WRESTLING WITH PAUL SÉRUSIER

A visual contranym in the fields of Brittany

by Tai Mitsuji

When poet A. Le Braz put pen to paper in 1894, his words were suffused with the allure of a simpler culture and a simpler time:

> How innocent, how primitive! The good folk flock together in the shade of the walnut trees, on the green sward, beneath the spreading elms. And there, under the eyes of the girls, seated demurely on the surrounding slopes, the youths challenge one another to wrestle.[1]

Le Braz was describing festivities in Brittany, but he could have easily been referring to a recently completed painting by Paul Sérusier. On both the writer's page and the artist's canvas, men fought, women flocked, and Breton culture remained caught in an idealised past. Or so it seemed.

FIG. 1

Paul Sérusier, *La Lutte Bretonne*, 1890-1. 92 x 73cm, oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Photograph by the author.

While Sérusier's *La Lutte Bretonne* (1890-1, *g.1*) may have appeared to propagate the popular 19ˆthˆ century fantasy of Brittany, it presents a far more complex tableau upon closer inspection. The seemingly simple representation of two wrestlers, caught mid-fight, belies the complex theoretical tension that underpins the painting. Running parallel to the depicted struggle, the work itself grapples with divergent conceptions of Brittany: one static, the other

evolving. For although the painting engages with many of the tropes of primitivism, beneath this thin veneer of cultural unity lies a changing society. Further investigation of the work reveals how it constantly oscillates between the conditions of the then modern and the idealised past, as romanticised exoticism, faux nativism, Japoniste influences, and the artist's own subjectivity all competed to define the provincial scene. [2]

The following paper reveals the aporetic nature of the painting, highlighting how it both builds up and collapses the idea of a fixed, unchanging Brittany. However, it attempts to take our understanding of the scene beyond the easier and eminently more seductive conclusion that there is a contradiction written into the painting's cultural identity. Instead, the paper borrows a term from the linguistic fields as it suggests that what we find here is, in fact, a contronym—-a word (or, in this case, a painting) that simultaneously articulates diametrically-opposed ideas. The contronym is more than a simple contradiction; it is the coexistence of mutually-exclusive ideas not only within the same space, but within the same body. In Sérusier's painting, we find a single entity whose delicate multivalence not only accommodates but actively supports incompatible cultural identities, within the same brushstroke. Ultimately, it is a work that both sanctions the 19ˆthˆ century primitivist fantasy of Brittany, and *sanctions* the 19ˆthˆ century primitivist fantasy of Brittany.

BRITTANY

At the end of the 19ˆthˆ century, the seemingly immutable allure of Paris was beginning to wane. Griselda Pollock contends that the image of the 'metropolis as the paradigmatic site for advanced culture's encounter with modernity' was fast eroding, prompting artists to search for a new, equally fecund, cultural setting.[3] Emerging from this flux, and reacting against the perceived homogenisation of culture that accompanied the spread of capitalism, was the collective push towards regionality.[4] This saw artists increasingly look to escape the confines of the city by venturing into the French countryside, hunting for pockets of pure, unsullied culture.[5] Yet despite these grand aspirations, artists tended to congregate in concentrated areas of the countryside—-*following* one another in their pursuit of artistic individualism.[6]

And so it was that in 1888, Sérusier left the comforts of the capital and set out for the small town of Pont-Aven in Brittany.[7] The region had garnered recognition as a creative hub, with artists flocking to the perceived exoticism of local dress and religious festivals.[8] In many ways, this initial journey prefigured Sérusier's cofounding of the Nabis, and their collective fascination with other cultures.[9] The ritual-driven spiritualism of Breton culture naturally appealed to the Nabis, who actively trafficked in the optics of mysticism; a fact that was written into their very name, which translated from Hebrew as the 'prophets'.[10] Indeed, by the time of *La Lutte Bretonne,* the Nabis increasingly embraced the theosophical push towards the idea of 'an Ancient Wisdom that, if rediscovered, would heal the modern world driven by matter and material'.[11] Viewed against

this value system, the appeal of Brittany is clear: it was a region purportedly fixed in cultural stasis, forever unchanged and unchanging.[12] In this setting, Sérusier became an artistic intercessor, who facilitated the brief confluence between the activities of the city artists and their counterparts, l'École de Pont-Aven, in the country.[13] For the Nabis, Sérusier's painting represented more than just sport; it was a window into an ancient culture and, more importantly, the *forgotten* truths that it harboured.

