

# ART & ANTIQUES

DECEMBER 1986

## POST-IMPRESSIONIST MASTERPIECES

By Vincent Price

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# THE SIREN OF THE MOULIN ROUGE

A distinguished actor's tale of how,  
via the masterpieces at the Courtauld Institute,  
he found his calling.

**A**lthough I still have it—the slim, yellowed paper pamphlet whose cover reads “Home House, No. 20 Portman Square”—for something that had such a great influence on my life, I can't for the life of me remember how I first got it. In 1934, Home House, the building that contained the Institute of Fine Arts founded in 1931 by Samuel Courtauld and his wife, wasn't exactly on the tip of anyone's tongue. It was not yet famous as either a center of learning or as the possessor of a collection of modern art. It was merely summed up in this booklet as an almost perfectly preserved Robert Adam house built for an eccentric noblewoman in the eighteenth century. The booklet also listed, almost parenthetically in back, thirty-three paintings belonging to the institute (to be used, it said, for “educational purposes”) hanging in Home House.

On the list were Cézannes, Seurats, Renoirs, Degases, a Modigliani, a Daumier, Gauguins, a Van Gogh, a Monet, and a Manet. But I don't think the list would have particularly caught my eye in 1934. These painters had not yet been put on pedestals of immortality; in some cases they were still relative-

Vincent Price has just completed a new film, *The Whales of August*, with Lillian Gish and Bette Davis.



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ly unknown. Although I was already a budding collector (with a \$50 Modigliani drawing of my own), I had the booklet not because I was interested in modern art, but because I wanted to go to Home House to study German Renaissance art history.

The two things that always meant the most to me are the theater and the visual arts. My mother took us to see Pavlova in St. Louis when I was growing up, but I discovered art on my own. I never

forgot the first good picture I saw, a copy of an Andrea del Sarto, and when I first went to Europe at the age of sixteen I saw the original in Florence.

That tour clinched my desire to see and know as much as I could of what I felt is man's ultimate achievement. But it wasn't until my third year at Yale that I was finally able to elect courses and study the subject I hungered to learn.

It was worth the wait: those first art-history courses electrified me. And a desire began forming to share my passion about it with others. Graduating in the cold post-Crash world of 1933, I snapped at the first job offered to me, at a day and boarding school in Riverdale-on-Hudson, New York. I was to drive a bus, coach soccer, and tend a dormitory for the precocious offspring of New York intelligentsia. I persuaded the headmaster to let me also be an apprentice teacher of art history.

A year of this taught me one thing: I didn't yet know enough to teach. I determined to go to London to study. Paris was then the creative center of the art world, but London outranked any other city for scholarship.

Enrolled in classes and ensconced in rather glamorous—though cheap—“digs” on Wimpole Street, I felt I was the luckiest fellow I knew. The stern exterior of Home House and the “firm articulation” of Adam's great winding

*Seurat's mistress as La Poudreuse (left): upholstered in layers of avoirdupois, and covering herself with clouds of powder, “a witty compliment to the lady Bernadette Peters played on Broadway,” as Price (above) says.*



*Gauguin's forever  
young nudes sit around  
asking each  
other eternal questions.*

