) is established on the basis of signs of the disease, and confirmed by the results of laboratory testing, that is, tests discovering, among other

things, antibodies that are found in blood serum. These tests are more or less specific only for syphilis, and those, which are positive not only in syphilis, but, also in other diseases, such as, occasionally, malaria, leprosy (Hansen's disease), or certain diseases with an immunologic basis. Positive results not specifically due to syphilis (i.e. those due to non-luetic diseases) are generally weakly positive – which permits distinguishing them from cases of syphilis in which, depending on the duration of the disease, they are usually strongly positive. Additionally, there are other tests less commonly done that are very specific, and thus permit either the exclusion or confirmation of infection with lues. It also happens that after correctly conducted anti-syphilitic treatment, the results of some tests remain positive in some patients, but at a very low level, which does not indicate that the disease has not been entirely cured. This sometimes creates a problematic situation, as some patients become convinced that their disease has not been finally eradicated. There remains in my memory the history of one patient, who was referred to our institution for consultation for this actual reason. This patient had weakly positive results in standard testing, and despite having undergone treatment in a private doctor's office, and maybe even several penicillin treatments, did not attain complete negativity. Very exact testing done by us excluded infection with syphilis, and, despite his demanding further treatment, and even treatment of his wife, in whom all test results were negative, he was released home. We explained to him at some length that additional treatment in his case was groundless, and it appeared that he finally understood, as he was a well-educated teaching employee at the engineering college. Over a year later, I met his wife at a mall, and asked about her husband. She was dressed in black, but did not look like a person in mourning. I was mistaken, however, as she told me that several months earlier her husband had died, by suicide. I felt bad and a bit embarrassed, as I thought to myself that my former patient

had taken his life in the belief that he had “an incurable form of syphilis.” His widow dispersed my doubts, however, clarifying for me that her husband had been ill with depression, and that had been the cause of his suicide. She said also that her husband had had psychiatric problems for a long time, but had not informed us.

Belief in having incurable syphilis and fear of this disease are currently rare, what cannot be said about feelings of shame or a certain abashedness as a result of having become infected with a sexually transmitted disease. This is linked to the fact that infection is often the result of marital infidelity or of being untrue to a sexual partner, of sexual contact with a prostitute, alcohol intoxication, or also use of narcotics. Taking advantage of the literature, or, lately, more frequently of the Internet, patients learn that syphilis, and also other venereal diseases can be contracted by other than sexual routes, for instance use of common objects, by touch, or by use of public toilets. The last suggestion gave rise to an anecdote known to every physician involved with venereal diseases. “After being examined by a physician, a wife tells her husband that she has been diagnosed with syphilis, but assures him that she was never unfaithful to him, and that she most probably became infected in a public toilet which she had used recently. The unbelieving husband asks the doctor if one can be infected with syphilis in a toilet, to which the latter replies, that one can, but it's not very comfortable.” One can laugh at this, but to venereologists it isn't always funny, as quite often they have to answer this type of question, knowing that the questioner really isn't joking. Asked the same or similar question many times, I would always answer in the affirmative, out of the conviction that, although rare, non-sexual infections are possible, and that it is not I who should decide the fate of someone's relationship. I also often saw that patients regret having committed mistakes, which made it easier to take this type of approach.

In mentioning the Internet, it should be stressed that it is currently the main source of information about venereal diseases for many people. This has a huge meaning in the battle against these diseases, as, thanks to it, a patient suspecting infection may go to a physician in a much earlier stage of the disease. This is invaluable, both from the epidemiologic perspective, as he or she does not infect new partners, and the therapeutic point of view, as, in the early period, it is easier to cure lues, often avoiding serious later complications. Obtaining knowledge on the subject of venereal diseases exclusively from the Internet also has its negative side, as the brevity of information included there, and the impossibility of discussing it with a specialist (discussions on so-called fora/forums does not fulfill this role) causes us to have many patients at VD clinics, who go there due to a blemish on the skin of the genitalia, or burning upon urination, convinced that they have become infected with syphilis or gonorrhea, while not having these diseases. Despite everything, though, every physician prefers that a patient presents him- or herself even unnecessarily, rather than foregoing a visit in a case of genuine infection.