By the time Sérusier arrived, however, Brittany was far from isolated. Although touring artists chose to focus on its picturesque charm, in truth the region was experiencing rapid population growth, and significant expansion of its major roads and railways.[14] But while this infrastructure facilitated artists' easy journey to Pont-Aven, it was almost always forgotten upon their arrival. Those who came from Paris 'ignored signs of industrialisation, wealth and encroaching urbanisation,' preferring to focus on subjects that conformed to their preconceptions.[15] Turning a blind eye to signs of modernity, these outsider artists searched for something more essential to inspire them.

Sérusier struck upon inspiration late in his trip, when he met Gauguin. A prominent figure within l'École de Pont-Aven, Gauguin was instrumental in introducing Sérusier, and by extension the Nabis, to Synthetism.[16] The artists at Pont-Aven had adopted Synthetism in a 'less esoteric and philosophic' manner than their Symbolist counterparts in Paris, construing it as the freedom to interpret and transcribe nature through the lens of personal experience.[17] Under Gauguin's guidance, Sérusier painted *Le Talisman*, an abstracted study which departed from the mimetic language of naturalism.[18] The work became a key artistic reference point for the Nabis—Maurice Denis attested that it was a constant reminder 'that any work of art was [...] the impassioned equivalent of a sensation experienced'.[19] Under the auspices of Synthetism, the artists not only captured nature, but also transformed it into an expression of their own psychology. Gauguin recounted, 'I love Brittany; I find there the savage, the primitive [...] that I seek in my painting'.[20] It is somewhat unsurprising that these words have been echoed and re-echoed in the pages of subsequent scholarship on the artist, as they suggest infinitely more about the describer than they do about the place being described. Indeed, Gauguin's words speak to the prevalent belief among these artists in an uncorrupted Breton culture; a fantasy which inevitably suffused their work.

Synthetism's subjectivity allowed Sérusier to escape the rigidity of strictly representational art, but, more than that, it licensed him to imprint a romanticised primitivism onto his works. In attempting to capture the quiddity of Brittany, Sérusier avoided realist representation and instead adopted an expanded visual vocabulary inflected with the fantastical.[21] However, as this paper will show, Sérusier's rendering of the past was also paired with signs of the present. Critically, his artwork manifests more than just a pursuit of his own fantasies; alongside Sérusier's tendentious artistic vision, we find the shifting contours of local culture.

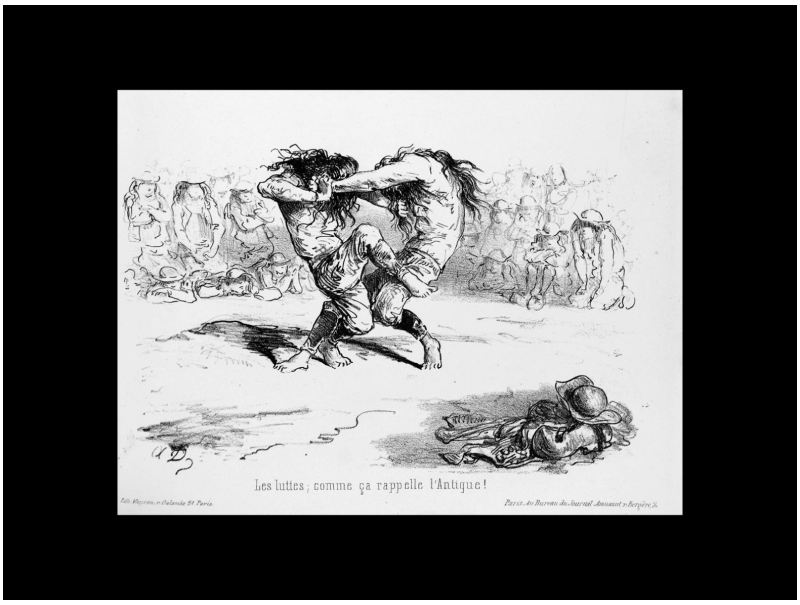
THE WRESTLING

In 1890, the depiction of *gouren* was tantamount to the depiction of Breton culture. *Gouren* had been a feature of Breton life for centuries, woven into the fabric of local culture through competitions, which traditionally followed religious ceremonies known as pardons.[22] For a devout society, the intertwining of these events—one holy, the other profane—reflected the mutual importance of both.[23] Indeed, in many cases, the enthusiasm for *gouren* even threatened to outstrip the primacy of the religious ceremonies, with some local rumbling that 'the pardon appears [...] only a pretext [for wrestling]'.[24] But while *gouren* emblematised local identity, it also reflected foreign influence. It was Celtic migration, centuries earlier, that initially brought *gouren* to Brittany; yet, even after its arrival, the local wrestling style still cross-pollinated with neighbouring cultures.[25] The idea of a static and ossified tradition, untouched by other cultures, was therefore undermined by the *very* form of *gouren*. From its origin, wrestling instead represented the multivalence of Brittany, whose traditions resisted the cultural singularity that was so often imposed on it.

