

Oral History with Sylvie Crussard

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ELIZABETH GORAYEB: I'm Elizabeth Gorayeb, and I'm here today with Sylvie Crussard. It is September 16th, 2020, and we're recording an oral history for the Wildenstein Plattner Institute's Paul Gauguin oral history series. Sylvie Crussard, do I have your permission to record this interview?

SYLVIE CRUSSARD: Yes, of course.

EG: Wonderful. Great, thank you so much for being with us, Sylvie. So as we discussed, I'd love to have a little personal introduction from you, and mainly, Sylvie, how did you get into the field of art historical research? So you can go back as far as your early days working for the Wildenstein Institute, when you started working for the Wildenstein Institute, or even before then. So, I'll leave it to you to fill in that first blank.

SC: Well, Liz, I must say, working for the Wildenstein Institute was my very first job, because I'd just finished my studies. Which by mistake, were not history of art, except for a little bit of *formation*. But my main thing was political science.

EG: Oh, interesting. And where was that, Sylvie?

SC: This was a total mistake. I should never have studied political science, but finally, I still did, so I finished it. And during the last year, I passed three certificates of history of art, because this was a -- very relaxing, to me, you know, compared to political science. Which I didn't dislike, but

(pauses) it wasn't my vocation at all. So, I was relaxing, reading history of art books, and I passed -- you needed four *certificat* to get a *licence*, which means -- which is the first degree. I only had three. But when I finished my studies, I started looking for a job rather in history of art, although I had no serious degree and no serious qualification. And I found this job with Wildenstein.

And so, my first job was working on Monet. And -- well, this was rather solitary work. But once a week came in a man who was a researcher called Rodolphe Walter, who was studying the correspondence, Monet's correspondence. And this was fun, we got along great, you know? Because we did all these little things like taking maps, really detailed maps, and looking at the curves which show how high you are, you know? And show the shape of hills, et cetera et cetera. And then you would say, "If Monet went down the Seine 15 meters lower, then the church spire would be to the right of this hill. Or if he went in that direction, it would be left." And so, we tried to really find out where paintings were painted.

And also, another thing which was fun was dating correspondences. Because, well --

[BREAK IN AUDIO]

SC: -- it's a nice thing to do, you know, because you have to remember every detail. And if the artist says, "I brought my shirt to the cleaners," you have to remember it, because maybe in another letter, he would be talking about history of art matters and he would say, "My shirt has lost its buttons." So you could date the letter. So, I learned this with Rodolphe

Walter. And besides that, in those days, I don't know -- I haven't looked at the Monet catalogue for a long time. But what I remember of it is that it was extremely succinct. That on the right-hand page, there were six images -- each, all of them the same size, you know, like about postcard size. And on the left page, there were six squares with the technical info. The same size. So, it wasn't very developed. But what was more developed was the research, correspondence part, et cetera et cetera, which was mainly done by Rodolphe Walter. So, that's how I started in history of art. I had absolutely no *formation*, I must say. (laughs) But it didn't matter, because it was a very easy job, you know, what we were doing, and it was fun. So, that's it for Monet.

EG: That's fascinating that you remember the topographical maps and trying to piece together where Monet was. And I wonder, was the process of investigating really the fun part for you, or did you start to develop an appreciation for Monet's biography? Was it more the hunt, or was it the appreciation of the art that was really motivating you during that time?

SC: Well, (pauses) the appreciation of the art was part of the job anyhow, because you had to, you know, understand it stylistically in order to date paintings, for instance. I remember -- another remembrance I have is going to see Daniel Wildenstein. We saw him very rarely, but I remember he -- he (laughs) tried -- I was very young, very intimidated. But I remember him trying to see if I was smart or not, and asking me, "Is this 1873 or 1874?" Paintings which weren't dated. And so, you had to have a feeling for things, too.

EG: So, clearly you won Daniel Wildenstein's trust, since you stayed until the end of the Monet catalogue raisonné, clearly, and then you started working on Gauguin. How did that happen? When did you start to look towards Gauguin?