A different phenomenon associated with the Internet, is the somewhat changing clinical picture of venereal diseases, including syphilis, caused by the popularity of pornographic webpages, which propagate a variety of forms of performing sex, that are, let's say, distant from the traditional ones. Currently, every other patient, male or female, admits in his or her interviews, of participating in oral or anal sex, in addition to traditional (vaginal) relations. Formerly rare “rimming” or “fisting” are no longer as sporadic, while among women, use of a variety of mechanical toys (dildoes) while masturbating, is becoming increasingly prevalent. The appearance of various creams, ointments, and gels available on the market without prescription, which are supposed to potentiate sexual experiences, causes us to have to deal with formerly rarely observed signs or symptoms. Oral or

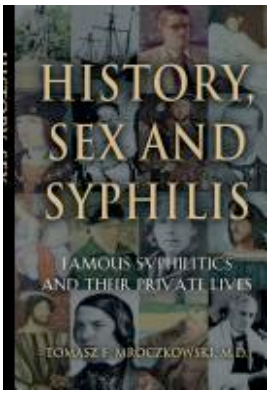
anal sex, more and more frequently causes us to have to anticipate the appearance of primary luetic chancres on the lips or tongue, or likewise in the anal area, and that, not only among male homosexuals, but equally in women. More often than earlier, we observe patients presenting themselves as a result of injury in the genital and anal areas caused by teeth, mechanical toys or various attempts at genital adornment, associated with genital piercing, also equally in both women and men. (22)

The use of intimate gels causes allergic reactions in some patients, sometimes resulting in confusion with signs of venereal disease. (23) New anatomical discoveries and their popularization by the Internet, for example “point G,” results in women presenting themselves to venerelogists or gynecologists with injuries to the anterior wall of the vagina caused by overly aggressive activity at this location by the partner, or during masturbation. I was told of a female patient who presented herself to a physician, convinced that she had syphilis, as she felt something like an ulcer in this area. Fortunately, this was not syphilis, while the ulceration on the anterior wall of the vagina was the result of scratching with long, artificial fingernails, such as women wear for decorative purposes. The inventiveness of patients searching for variety in their sexual life knows no bounds, whereas my citing examples concerning selective situations, in which patients infected themselves with syphilis in a non-traditional way or suspected syphilis in themselves, which was, in fact, a sequel to uncommon sexual practices, does.

In conclusion, I would like to relate an incident of which I was a witness, if not to say a participant, which took place in the late 1990s. One day, a patient presented himself to me with the complaint that, some time earlier, red spots had appeared on the skin of his penis and abdomen, and also enlarged nodes in his groin. He was very anxious and asked me what I thought about all this. I told him that I would reply to his question immediately after receiving the results of the

blood test that we had drawn earlier. Consistent with my supposition, the RPR (Rapid Plasma Reagin) test was strongly positive, indicating that I was dealing with a patient with secondary syphilis. After his return to the office, I notified him that I had bad news for him, as he had syphilis, and that we would have to treat him with penicillin. In response to my words, the patient jumped from his chair, and threw himself at me, hugging and patting, then kissing me; he performed several circuits of the office with me in a dance that was reminiscent of something between a waltz and a polka. When, after a few minutes, he calmed down and was again seated on his chair, he informed me that he was delighted, and that he had never felt as happy as at the moment that I had told him that he had syphilis. For several days, he had walked around terribly depressed, as his friend (who was a hospital employee) had told him that the signs he had, indicated an infection with the HIV virus!

This occurrence apprised me of the change and evolution that have occurred in the attitude toward lues – a disease, which has taken millions of human beings from this world; a disease, the diagnosis of which had been a sentence of death or crippling for so long. Syphilis has been dethroned and replaced by other venereal disease such as AIDS. And in that very moment I thought to myself that 500 years had to pass for a diagnosis of syphilis not to frighten a patient but evoke joy and relief!



"History, Sex and Syphilis: Famous Syphilitics and their Private Lives," by Tomasz F. Mroczkowski, MD, is a fascinating and iconoclastic read. Written by a well-qualified physician and specialist, the author incorporates his extensive knowledge of the history of the disease with the private lives of the great writers, musicians, and artists who shaped Western Civilization, and who suffered from a disease that still too little is known about.

History, Sex And Syphilis: Famous Syphilitics and Their Private Lives