Nonetheless, wrestling was still co-opted as an essentialising synecdoche for Brittany. Its very nature as a combat sport, characterised by visceral action, played into the Parisian fetishisation of local primitivism. Mass migration from the French countryside to the capital had transformed regional wrestling into a recognisable sporting fixture by the mid-19ˆthˆ century.[26] Thus, when artists ventured to Brittany to depict *gouren*, they were paradoxically representing a *familiar* exoticism. However, this familiarity did not necessarily aid the accuracy of such portrayals.

Alfred Darjou's *Les Luttes, comme ça Rappelle l'Antique* (*g.2*), for instance, manifests the ease with which *gouren* became caricatured in popular media.[27] The lithograph's sarcastic title immediately establishes the disjunct between the idealised wrestlers of the classical past and the primitivism of their present-day Breton counterparts. The two men are caught in a moment of tense struggle, their long tousled hair infusing the work with a sense of frenetic, almost animalistic, movement. But, as Denise Delouche has suggested, their hair was likely greatly exaggerated, as these characteristics fail to appear in any other depiction of the subject.[28] Indeed, even the most innocuous aspects of the artwork exhibit traces of fiction. The clothing which lies abandoned on the ground, for example, encodes the work with a sense of spontaneity, as if the fight has recently broken out and the men have undressed in haste. Undermining the veracity of this fetishistic vision, however, most wrestling matches tended to be organised and require that particular attire be worn.[29] When considering Darjou's scene alongside these prescriptions, it is evident that his work was born more out of fantasy than observation.

FIG. 2



Alfred Darjou, *Les Luttes, comme ça Rappelle l'Antique,* 1859. Lithograph. Collection Musée départemental breton, Quimper. © Photograph by Serge Goarin/Musée départemental breton.

Despite its prima facie naïveté, there is a visible push towards greater cultural responsiveness in *La Lutte Bretonne*. Unlike the figures in Darjou's lithograph, Sérusier's combatants are shown in the customary sporting dress of Brittany: 'barefoot, wearing a tight white shirt and black trousers'.[30] These garments elevate the work's cultural specificity, as they reproduce actual aspects of Breton culture and locate the viewer therein. Of course, physical violence resides at the heart of both scenes, yet Serusier's inclusion of a uniform provides us with a sense of the social contract that has been entered into by the participants. Conversely, Darjou's central figures are almost interchangeable with their pictured onlookers, as if to suggest that violence is not contained within this circumscribed space or confined to these two figures—instead, violence is ubiquitous within this primitive society. Put simply, Darjou's protagonists are caught in a fight, whereas Sérusier's subjects compete in a match. This distinction underscores the presence of cultural particularities in Sérusier's painting, and illustrates how even this subtle specificity is able to rescue the work from devolving into an infinitely flatter, primitivist vision.

The body itself becomes a vehicle for articulating cultural affiliation in Sérusier's painting. The stance of the wrestlers infuses a sense of action into the scene, while *also* demonstrating fidelity to the *gouren* tradition. The man on the left wraps his leg around his competitor, attempting to destabilise his opponent and execute a throw known as a *kliked*.[31] In portraying a physical trope specific to *gouren*, the work reiterates its cultural connection and foregrounds its veridicality. Indeed, the mere fact that both combatants are *standing* differentiates the spectacle from other Greco-Roman wrestling, which permitted fighting on the ground.[32] All of these details point to the importance of specificity in the simple composition—which, in turn, is consistent with

Sérusier's belief that some essential truth could be found in Breton culture (and its specificities).[33]