SC: Oh, it was much more complicated than that. Because in the meantime, (laughs) I had discovered my absolute passion, you know, which I discovered in my 30s, which was dance. So, at one period, I said, "Well, history of art isn't really that useful. Dance is much, much more useful." So, I stopped working in history of art for a few years. And I still think dance is -- really as useful, if not even more useful, than history of art, because it really is very useful. But anyhow, it's much more difficult than history of art. So, I tried to -- I didn't know how to do anything in dance, but I tried to teach a little bit, et cetera, et cetera. And it turned out that I could never earn my living with it, because I wasn't formed enough and also, it's much more difficult than intellectual jobs. So, I came back -- I found the Foundation [Wildenstein Institute] again, and I said, "May I come back?" Because I had left it for a few years, you know.

EG: How long -- may I interrupt? When was that exactly, Sylvie, that you left and you came back?

SC: Uh, from '75 to '78.

EG: I see.

SC: Three years.

EG: And the Monet catalogue raisonné had not come out yet? Is that correct, it came out in --

SC: I only worked on the first volume. And at the end of the first volume, I left Paris for a while, went to London for a while. Then I had to come back because of family things. And then, I worked a little bit on Redon. But not for a very long time, and I think it must have been that the time I discovered dance, so -- so, the really intense thing was dance, you know. And well, I had to come back to history of art to earn my living. (laughs)

EG: Right. So, while you were in London, you were strictly doing dance? You weren't involved in any type of art?

SC: I mean, (laughs) this was an absolutely absurd time in my life, because I wasn't really doing anything. I was -- well, this was the dropout period, too, and stuff like that. (laughs) I mean, it sounds absurd nowadays, anyhow. And London didn't last for -- just a few months, you know. Then I came back and worked on Redon.

EG: And for Redon, were you doing similar research in the mode you were doing it with --

[BREAK IN AUDIO]

SC: No, no, because this was the very beginning of the Redon catalogue, so I was doing regular documentation, constituting files, and this was just setting down the basis for the catalogue. But I liked Redon, you know. But then Redon, I mean -- I was young. I didn't love Redon like I love him now. I didn't

quite understand the scope of the whole thing. So, things really got started again when -- in '78. Daniel Wildenstein -- I said, "Do you have anything I could do?" And he said, "Well yes, you can do Gauguin. That might be a good thing." And in those days, you hardly got any (laughs) indications, you know, of what to do in your work. So you were -- at Wildenstein's, you were always very free to organize your work as you want to orient it, the way you want it.

So then, I started with Gauguin, and in those days -- well, in those days, the person who was on Gauguin was Douglas Cooper. Who didn't live in Paris, who came in from Monaco from time to time. And a rather nice girl, who was his secretary. And I was on the drawings, organizing them. And then, I started -- I started organizing the documentation, too. Because for instance, there was no correspondence files, so I started collecting the correspondence. I started files on collectors. I started -- more than files, you know. Great -- how do you call them? -- *classeurs*. You know, these books with holes, where you put --

Okay, I started creating lots of categories of documentation. There was a whole wall filled with newspaper articles, a whole wall filled with topographical documentation. For instance, if you want to see "Le Pouldu," then you have maps of "Le Pouldu," you have photographs of "Le Pouldu," you have lots of things. And then, documentation about -- I don't know the word for -- *état civil*. These are the documents which you collect from town halls, when you're born or when you die, and then notaries' archives, for successions.

EG: Yes, government files, government papers.

SC: Government papers, yes.

EG: So, Sylvie, can I ask -- it sounds to me like this was all a very self-motivated and self-directed project for you. It doesn't sound -- and correct me if I'm wrong -- that Douglas Cooper was coming in and telling you what needed to be done. You just decided to do this. Is that correct?

SC: Well, he wasn't really asking me anything. I was in charge of the drawings; he was doing the paintings.

EG: I see.

SC: But I was sending him info about drawings connected to paintings. I knew the letters, you know, so I could tell him, for this painting, it's quoted in this and that letter, and stuff like that. But Douglas Cooper was in Monaco anyhow. He asked very precise -- Alix De Fontenay, this other girl, she was really very much like his secretary more than anything. She would write his letters and classify paper, and I was doing what I felt had to be done. So, I've always been totally free to do what I wanted, even on Monet. (laughs)

EG: Right. So, it sounds like the experience with Monet and doing the dating with correspondence really shaped what you started to undertake with Gauguin's letters. How did you move into the paintings?

