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# Paul Gauguin (1848-1903)

## *Breton Girls Dancing, Pont-Aven (1888)*

The French province of Brittany juts westward into the Atlantic Ocean on a granite peninsula, dotted with megaliths from the age of Stonehenge. Many Bretons are descendants of Celtic settlers who arrived centuries ago by sea after crossing the English Channel from Britain and Ireland. The distinctive Breton language, customs, and style of Christianity live on and give the people of this region a reputation of being the least French of the French.

Paul Gauguin was captivated by this exotic corner of his own homeland. He wrote to a friend, "I like Brittany. Here I find a savage, primitive quality. When my wooden shoes echo on this granite ground, I hear the dull, muted, powerful sound I am looking for in painting."<sup>1(p22)</sup> The 3 girls in *Breton Girls Dancing, Pont-Aven* were probably reenacting a dance from a *fest-noz*, a night of feasting and dancing to celebrate a successful harvest. They wore traditional Breton peasant attire: wooden shoes, a dark dress, an apron, and a white shoulderpiece and cap (*coiffe*). The design of the *coiffe* varied from town to town, so an informed observer could tell that 1 of these dancers was from Pont-Aven just from her bonnet.

Despite the strong sense of tradition, community, and local color, daily life was far from easy for Breton peasants and children in the late 1800s. Coaxing the rocky soil to yield a decent crop of potatoes or beets and tending the livestock required hard, dirty work. Children began helping to work the land at an early age. As falling death rates led to the survival of more and more heirs, farms were divided up into smaller and smaller plots by

rock walls like the one shown in the painting's middle ground. Farming methods changed little, however, and crop yields failed to keep pace with the growing need.

Already faced with scarcity and poverty around them, many young people saw a bleak future for themselves in Brittany. They were also caught in a tug-of-war between 2 cultures. Their parents spoke Breton at home, but the schools taught mainly in French in an attempt to unify the nation linguistically. Speaking French became viewed as sophisticated and modern, whereas speaking Breton seemed provincial and old-fashioned. The result was that youths from rural Brittany migrated in large numbers to the towns and cities of modern France ("How ya gonna keep 'em down on the farm . . .?"). In this vein, the leftmost girl in Gauguin's painting seems to be leading her fellow dancers away from the village, out of the picture.

The instinct to escape was well known to Gauguin. One by one he left behind a career in finance, his wife and children, and the comforts of bourgeois Paris to live and paint in wild, remote places. Three years after completing this painting, he sailed for Tahiti. He spent his last years on an isolated island in the Marquesas.

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### REFERENCE

1. Gauguin P. *The Writings of a Savage*. Guérin D, ed. New York, NY: Viking Press; 1978.