To outsiders, *gouren* must have been the ultimate expression of what they sought: a blend of religious ritual and primal action. The perceived exoticism of wrestling culture was compounded by its association with the occult—for while there was nothing *inherently* religious about *gouren,* aspects of spiritualism nonetheless pervaded the sport. Tournaments had a ritualistic quality about them, with competitors crossing themselves and renouncing the devil before each match.[34] This routine forswearing was not a remnant of pre-historic tradition, but rather reflected the active superstitions surrounding the events. Indeed, it was common for wrestlers to invoke both Christian saints *and* other mysticism in an effort to gain an advantage, leading locals to believe that the wrestlers' power derived from the supernatural.[35] This superstition was even embodied in the oath read before the event: 'If you wrestle with your own strength, stay where you are [...] if you do it with the help of the devil, go away!'.[36] Beyond their local importance, these practices played a significant role in affirming the perceived *otherness* of Brittany and perpetuating its appeal to the travelling artist's eye.

Sérusier's painting not only depicts Breton culture, but also attempts to locate the viewer within it. *Gouren* traditionally took place in a village meadow, with onlookers forming a circle around its perimeter.[37] This circular layout is suggested in Sérusier's painting, as the right-hand side of the crowd begins to curve towards the viewer, alluding to the continuation of the line of onlookers beyond the canvas. Critically, this composition works to relationally locate the viewer, placing them on the opposite side of the circle. This new orientation transforms the viewer's experience, as they now simultaneously inhabit the space of the gallery and the field; they look *at* the spectacle while forming part of it too. Cementing this configuration, the viewer's static position in front of the painting creates a corporeal equivalency that attaches them to the rest of the crowd, many of whom stand transfixed in similar poses. Ironically, by standing passively in front of the painting, the viewer becomes an active participant. Through this shared spatiality, the work visually assimilates the viewer into the purportedly primitive culture, creating a push-pull between the exoticism that culturally distances them from the scene, and the visual directives that actively draw them into it.

Despite the frantic action of the central figures, Sérusier's painting actively encourages cerebral contemplation. Whereas other artists emphasised the raucous nature of such events, Sérusier's work is characterised by tranquillity. This tone is embodied by the painted crowd, who appear both silent and still as they observe the wrestlers. Gauguin's far more feted painting, *La Vision Après le Sermon* (1888, *g.3*), offers insight into this dynamic, since it explicitly demonstrates the relationship that is *implicitly* enacted in Sérusier's work. In Gauguin's earlier painting, Jacob is shown wrestling an angel; here, the spiritual and physical worlds interpenetrate as the transcendental vision is afforded a tangible manifestation. Yet this fight—the seemingly obvious emphasis of the work—occupies little of the painting's real estate. Instead, a

group of Breton women dominate the lower half of the work, compressing the composition and creating a distinct sense of propinquity. The pictorial layout produces an immersive physicality as the viewer feels as though they are positioned just behind the women, with this implied proximity slowly working to assimilate them into the group. This spatial convergence is so effective that, instinctively, one almost wants to push past the painted figures in order to see more of the distant spectacle. The viewer's *a priori* position among the crowd in Sérusier's work similarly connects them to this form of collective observation. Critically, this connectivity allows both paintings to normatively guide the viewer, by prompting them to adopt the same manner of introspection as their fellow spectators.[38] In echoing the dynamic of Gauguin's work, Sérusier creates an equivalency between the wisdom of the Catholic vision and the culture of Brittany, but more than that, he also enacts an equivalency between the viewer and the viewed.[39]

FIG. 3

Paul Gauguin, *La Vision Après le Sermon*, 1888. 72.2 x 91cm, oil on canvas. National Galleries of Scotland. © Photograph by Antonia Reeve/National Galleries of Scotland.

Sérusier's admiration for the essential character of Brittany is evident in his Synthetist application of paint. The perceived primitivism of the locals can be seen reflexively expressed through the simplification of the form and shape used to represent them. The wrestlers, for instance, are composed almost entirely of undisrupted blocks of colour, which are only intermittently broken up by thick contours. The physiognomy of the wrestler on the right is described through crude dark lines that appear isolated in space, their articulation of form unsupported by the areas of flat colour that surround them. The onlookers' facial features are similarly generalised, but where the wrestlers have fingers, the crowd only have rough patches of colour to approximate the shape of their

hands. No attempt is made to blend or modulate tone, and it seems that mimetic representation has been sacrificed at the altar of pictorial roughness. It is as though the perceived naïveté of the subject has osmotically infused the formal qualities of the work. However, the painting also demonstrates an awareness of this Synthetist-driven translation. That is, by leaving visible brushstrokes in the work, Sérusier indexes the presence of his own hand and signposts its inherent subjectivity. Once again, the artwork demands more than our initial conclusions offer. The raw handling of paint and conspicuous facture not only speak to the perceived qualities of the Bretons, but also suggest the artist's framing of these qualities.