SC: Into what?

EG: The paintings, working on Gauguin's paintings.

SC: How did I get to work on that?

EG: Yes.

SC: Oh, well just because Douglas Cooper died.

EG: I see. So, he worked until his death, and when was that?

SC: He died in '84.

EG: Okay.

SC: Yeah.

EG: So, how far had he gotten in his endeavor? And he did it by himself, with his secretary occasionally asking you questions? Is that right?

SC: I didn't understand.

EG: He -- Douglas Cooper, since he was not in Paris, he was in Monaco -- he was compiling dossiers himself with the help of a secretary. Was that secretary in Paris working with you at all?

SC: Yes, yes, she was, she was. But Douglas Cooper was -- well, now we get into a real story. (laughs)

EG: Oh, please tell.

SC: (laughs) Yes, because what happened -- it's the story of the Gauguin catalogue. What happened -- I mean, after the catalogue was published in '64 -- is that for the first time,

people in general, museum-keepers, dealers, et cetera, had a view of Gauguin's work, you know, collected. So, they could form an idea of what a real, beautiful, good, classical Gauguin is. And what happened is that all the Gauguins, which are -- Cogniat had put in -- are not all of them classical. He put in lots of Gauguins. And for some reason, people criticized his catalogue. Especially there was an article by Merete Bodelsen, where she was right because she had the Danish information, which Cogniat didn't have. So, she did a lot of additional critiques, but she also criticized his way of working.

And then, there was an anonymous article in some -- I think, I forget which paper, an English-speaking paper, maybe a British one -- anonymous, by Douglas Cooper, where (laughs) really Douglas Cooper dipped his pen and -- for Cogniat's blood, you know. He said the catalogue was filled with fakes, and so -- I mean, I wasn't there. I wasn't working on Gauguin yet, it was in '66, '65, '66. But now, I realize from looking at the files that poor Cogniat must have been very unhappy, and unjustly, because his work was actually very honest, very sound, and very sensitive.

Whereas after '66 and in the '70s and in the '80s began a period of severity for Gauguin works. So, under the direction, Douglas Cooper probably went to see Daniel Wildenstein, and said, "See, Bodelsen criticized the catalogue, and your catalogue is filled with fakes, you have to redo it." So, he was given the direction, you know, and he eliminated just dozens of works. And when I started working on Gauguin, we were absolutely just in the middle of that period. So, Douglas Cooper was supposed to -- well, he rewrote the catalogue, but I don't know if I should say this or not, but I don't think he wrote it better than Cogniat

did, you know. Because Cogniat was using documents, of course, it was in a very succinct form, but still, he was using letters and making comparisons with drawings. And Cooper was doing a much more -- work which was much more fast. So, that's what was happening in those days.

EG: And so, Cogniat was the subject of Douglas Cooper's anonymous and strategic criticism. How did the Wildensteins respond to that? Because their name, of course, is on the 1964 catalogue raisonné.

SC: Well, I wasn't there, you know. But all I can see is that Cogniat must have been strongly criticized -- unjustly, in my view. And afterwards, for a few years, you find little pages, scribbled pages, in the files of the works, where the decisions were made by a committee consisting of Douglas Cooper, Raymond Cogniat, and Daniel Wildenstein. And so, there was a committee already in those days. And I think poor Cogniat must have been unhappy. (laughs)

EG: Well, certainly. So, are you talking -- there was a committee after the publication of the '64 catalogue?

SC: In the '70s or something like that.

EG: In the '70s, I see.

SC: But it wasn't called the committee, you know, because supposedly it was Daniel Wildenstein who had the last word. But for one period, I believe Douglas Cooper must have had the loudest voice. You know, he was a very outgoing man.

EG: Yes.

SC: A bit like a trumpet, you know? (laughter) So, we had fun with him. (laughs) But I don't think his work was -- I prefer Cogniat's work.

EG: Indeed. So when Douglas Cooper dies in '84, what happens to his files and what happens to the project?