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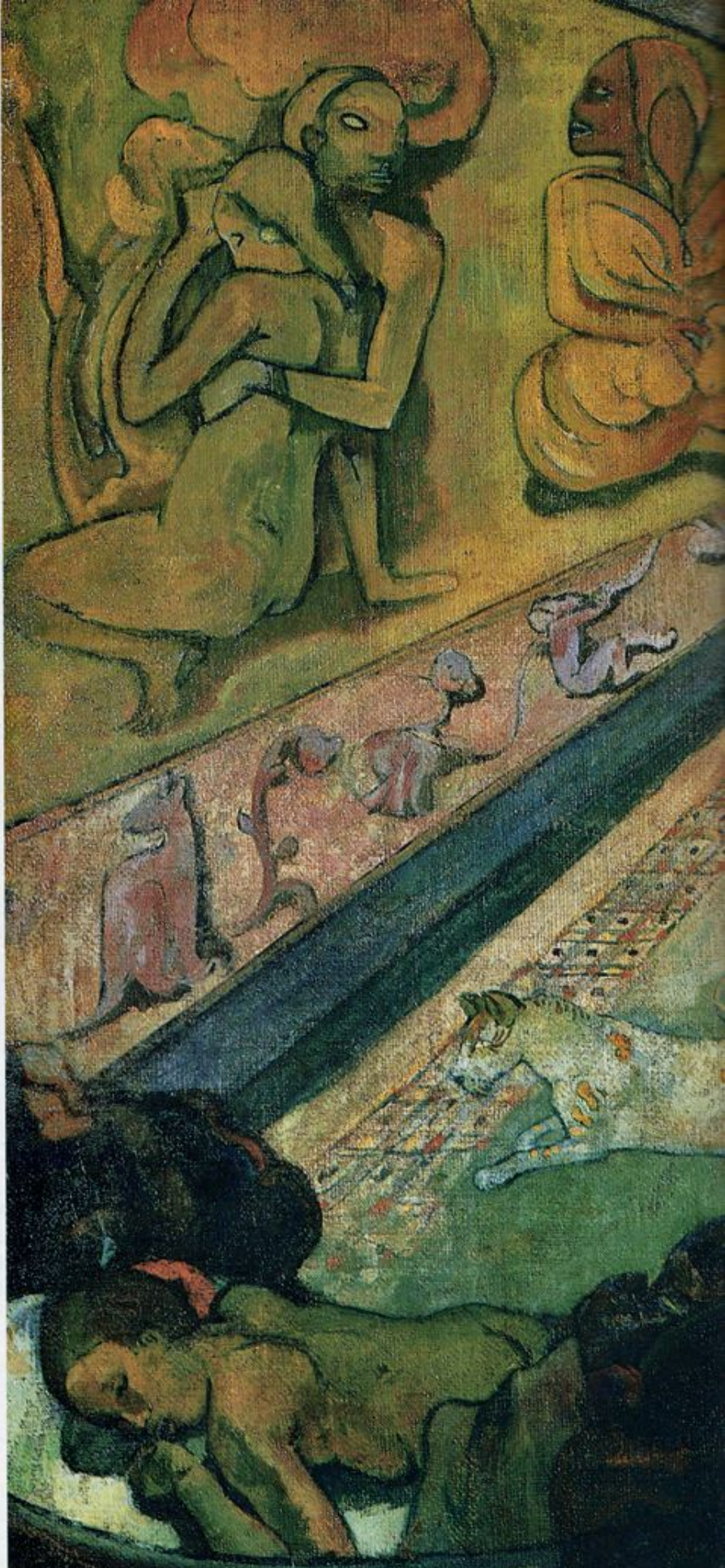


staircase greeted me every morning as I entered. If these seemed threatening to the casual demeanor of most students, we were instantly put at ease by our classroom, which had once been the building's front parlor. It was a graceful, light, airy room with a finely carved Chippendale mantelpiece, a far cry from the musty pseudo-Gothic and late Victorian study halls at Yale. Even the addition of classroom chairs of indifferent design couldn't make it commonplace: four red porphyry pillars gave it a formality balanced by the mantelpiece, the oval ceiling panel painted by Angelica Kaufmann, and, most of all, the "decorations" hanging on all the walls.

Over the fireplace Cézanne's *Card-Players* was flanked by his *Man with a Pipe* and a formidable *Mont Ste-Victoire*. The chairs were placed so these faced our backs, since our attention was supposed to be focused at the other end of the room, on the raised podium that stood before Daumier's powerful *Don Quixote and Sancho Panza*. In the center of the wall was a mysterious unfinished work by Fra Bartolommeo and, if I remember correctly, Gauguin's *Te Rerioa*.

To our right, between the windows, hung Degas's *Two Dancers on the Stage*. And the wall to our left, dramatically

*Cézanne's Mont Ste-Victoire  
(above): more a painted backdrop than  
a mountain of challenge. Gauguin's  
Te Rerioa (right): not Nevermore.*





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lit by the windows opposite, fairly trembled with a load of masterpieces. At the fireplace end was one of Modigliani's most seductive reclining nudes, a disturbing picture to say the least. In the center was a sumptuous landscape from Van Gogh's Arles period, *La Haie*. At the end, by the classroom's door, was Lautrec's brilliant *Jane Avril*, shown leaving the Moulin Rouge.

The little booklet listed other pictures as well. Gauguin's sexy *Nevermore* and Manet's jolly *Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (a picture that, to me, looks like a still from a Fellini movie about Paris), were both in the National Gallery. Others must have hung in the upstairs rooms, into which I almost never ventured. Here, no doubt, was Gauguin's *Haystacks*, and Renoir's *La Loge*.