An examination of the painting's stylistic influences further dismantles its apparent cultural singularity. The hermetically sealed representation of Brittany that greets a viewer at first glance gives way to other cultural influences upon closer inspection. The painting's flatness, which is particularly evident in its dark background and swathes of green, most conspicuously recalls the aesthetic of Japanese *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints.[40] The Nabis were inspired by these prints and, as Patricia Eckert Boyer notes, actively cultivated the 'simplification of form, [and] abbreviated and abstracted rendering of space'.[41] Sérusier came to embrace this aesthetic stylisation through Gauguin, whose paintings in Brittany owed a debt to such compositions.[42]

Looking at *La Lutte Bretonne,* the grass around the feet of the crowd manifests this Japoniste flatness. Specifically, the green ground lacks any tonal variation or conspicuous facture, and appears almost completely uniform. While stray areas of darker brushstrokes signify blades of grass and occasionally disturb this plane, they also help to emphasise its pared-back minimalism. That is, the unbroken verticality of these sparse darker lines works to make them sit atop the lighter green surface, rather than becoming embedded therein. This dynamic is echoed in the sombre background, which similarly offers the viewer no spatial recession. Its muted colour and lack of discernible shape compounds the abstraction of space, precluding the viewer's eye from entering the painting's depths. Again we encounter a fissure: the aforementioned iconography of the watching crowd invites us into the painting, while the formal rendering works to bar this very access. This dynamic is only complicated further by the origins of the style being adopted. Although these Japoniste qualities are subtle and operate in an almost oblique fashion, their presence nonetheless takes the work beyond its nativist subject matter and connects it to an artistic style far beyond the confines of Brittany. The painting therefore refuses the intuitive narrative of a provincial subject matter refusing the gaze of the outsider. Instead, it is the importation of these foreign aesthetics that paradoxically hinders the viewer's subsumption into the work.

In this sense, *La Lutte Bretonne* is as much a reflection of the Parisian avant-garde as of the Breton locals. While the work's form may appear to respond to the primitivism of Brittany, it also represents a push away from the constraints of Realism and an embrace of the Symbolist's privileging of the individual's subjectivity over the governing laws of reality.[43] Sérusier's frequent travel between Brittany and Paris meant that his work was always anchored to

metropolitan values, and more specifically his artistic coterie. Just as Gauguin's paintings in Brittany remained 'determined by, and addressed to, the [Parisian] vanguard,' so too, Sérusier remained beholden to the capital.[44]

However, these influences also breed a tension into the very foundation of the painting, and destabilise any claim to cultural or pictorial coherence. In assimilating the viewer into the ring of spectators, *La Lutte Bretonne* facilitates a heightened sense of proximity to this purportedly primitive culture. Yet the integrity of this tendentious vision is inevitably corroded by the conspicuous manifestations of avant-garde and Japoniste stylisation. The viewer is presented with localness and foreignness in the space of the same brushstroke, as the painting visually invests in diametrically opposed visions. Indeed, the viewer's own privileged perspective and immersion within the crowd is *itself* self-defeating. That is, the viewer's implied presence within the ring simultaneously constitutes and undermines their experience—as, ironically, there can be no untouched culture, as long as they view it.

THE ONLOOKERS

The vacillation between entrenched tradition and creeping modernity suffuses not only the central spectacle, but also its spectators. While the crowd at first seems to lend support to the narrative of cultural purity, evidence of change and foreign influence is scattered throughout their ranks. Reflecting established gender divisions, the crowd is overwhelmingly composed of women, who assume their historically prescribed role, passively watching as the men wrestle.[45] The women's faces are expressionless and largely lack distinction, creating the illusion of the crowd as a homogenised mass. This impression is heightened by the consistency of their clothing, which is presented almost like a cultural uniform. The dark charcoal hue of the women's dresses and shawls and their crowded proximity produce an ambiguity of form that almost leads their bodies to blend into one another, with the separation of the figures only being realised upon closer inspection. In particular, the bodies towards the back, on the left-hand side of the red parasol, easily elide into one another and resist differentiation. With the exception of the occasional coloured apron, the crowd is characterised by this sameness, which visually reinforces the idea of unchanging cultural singularity.