SC: Well, what happened by then in '84 is that Victor Merlhes published his incredible correspondence with footnotes, which are more developed, if not as developed as the letters, you know. So, up to then, the ideal model of art historians was John Rewald, you know, history of Impressionism, of Post-Impressionism, with the use of letters. Sort of a scientific approach. But Merlhes made the approach a thousand times more *pointu*, I don't know the English word, but even much more precise. It was another level of research, you know? Because he went into archives, which no one would ever have thought of. So, this became, for me, the model. So, I collected more info. Well, I wasn't in charge of only the drawings then; I had the paintings, too. So, I just developed the -- collecting materials. As I told you, archives, correspondence, and stuff like that.

And then, then came the 1988, '89 big Gauguin exhibition. Which was another date in the history of art, because it was a really great catalogue. We were told, if I well remember it, I may be wrong or right or wrong, but that they had a huge team working on that with lots of young helpers. We were told 30 people, I don't know anyhow. So, this became the model. So, at one point, when I started -- I started rewriting Cooper's, because Cooper

died just before he had finished. And I don't remember how it happened, but I started rewriting his work, because it was scientifically not up to -- either the Merlhes or even the '88, '89 exhibition standards.

EG: I see. So, in the sense that Cooper was a one-man show, and wasn't knocking on the doors of archives and really digging into the provenance research like these two scholarly endeavors did.

SC: Provenance research is a later phenomenon. But well, we always did -- of course, it -- Cooper was more, I wouldn't say a one-man show, but he was a generalist. And he just was writing his stuff easy in Monaco without much scientific information. So, I can't remember how I restarted rewriting -- I started rewriting his *notice*. But of course, it was natural, because Cooper hadn't read Merlhes, for instance. You had to read Merlhes if you wanted to publish a good catalogue. So, from then on, everything had to be rewritten.

But I remember I asked Daniel Wildenstein to change the formula of the catalogue from the Monet formula, (laughs) which was so meager, to the 1988, '89 exhibition formula, which was much more developed. And Daniel Wildenstein said yes, you know, and that's how the catalogue became not only a catalogue raisonné but a *catalogue critique*, which means that you have permission to develop -- like, the artist's intentions, his precise aim in each painting, et cetera, et cetera.

EG: And that really has become your specialty, Sylvie.

SC: I don't know, no, I think everybody can do that.

EG: Well, I think that you're uniquely positioned. You've accumulated a wealth of knowledge in having worked on these files for so long, not only the documentation that you collected, but it seems that you are a resource for a lot of Gauguin scholars working today. Can you talk a little bit about some of the people that you've met over your time as the resident Gauguin scholar, and some of the archives or findings that you've come across in your position that would have been unheard of or were not accessible to people like Douglas Cooper or even John Rewald?

SC: I didn't understand everything. You were asking about what archives, for instance, we've come across.

EG: Yes. Archives and other discoveries that you've come across.

SC: Well, the main archive *fond* we discovered was the only person who really worked on Gauguin, because -- Alix de Fontenay, Cooper's secretary, she stayed on. But she wasn't really a researcher, she was a really nice girl, but she wasn't really an art historian. But at one point came in a girl called Martine Heudron, who was a fantastically stubborn and precise person. So, we decided to explore the notarial archives of Gauguin's family, digging them up, you know. And then, we read them together, and we interpreted them together, and we got this huge family archive, which we have here. And we had to learn types of documents existing. I forget the names, but they're not just *succession*, you know, they're much more complicated and financial things. And we found about Gauguin -- paternal side's fortune, which they had a little bit of money. Then I researched

a lot about Flora Tristan. And we had her succession files, too, in the notes material files. And this was a lot of fun.

But we did millions of things, you know, in that area. And for notarial files also, I got some of Schuffenecker's notarial file, which I should never have gotten, but he gave them to me. And for a long time, I was embarrassed, because they weren't supposed to be published. But now, time has expired and I think they can be published. What else about documents? Well, you know, collecting letters, it's a slow job. But it's always fun too, because that's how you read the history. Because you don't only collect Gauguin's letters; you collect letters which speak of Gauguin, letters addressed to Gauguin, then you put them all in the same book, you know. So you can see the story developing. And then, you have to redate them, which is a -- at some periods.

