



HISTORIC  
MASTERS

BY ANNE UNDERWOOD

# 2 ARTISTS, 1 TOWN, 10 PAINTINGS

The year was 1924, and an American artist named Isadore Levy was visiting the tiny town of Le Pouldu on the south coast of Brittany in France. As he sat at a table in a small inn awaiting his food, he began studying some murals that workmen had recently uncovered beneath layers of wallpaper. The proprietress was about to repaper the walls. But Levy spied a signature on one mural that would change everything: “P Go,” short for Paul Gauguin (1848–1903).<sup>1</sup>

Levy came along at exactly the right moment to rescue an astonishing piece of art history. It turned out that Gauguin had lived in this very building — the Buvette de la Plage — between October 1889 and November 1890. The Buvette had a dining room and a taproom downstairs and three bedrooms upstairs, where Gauguin had lodged with his fellow artists Jacob Meyer de Haan, Paul Sérusier, and (later) Charles Filiger. Late in 1889, they had painted the dining room’s walls, ceiling, and even its windowpanes.<sup>2</sup> Now, before the murals could disappear from sight again, Levy purchased one of them from the landlady and persuaded two friends to purchase another (*Breton Girl Spin-*

*ning*). They paid for workmen to extract the murals, then re-plaster and paper the wall.

Gauguin and his entourage were the most famous artists to descend on Le Pouldu in the late 1880s. But they were not the only ones. A month before Gauguin moved into the Buvette de la Plage, another artist had taken up residence nearby at the Hôtel Destais. His name was William Sergeant



(RIGHT) PAUL GAUGUIN, *Breton Girl Spinning*, 1889, oil on plaster, 53 1/8 x 24 2/5 in., Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, s0513S2006 ■ (FAR RIGHT) WILLIAM SERGEANT KENDALL, *Two Young Gossips of Le Pouldu*, 1889, oil on canvas, 30 1/4 x 21 3/4 in., private collection, New York City, photo courtesy Michael Owen, Owen Gallery, New York City





(LEFT) PAUL GAUGUIN, *The Kelp Gatherers*, 1889, oil on canvas, 34 1/4 x 48 1/2 in., Museum Folkwang, Essen, Germany, photo: Artothek ■ (BELOW) WILLIAM SERGEANT KENDALL, *Désirs*, 1892, oil on canvas, 68 3/4 x 58 1/4 in., Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C., 1974.45, gift of Elisabeth Kendall Underwood



Kendall (1869–1938), and he was one of a number of American and British art students who came from Paris to Le Pouldu to paint during summer breaks. Born in what is now the Bronx, Kendall had trained at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts under Thomas Eakins and at the Art Students League of New York with Harry Siddons Mowbray. In Paris, he had

gained admission to the prestigious École des Beaux-Arts — quite a coup for an American in those days. But his stay in Brittany marked the first time in his life that he was free to hire his own models and choose his own subjects.

Le Pouldu nurtured not only Gauguin’s radical experiments, but also Kendall’s efforts, which were likewise striking, if more traditional. A new museum in Le Pouldu, set to open in the spring of 2025, will trace the outsized role of this tiny town in the art world of its day.<sup>3</sup> But visitors seeking to retrace the steps of the artists can do so now. Next door to the site of the future museum is the Maison-Musée Gauguin, a faithful reconstruction of the Buvette de la Plage as it looked in Gauguin’s time. And along the shore, visitors can take a walking tour comprising 19 stops, where they see the scenes that inspired Gauguin and other painters.

That a village with a population of 48 (281 if you include the contiguous hamlets) could draw so many artists may seem unlikely.<sup>4</sup> But Le Pouldu offered cheap accommodations, a rugged coastline, unspoiled countryside, and ways of life that hadn’t changed for generations, providing plenty of “motifs” for painters. Gauguin and Kendall were just two of the artists who walked the same paths, met the same people, and painted the same scenes, yet rendered them in very different ways.

A side-by-side comparison of five paintings by each of the two artists shows their different approaches. Illustrated here, each pair takes a specific theme related to life in Le Pouldu — spinning, harvesting seaweed, praying, and viewing the landscape or ocean — and shows how the two artists addressed it.

In this, his third stay in Brittany, Gauguin was pushing the boundaries of art — flattening perspective, moving away from naturalism, and eliminating all but the basic elements in a scene. He deliberately avoided sunlight and shadow, and he dispensed with the shading that creates the illusion of three dimensions, favoring instead solid blocks of color. This style became known as synthetism. Although he had formulated its principles with Émile Bernard in nearby Pont-Aven the previous year, Le Pouldu provided Gauguin with the time and space to fully develop these ideas. Here he would depict sand as red (as in *The Wave*) and stylize the image of a spinner so much that we can barely make out her distaff and spindle (*Breton Girl Spinning*).