In many ways, these costumed women were the quintessential sign of local primitivism. Caroline Boyle-Turner has observed that 'to artists from Paris and abroad, their starched lace coiffes and collars, embroidered jackets, and wooden shoes presented an almost exotic, picturesque charm'.[46] Cultural distantiation was the by-product of such conspicuous difference, with Brittany framed as a dislocated society, stuck in a state of fixed existence. This perception is evident in Henry Blackburn's travel book from 1881, where he described how the people of Pont-Aven, 'in their picturesque costume (which remains unaltered) have learned [...] to sit as a model'.[47] Although his parenthetical aside is incidental to his larger point, it speaks to the collective perception of travellers at the time, who believed that they were passing through an ancient culture frozen in time.

While, at first glance, *La Lutte Bretonne* appears to ballast this well-worn narrative, upon closer inspection one finds that the painting also disrupts it. Embedded in the representation of the Breton women is an acknowledgment of change and a subtle refutation of Blackburn's earlier observations. To appreciate this subtext, however, one must understand the history of the coiffe. Traditionally, the coiffe performed two important functions: shielding a woman's head from the weather, and safeguarding her modesty by covering her hair.[48] Over time the coiffe slowly evolved, with stylistic distinctions beginning to emerge during the 17ˆthˆ century, and becoming more pronounced in the 18ˆthˆ century.[49] But it was not until the latter half of the 19ˆthˆ century that these permutations truly changed the structure of the coiffe, with the wings on the side of the headdress being removed or 'drastically reduced in size and curved upwards [...] revealing the sides of the face for the first time'.[50] Referring back to Sérusier's painting, we see this change evident in the women's coiffes, which do not obscure their faces and are far shorter than previous styles. Here, the coiffe, which had become a shorthand for ossified culture, in fact, becomes a declaration of change.

Another understated gesture towards cultural change is the presence of parasols in Sérusier's painting. Parasols were constantly evolving throughout the 19ˆthˆ century, acting as an expression of the latest fashion trends and cosmopolitan whimsy.[51] Their insertion into the Breton context may therefore be read as connecting the countryside to the city. The fact that Breton women are holding the parasols is particularly significant, given that in other representations of Brittany, parasols are mobilised to demarcate the two cultural spheres. In Émile Bernard's *Bretonnes dans la Prairie,* for instance, parasols serve as an extension of the aesthetic difference between the fashionably dressed Parisians and the locals. The parasols in *La Lutte Bretonne* show the disintegration of these cultural distinctions, and the subsumption of such accoutrements into Brittany. Indeed, Boyle-Turner has suggested that the parasol in another of Sérusier's paintings, *L'Averse,* refers to more than just French culture, connecting Brittany to Japan.[52] While this reference seems too oblique to apply to *La Lutte Bretonne,* critically, the presence of parasols nonetheless complicates the trope of cultural isolation.

Finally, the idea of a socially dislocated Brittany is further ruptured by the inclusion of the policeman in *La Lutte Bretonne*. Wrestling matches were traditionally overseen by stewards, who kept the crowds at bay with either a whip or saucepan.[53] François-Hippolyte Lalaisse's *Une Lutte à Rosporden* (*g.4*), for instance, pictures a man in the lower right-hand corner, holding a whip in a manner that anticipates its imminent use. In fact, another steward (just left of the wrestlers) appears to already be wielding his saucepan, forcing back a line of women. The scene's atmosphere is visceral and chaotic, and captures how the perimeter of the fight was often determined by 'the spectators' good will,' as much as by supervision.[54] We see a notable departure from this in Sérusier's work, where the crowd is portrayed in a moment of stasis. Where the bedraggled stewards appear to almost be wrestling with the crowd, the policeman stands calmly; his inaction signalling the tacit strength of his

authority. The official nature of the policeman not only lends a sense of order to the scene, but also links rural traditions to centralised governance, thereby dismantling the idea of regional isolation. In effect, we are being shown that even the *most* provincial activities have become connected to the metropolitan centre.

FIG. 4

François-Hippolyte Lalaisse, *Une Lutte à Rosporden*, 1865. Lithograph. Musée de Bretagne. © Photograph by Musée de Bretagne.