When he was in Tahiti, Gauguin was dating his letters, because there were so few boats, you know, and they took so long. So, he put dates on his letters. But for instance, in 1889, he doesn't date his letters. And so, Malingue [sic, Merlhes] published them, but we had to rechange completely the order of the letters, which implies -- which allows to change or modify, let's say, the date at which he stays in Le Pouldu or Pont-Aven, you know, he goes back and forth between both. So you have to try to understand in order to be able to try to guess whether this or that painting, like *Le Christ jaune* or et cetera, whether if it was done in Le Pouldu or in Pont-Aven, whether it was done in Le Pouldu from a Pont-Aven drawing, for instance, or stuff like that. So --

EG: And these letters that you're coming across and dating, how are you finding these letters? Are they being presented to you by other scholars, or are you traveling and seeking them out?

SC: No, this is something which should be done -- whenever there is a catalogue raisonné, the documentarists who are working on the documentation should be looking at the autograph dealers' catalogues, at the sales catalogues. This should be done systematically if you work on an artist, because you find lots of things. And so, that's what we did. We went to all the autograph dealers' little shops and looked at their catalogues from 20 years up to 2003, or 2001. But since then, it hasn't been done, and it should be done, you know.

EG: Right, and so, I would imagine that researching methods today, of course, are very different than they were when you began --

SC: Yes.

EG: -- with the Gauguin catalogue raisonné. Can you talk a bit about what has changed and whether you're relying on internet research more than you did in the past?

SC: In the past, things weren't online, so you had no access to them. Now, this is a big, huge progress, that people can consult things which are online. So, provenance research, certainly, has done a huge step forward. My opinion, if I may say something, (laughs) is that history of art is very much turning into forensic exams and provenance research. And that the sensitive aspect of it is -- less important, you know. The proportions have changed. Before that, the sensitive aspects was the

foremost, and now, it isn't anymore. But I think, of course, you need the scientific research and if it's possible, of course you should do it. But then, you should also develop some firmness in your personal vision of an artist.

EG: Do you think that the shift from the vision of the artist to provenance research is due to people being fearful of forgeries and wanting evidence?

SC: Of course, and they're right. You must have all the evidence which is possible to get, and nowadays, it's much easier to get more evidence. So, of course you have to do it. But I think since the 1990s, where prices were multiplied, since art became such a financial affair, the tendency, the parallel tendency is to rely or request all these guarantees, scientific guarantees, which are still not the only guarantees nor maybe the best. I think lots of people have gone into the art business, and they're afraid of making decisions, because they don't know enough. And this is a tendency which doesn't diminish. It rather spreads, I would say. And it's a bit sad.
(laughs)

EG: What are some of the stylistic aspects of Gauguin that you think are very important to his art, but that are often overlooked, particularly when people aren't, as you say, giving as much importance to maybe a connoisseurial approach. Are there certain stylistic elements that you feel are essential to work by Gauguin? (crosstalk)

SC: That's a very, very vast question.

[BREAK IN AUDIO]

SC: It brings me back to the end of the first story I told you about the appreciation of Gauguin's work and the period of severity, which was spread -- severity spread in the 1970s and 1980s. But it was -- I mean, this was -- you can't reproach it. This is sort of what -- a general tendency. And it was -- even intelligent people were into it. But then, (pauses) we started at Wildenstein's, we started slowly inverting the tendency. Because Gauguin is actually a fierce experimentator [sic]. And all the experimental works had been eliminated or refused, because, for instance, there are many, many experimental drawings, even more than paintings. And they were presented, they were refused immediately. Even Daniel Wildenstein, who was a great art lover and connoisseur, he was into that, because everybody was into that.