But in the back parlor, where occasional institutional parties were held, were three almost comical landmarks of modern art. There was a *Portrait of Ambroise Vollard*, the great art dealer, by Renoir. Pudgy M. Vollard is depicted upholstered in a bullfighter's outfit. Next was Seurat's portrait of his mistress at her toilet, *La Poudreuse*. She, too, is upholstered, but in layers of avoirdupois, draped in frilly lingerie she is covering with clouds of powder. *La Poudreuse* is not my favorite Seurat, but it is a witty compliment to the lady Bernadette Peters played on Broadway in Stephen Sondheim's *Sunday in the Park with George*. The third was Manet's controversial *Dejeuner sur l'Herbe*: two fully clothed gentlemen having a chat and a snack with a nude lady in an idyllic landscape. All three struck us as highly amusing, a side of art that is too often neglected in the deadly seriousness of today's art world.

Even if in 1934 these masterpieces were really "modern" and not as familiar as they've become around the world,



*Lautrec caught that moment only actors know, when, with a trace of makeup left on, you leave one world for another.*

the least initiated amateur had to be dropped in his tracks by all this splendor. Although most of us were there to bone up on the old masters, the collection didn't make it any easier to concentrate on the institute's lecturers, no matter how brilliant. For all their dreariness, the classrooms at Yale had been more conducive to study than this room with its ten fantastic distractions.

As if to utterly destroy my concentration on the slides and lectures, I used

to play a game with myself: which treasure would I most like to live with, own, or—if necessary—steal? Though the Cézannes were behind me as I tried to concentrate on the lectures, I always paid them homage on entering the room. But they were too clinically perfect, too careful, to be my favorites. The *Mont Ste.-Victoire*, for all its greatness, looks more like a painted backdrop than a mountain of challenge. The Modigliani was too disturbing: no one was man enough to have her hanging around the house permanently. The Daumier, potent as it was, too literate. The Degas, for all its affecting theatricality, too romantic. Had it not been sent to the National Gallery, I'd have taken Gauguin's *Nevermore* (I owe a lot to Poe). But there is something too forever young about his static nudes, sitting around asking each other eternal questions.

The Van Gogh is certainly one of his most brilliant achievements; but it is not a very personal picture. It lacks that involvement with the desperation of his nature and his struggle to know it that make the viewer forget himself and think only of the artist. That left the Lautrec. In *Jane Avril*, he has caught that lonely moment only actors know, or at least know best, when the lights are dead, the music silenced, and—with only a trace of makeup left on—you leave one world for another. For me, Lautrec has dealt with the theater more poignantly than any other artist. I've often wondered if it was his *Jane Avril* who asked me to come back with her one night to the Moulin Rouge and join the world of make believe.

No; it was London. In 1934, on my student's pittance, I saw John Gielgud play Hamlet fourteen times. The Courtauld, for all its erudition, couldn't compete. I tried out for the part of Prince

Renoir's *La Loge* (left), and Lautrec's *Jane Avril* (above): "I've often wondered if it was Lautrec's *Jane Avril* who asked me to come back with her one night to the Moulin Rouge and join the world of make believe."





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*To my amazement, the play was a hit; the classes I missed became faraway guilts.*

Albert in a play by Laurence Housman, *Victoria Regina*, and got it. Soon I found myself cutting lectures to rehearse. To my amazement, the play was a hit; the classes I missed became faraway guilts.

One day, W. G. Constable, the director of the institute, called me into his office. I was certain I was going to be reprimanded for cutting so many classes. I deserved it, and I entered with a carefully studied look of humility. W.G. looked at me over his glasses and said, "Congratulations. I've missed you in class, but I saw the play. You're obviously an actor. I hope you'll go on being a good one. And remember, you can always continue to study the history of art, and I urge you to do so. It's the history of man at his best; yes, even in the theater."

In 1935 I found myself leaving London to repeat the play with Helen Hayes on Broadway. I'd gone to London to become an art historian and left it an actor. I never graduated from the Courtauld. I followed *Jane Avril* instead, though in the half century since I've never ceased to heed W.G.'s very good advice. □

· "Impressionist and Postimpressionist Masterpieces: The Courtauld Collection" will be at the Cleveland Museum of Art from January 14 to March 8, 1987. It will then be at the Metropolitan in New York (April 4 to June 21), the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth (July 11 to September 27), the Art Institute of Chicago (October 17 to January 3, 1988), and the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art in Kansas City (January 30 to April 3, 1988).

*Manet's Bar at the Folies-Bergère: a still from a Fellini movie, in which the viewer becomes a customer hoping to order a drink.*