CONCLUSION

In closing, it is perhaps important to briefly reflect on why I have decided to return to *this* particular work. The *raison d'être* for this paper did not derive from some impulse to rescue Sérusier from the scholarly margins nor to shift his status away from that of the epigone. If that has occurred to any degree, it is incidental. Instead, the impulse came from an idle moment in the Musée d'Orsay, when I found myself standing in front of Sérusier's quiet painting, unable to impute onto the work one of the many descriptive short hands that are typically deployed in the overstimulating and ever-distracting environment of the museum. In truth, the split nature of the work demanded more time than I was able to afford it. While the writing on l'École de Pont-Aven is extensive, the painting remained a question mark, in a room full of statements. This paper has not looked to erase that question mark, nor has it attempted to suggest the possibility of a full stop. Rather, it has worked to describe the permanent nature of the painting's seemingly endless contingencies. But, more than that, I have sought to offer up the contronym—-a theoretical model that avoids the flattening out that often accompanies the parsing of such a complex work.

Upon closer inspection, *La Lutte Bretonne* resists the intuitive categorisation that the work, itself, invites at first glance. The painting instead embodies a collection of mutually exclusive concerns: the old is matched with the new; the foreign with the indigenous; the visceral with the tranquil. And while this aporia is not immediately apparent, it nonetheless dictates the viewer's consumption of the painting. Whether consciously or otherwise, Sérusier has given us a vision that captures the inconsistencies of culture, revealing the Parisian fantasy of Brittany to be riddled with contradictions. However, what is perhaps most fascinating about the work is how these contradictions are able to exist almost symbiotically within the same sphere, and how the same mark can actively encourage divergent conclusions—without diluting either. Ultimately, in depicting the influences of the outside world in both its content and style, Sérusier's painting disrupted its own cultural singularity, and revealed itself to be as much a portrait of the travelling artist as it was of Brittany.

1. The original account was written in 1894 and was subsequently translated in A. Le Braz, The Land of Pardons, trans. Frances M. Gostling (London: Methuen, 1906), xix. Unless otherwise stated, all translations are by the author of the cited text. ↩
2. This paper's close focus on Sérusier represents a marked departure from the relatively scant scholarship that currently exists on the artist, which for the most part mobilises Sérusier as a contextual marker for the Nabis, or an epigone of Paul Gauguin. The most notable exception is Caroline Boyle-Turner's monograph, Paul Sérusier (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1983). See also, Paul Sérusier and Maurice Denis' artistic manual, ABC de la Peinture (Paris: Floury, 1942). La Lutte Bretonne is also mentioned in passing elsewhere; however, this author has not been able to locate any writing that goes beyond cursory descriptions of the work, see, e.g., Denise Delouche, "La Lutte Bretonne Vue par les Artistes (1798-1930)," Mémoires de la Société d'Histoire et d'Archéologie de Bretagne 71 (1994): 334. Lastly, it would also be remiss not to note the catalogue raisonné housed online by the Le Comité Paul Sérusier (), which provides great access to the artist's broader oeuvre. ↩
3. Griselda Pollock, "On Not Seeing Provence: Van Gogh and the Landscape of Consolation, 1888-1889," in Framing France: The Representation of Landscape in France, 1870-1914, ed. Richard Thomson (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998), 82. ↩
4. Ibid., 83. ↩
5. For a broader discussion, see Magdalena Dabrowski, French Landscape: The Modern Vision, 1880-1920 (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1999), 12-13; 55-62. ↩
6. See, e.g., Ronald Pickvance's Gauguin and the Pont-Aven School (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1994), which catalogues 21 of the artists who congregated at Pont-Aven. ↩
7. Boyle-Turner, Paul Sérusier, 9. ↩
8. Ibid. ↩
9. Ibid., 17-19. ↩
10. Ibid., 18-19. ↩
11. Nancy Davenport, "Paul Sérusier: Art and Theosophy," Religion and the Arts 11, no. 2 (2007): 178. ↩
12. Boyle-Turner, Paul Sérusier, 21. ↩
13. Brief is the operative descriptor here, as it would be a misrepresentative to conflate the long-term activities of the Nabis and l'École de Pont-Aven. ↩
14. Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock, "Les Données Bretonnantes: La Prairie de Répresentation," Art History 3, no. 3 (1980): 323. ↩
15. Caroline Boyle-Turner and Samuel Josefowitz, The Prints of the Pont-Aven School: Gauguin and His Circle in Brittany (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service, 1986), 21. ↩
16. Boyle-Turner, Paul Sérusier, 20. ↩
17. Ibid., 13. ↩
18. Ibid., 14-16. ↩
19. Elizabeth Prelinger, "The Art of the Nabis: From Symbolism to Modernism," in The Nabis and the Parisian Avant-Garde, ed. Patricia Eckert Boyer (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 83. ↩
20. Boyle-Turner and Josefowitz, The Prints of the Pont-Aven School, 21. ↩
21. Davenport contends that Sérusier represented 'the people and the land as mythic and eternal,' 191. ↩
22. Philippe Lacombe, "The Breton Body in Culture and Religion," Culture, Sport, Society 4, no. 3 (2001): 35. ↩
23. Ibid. ↩
24. Ibid., 36. ↩
25. Guy Jaouen, "La Lutte Bretonne," ArMen 92 (1998): 4-5. ↩
26. Delouche, "La Lutte Bretonne Vue par les Artistes," 323. ↩
27. Aurélie Epron, "Histoire du Gouren (XIXe-XXIe Siècles): L'invention de la Lutte Bretonne" (PhD thesis, Université Rennes, 2008), 217. ↩
28. Delouche, "La Lutte Bretonne Vue par les Artistes," 319. ↩
29. Belinda Thomson, Frances Fowle, and Lesley Stevenson, Gauguin's Vision (Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 2005), 67. ↩
30. Henning Eichberg, "Wrestling, Brittany (Gouren)," in Sports Around the World: History, Culture, and Practice, ed. John Nauright and Charles Parrish, vol. 2 (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2012), 465. ↩
31. Although the authors feature a plate of La Lutte Bretonne in their book, it is not mentioned in the body text. And while the kliked throw is identified (in the painting's caption), no attempt is made to unpack this finding further, see Thomson, Fowle, and Stevenson, 67. ↩
32. Eichberg, 465. ↩
33. Davenport, 210. ↩
34. Thomson, Fowle, and Stevenson, 67. ↩
35. Guy Jaouen and Henri Beon, Gouren: Breton and Celtic Wrestling (Skol-Uhel ar Vro: Institut Culturel de Bretagne, 1985), 9. ↩
36. Ibid. ↩
37. Thomson, Fowle, and Stevenson, Gauguin's Vision, 67. ↩