And then, finally, I remember one day when -- because there were some experimental drawings, for instance, in well-known sketchbooks. And I sort of collected experimental drawings of one kind, for instance, dynamic experimental drawings. And then of another kind, for instance, his illustration-like experimental drawings. Or roundish experimental drawings. I collected them in groups, from loose sheets. And also, put them together with things which were recognized as Gauguins, because they were in sketchbooks. And I remember bringing them to Daniel Wildenstein, and he said, "Well, if that one is Gauguin, because it has a very similar one in the sketchbook, then all of them are Gauguin." And from that day on, dozens of experimental drawings were accepted. And I was young, I was struck by his faculty of decision. Because I thought they were right, probably, but he just made the decision. It was impressive. "All of them are right." (laughs)

And this changed the view we had of Gauguin's work, because then came experimental works or works done quickly in a very dirty matter, but still -- spontaneous works. And so, we started reintegrating into Gauguin from the '90s on lots of aspects progressively, and it's from our view here, in the Gauguin catalogue, it's very clear and it's done, you know, practically. All the works which had been put away into boxes as not being by Gauguin, you know, practically -- I mean, practically all, maybe there are exceptions, have been reintegrated into the catalogue. But I don't know how this -- how widespread this vision is. I'm not sure besides the catalogue Gauguin, everybody easily agrees. I don't know, really. But the vision of Gauguin's works certainly has changed from the '90s on.

EG: Mm-hm. Can I ask you -- how, while you're working on the catalogue raisonné, do you deal with criticisms that you might be presented with, or contradictions to the work that you already have in progress? Does that happen often? Do you change your opinion very often as you're working? (crosstalk)

SC: No, because -- first of all, we're not published, so there's nothing to criticize. When we publish, then, you know, critics will arrive. But then, of course, we try to foresee criticism, and when we publish, we try to explain the reasons why we make this and that choice. But as long as we don't publish, you get no criticism. (laughs)

EG: It seems as if art historians today want to be very succinct in their answers, because they're not looking to justify why they've come to a conclusion about a work of art.

But are you saying that you'd be willing to talk about why you believe the work of art is indeed the work of art?

[BREAK IN AUDIO]

SC: If you're developing about a painting, you have to try to convince people. (laughs) So, you give your argument. (sighs)

EG: Sure.

SC: It seems absurd not to give the arguments. It's not easy, you know.

EG: Right, right.

SC: So, for instance, I've been talking about -- Pont-Aven is a very experimental period. So, there are tricks which Gauguin develops, ways of representing, for instance, vegetation as if it was a simplified sculpture, or -- well, lots of stylistic tricks and other tricks. So, there's one part in what you write where you have to talk about this, but it's hard, because it's a matter of sensitiveness or feeling, you have to choose your words very carefully and use as few words as is possible. It's not an easy thing to do, you know? Or at least it's an artistic thing to do. You have to have a good feeling to do it, you know, some taste or (laughs) whatever.

EG: Can you give -- can you think of an example of a work that has been widely doubted but you just feel it is absolutely right?

SC: No, no, I can only think of big, huge examples. (laughs)
Well, no, but -- yes, let's see. Well, for instance, in the Marie Henry succession, Marie Henry had some works by Gauguin, which she left at her place. And they were photographed. So, you have Marie Henry photographs of some works, and when I got to -- when I started working on Gauguin, at least half these works were considered not to be by Gauguin. And finally, we reintegrated them, one by one, up to, for instance, I don't know if you remember this chimney lintel, which was attributed to Serusier. And which probably still is attributed to Serusier.

[BREAK IN AUDIO]

SC: It's -- no, no, it's not (*Jeanne d'Arc?*), it's in the same room, but it was on the chimney-piece, it's a horizontal little narrow thing. With Breton dancers. We had meetings with Caroline Boyle-Turner --

EG: Ah, yes. Okay.

SC: -- who I really like very much, you know. And we had a collective meeting between the Gauguin committee and the Serusier meeting. And everybody defended their point of view. And well, I mean, I'll tell you something, (laughs) which you won't like. But I think -- like, I'm sure it's by Gauguin. I'm sure of it. I wasn't -- when I had -- when the experimental aspects of Gauguin had been unearthed, I had another view of Gauguin. And one day, after I had a clear view of Gauguin's experimental aspects, one day, I saw the lintel, which I had seen several times before, but I don't look at it every day, because it was in the Serusier boxes. And then, I said, "But that's Gauguin!" Just because I felt that some lines had to be

Gauguin. This is because the vision of Gauguin's work had changed in the meantime.