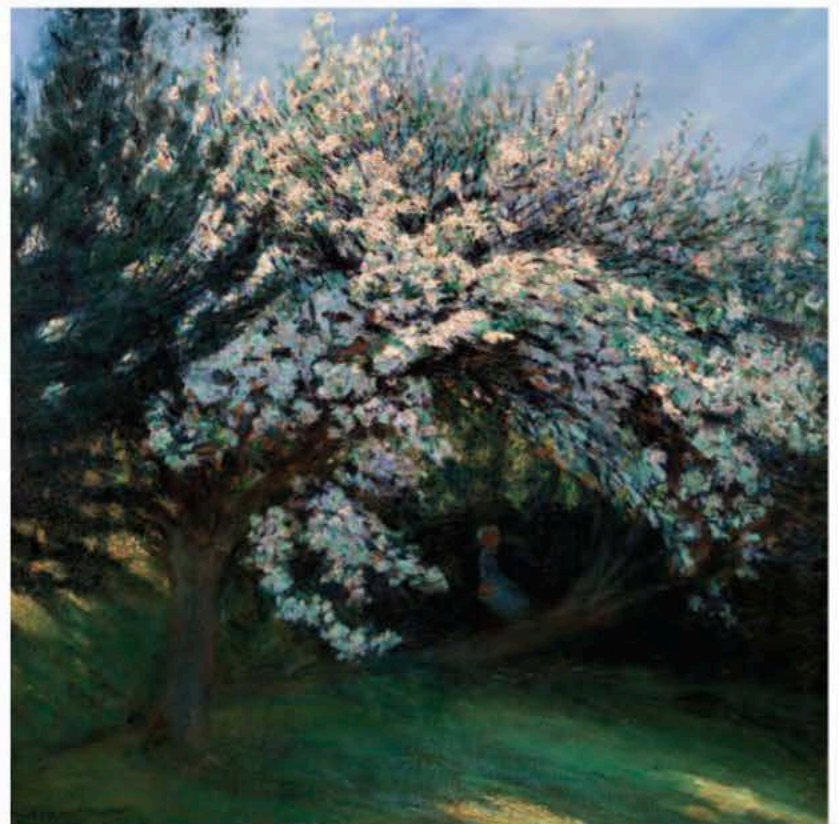
(ABOVE) **PAUL GAUGUIN**, *Adam and Eve, or Paradise Lost*, c. 1890, oil on canvas, 18 1/8 x 20 3/8 in., Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Connecticut, 1971.144, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin E. Bensinger, B.A. 1928 ■ (BELOW) **WILLIAM SERGEANT KENDALL**, *Saint Yves, Pray for Us*, 1890–91, oil on canvas, 38 1/2 x 42 1/2 in., private collection, photo courtesy Lawrence Steigrad Fine Arts, New York City



(ABOVE) **PAUL GAUGUIN**, *Landscape at Le Pouldu*, 1890, oil on canvas, 27 7/8 x 36 3/8 in., National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 1983.1.20, collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon ■ (BELOW) **WILLIAM SERGEANT KENDALL**, *The Glory of Fair Promise*, 1892, oil on canvas, 36 x 36 in., private collection, New Jersey



Kendall may have steered clear of such “suddenly born aesthetic fancies,” yet his approach was also modern.<sup>5</sup> He, too, stripped scenes down to their essentials, eliminating Victorian-era fussiness, and he made excellent use of negative space (as in *Saint Yves, Pray for Us*). His religious pictures weren’t Biblical tableaux like those of the past, but scenes of real people in real places. Where Gauguin layered his religious paintings with symbolism (*Adam and Eve, or Paradise Lost*), Kendall captured the raw emotion of an impoverished young woman imploring St. Yves, the Breton protector of the poor and of orphans, to help her. In a radical move, Kendall even lopped off the saint’s head, apparently feeling that a wooden statue in a church was less important than the young woman’s expression of faith. This painting won an honorable mention at the Paris Salon of 1891.