38. It has been suggested that Gauguin goes so far as to insert 'himself among the peasants whose intense religiosity he covets,' in La Vision Après le Sermon; see Suzanne M. Singletary, "Jacob Wrestling with the Angel: A Theme in Symbolist Art," Nineteenth-Century French Studies 32, no. 3 (2004): 306. ↩
39. For further consideration of the religious valencies of La Vision Après le Sermon see Mathew Herban III, "The Origin of Paul Gauguin's Vision after the Sermon: Jacob Wrestling with the Angel (1888)," The Art Bulletin 59, no. 3 (1977): 415-420. ↩
40. Delouche, "La Lutte Bretonne Vue par les Artistes," 342. ↩
41. Patricia Eckert Boyer, "The Nabis, Parisian Vanguard Humorous Illustrators, and the Circle of the Chat Noir," in The Nabis and the Parisian Avant-Garde, ed. Patricia Eckert Boyer (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 7. ↩
42. Boyle-Turner, Paul Sérusier, 40-41. ↩
43. Ibid., 13. ↩
44. See Orton and Pollock, "Les Données Bretonnantes," 330. In fact, venturing into the countryside and engaging with the occult were established tropes of the Nabis' rebellion against their 'strictly bourgeois' upbringing, see also Boyle-Turner, Paul Sérusier, 38. ↩
45. While several men do appear in the crowd, this does not dilute the sense of a gender division, as only males could participate in wrestling, see Thomson, Fowle, and Stevenson, Gauguin's Vision, 67. ↩
46. Boyle-Turner and Josefowitz, The Prints of the Pont-Aven School, 20. ↩
47. Henry Blackburn, Breton Folk: An Artistic Tour in Brittany (Boston: James R. Osgood and Company, 1881), 132. ↩
48. Yann Guesdon, "The Breton Coiffe: Past and Future," in Portraits in Lace: Breton Women, ed. Charles Fréger (London: Thames & Hudson, 2015), 249. ↩
49. Ibid. ↩
50. Ibid., 250. ↩
51. See Jeremy Farrell, Umbrellas & Parasols (London: Batsford, 1985), 25-75. ↩
52. Boyle-Turner, Paul Sérusier, 76. ↩
53. Jaouen and Beon, Gouren: Breton and Celtic Wrestling, 9. ↩
54. Ibid. ↩

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