“*Saint Yves* has wall power,” says Peggy Stone of Lawrence Steigrad Fine Arts (Manhattan), which recently acquired and then sold the painting to a private collector. She contrasts *Saint Yves* with another painting offered by the gallery that “screams 19th century, with a beautiful mother and lovely children — it’s pretty, but that’s all.” By contrast, she says, *Saint Yves* feels edgy and modern. “Kendall was a man out of his time, a forward-thinking painter,” she notes.<sup>6</sup>

Gauguin’s pictures fascinate, and they represent an important step in the development of art, paving the way for fauvism and other styles. But Kendall’s best works practically leap off the canvas. *The Glory of Fair Promise*, one of several paintings of apple trees he made in Brittany in 1892, combines flat brushwork for the grass with thick impasto for the dense clusters of pinkish white flowers. The branches, laden with





(ABOVE) PAUL GAUGUIN, *The Wave*, 1888, oil on canvas, 24 x 29 in., private collection

■ (RIGHT) WILLIAM SERGEANT KENDALL, *On a Cliff by the Sea—Le Pouldu*, 1890, oil on canvas, 17 x 13 in., unlocated, photo courtesy Michael Owen, Owen Gallery, New York City

blossoms, bend in a breathtaking sweep that's heightened by the sunlight striking the branches. Only after taking in all of this do we notice a figure in the shade below. This painting earned Kendall a medal at the World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago in 1893.

Kendall would go on to become dean of the Yale School of the Fine Arts (1913–22) and a National Academician (associate membership in 1901 and full membership four years later). He became known for his portraits, especially of children. In the early 2000s, one crooked art dealer in Vero Beach, Florida, even passed off a couple of Kendall's studies as the work of Mary Cassatt (and was sentenced to seven years in prison for various swindles).<sup>7</sup> Yet Kendall's pictures never give in to sentimentality, as paintings of children so often do. One could argue that he learned that approach in *Le Pouldu*, where the realities of life were harsh, despite the presence of great beauty.

In *The Kelp Gatherers*, Gauguin represents a major occupation in Le Pouldu — seaweed harvesting. In the autumn, when storms would tear kelp loose from the seabed, peasants would collect it to use as fertilizer on their farms. While Gauguin's style is pathbreaking, his subject matter is traditional. Kendall's approach is exactly the opposite. His style is traditional, but the subject is not. In *Désirs*, his kelp gatherers are not at the beach at all, but back at the farm, where one of them rests on a wheelbarrow full of seaweed. She gazes into the distance, wearied by “the thousand little incidents and accidents of life,” as Kendall put it, complete with the constant struggle, fatigue, and longing for rest that come with such an existence. But Kendall hated trying to describe his paintings and the meaning behind them. He concluded:

*What is the good of painting an idea if it can be expressed in words? The only excuse of existence of a picture is that it expresses some thought or idea or feeling that can be expressed in no other way. That is the canon of art.*<sup>8</sup>

For once, Gauguin would likely have agreed with him. ●

**Information:** *The Maison-Musée Gauguin* (open April-October) is located at 10 rue des Grands Sables in Le Pouldu. Its website, [maisonmuseegauguin.blogspot.com/p/pratique.html](http://maisonmuseegauguin.blogspot.com/p/pratique.html), includes visitor information, brief histories of the Buvette and the painters who lived there, and a map of “the painters’ path” walking tour.



**ANNE UNDERWOOD** is a longtime writer and editor for a variety of publications. She is a great-granddaughter of William Sergeant Kendall and is writing a book about him, based on her research on his artwork, journals, letters, family photos, and other archival material.

#### Notes

- 1 Author's written communication with Maud Naour, director of the Maison-Musée Gauguin in Le Pouldu.
- 2 The four walls were fully decorated by December 13, 1889, according to *Gauguin's Nirvana: Painters at Le Pouldu 1889–1890* (Eric M. Zafran, ed., p. 64). This book includes a complete description of the murals on pp. 64–67.
- 3 Author's interview with Maud Naour.
- 4 Archives départementales du Finistère. Recensements de population, 1886.
- 5 Kendall's interview with Montrose J. Moses in preparation for Moses's article “William Sergeant Kendall: Philosopher of Form and Color,” *Hearst's Magazine*, Jan 1916. The quote did not appear in the final copy, which was significantly edited. The early draft is in the New-York Historical Society (N-YHS) files on Kendall, Box 1.
- 6 Author's interview with Peggy Stone of Lawrence Steigrad Fine Arts.
- 7 Author's interview with Robert Austin, who presented proof for the trial that Matthew Taylor had doctored Kendall's work. Also, author's interview with the Los Angeles collector who purchased the two studies after being led to believe they were by Mary Cassatt. The items in question were studies for Kendall's paintings *Mrs. Hoyt and Her Children* and *Il Penseroso*.
- 8 Kendall's journal, May 4, 1892; N-YHS, box 4.