And so, now, I'm as sure -- as an art historian, you can never say I'm sure, because you're sure you'll be wrong sometime anyhow, also. But now, I'm sure it's by Gauguin. But I think Caroline still hesitates, because last time I saw her, she told me, "I haven't got the silver bullet." But to me, this is fun. And I feel -- this is my catalogue raisonné philosophy. If we want to catalogue it, we catalogue it. And if she wants to catalogue it, she catalogues it too. And that'll show people that -- that'll prove to people that history of art isn't precise science. Because (sighs) I think -- if that happens, I don't think it will happen -- but if it did happen, I would think it's really hilarious. (laughs) And it would be a good proof that -- well, history of art is a very lively activity.

EG: It is, and -- can I ask you, some of the scholars that you've worked with, who have been the ones that have really influenced your thinking about Gauguin?

SC: I must say, I'll disappoint you, but I would say nobody. Merlhes, maybe. Merlhes impressed me by his work.

EG: Now, just switching topics a little bit. Gauguin -- a lot of people like to talk about the controversy surrounding Gauguin as a white European man going to Tahiti and fetishizing Tahitian young women. Has that characterization of Gauguin had any effect on you and your appreciation --

SC: (groans) Never, never --

EG: -- of his work?

SC: -- never. (laughs) This is a -- I mean, I'm not really supposed to read much about the Tahitian period, but I still did read -- I tried to find things on the internet about Tahitian sexual habits. And I read one guy who was a doctor who seemed pretty serious. And apparently -- well, what happened actually, I mean, like in -- we weren't there. But I think what Gauguin says, which is probably right, he says, "I want a woman. I want to live with a woman." So, the people in his neighborhood said, "Oh, you do? Well, there's a family over there in this other village who has a young girl, and she's ready to -- to get married." So, he goes there, and he talks with the parents. The parents ask him, "Are you a good man?" And Gauguin says, (laughs) "Well, yes." And so, they say, "Well, our daughter can go with you. And she'll come back in a week from now. And if she wants to stay -- if she doesn't want to stay with you, she'll stay with us."

So, that's what happened. And the girl went back to her family, but she went back to Gauguin's place. And I read in this book that this was how things were done, that girls were considered mature to have sexual relationships when they were what, 13? And having sexual experience was -- that's what this book said -- considered as an advantage. And they had their opinion to give on the partner. And so, apparently, Gauguin did something which was absolutely within the Tahitian traditions. Also, wait a minute, I read something -- where did I read that? Oh, recently. (pauses) I think -- apparently, because it's supposed to be a legend initiated by Fourier or people like that -- you know, Diderot -- that Tahitian girls made love very easily. But I read something last week, I forget where, where apparently it wasn't

total legend at all. Sexual mores were much freer in Tahiti than in France anyhow.

And I'm sure -- in France, sexual relationships were horribly complicated at the end of the 19th century. You had to resort to -- (French, *gousette?*), you know, young girls, *grisette*, *cousette*, who were then dishonored. Or you had to pay regular (French, *famillegere?*), et cetera, et cetera. But it was very complicated, because in the 1880s, 1890s, you still had to keep this virginity façade. Which was crumbling, but the big change came around 1889, 1890. It started completely crumbling down, the sexual question. Started changing, but very slowly. And the bourgeoisie was still on, you know. The rules were still on, officially.

So, Gauguin had a hard time in France. Also, Gauguin didn't really have a very satisfying sentimental life, because he was like his grandmother, you know. He had failed with Mette and I think he never had the courage to start something as serious again, because he could have. There were -- in the artistic milieu, there were some girls which were much more free than the bourgeoisie. So, he could have had a big love. Unlike Serusier, you know, who wasn't as attractive as Gauguin. (laughs) He had a girlfriend who was brilliant, he had Zapolska. So, Gauguin certainly could have had Zapolska if he had tried, you know.

EG: So, Sylvie, can I ask somewhat of a different question? In 1903, Gauguin dies. And his works that he had, by that point in his career -- were his works selling?

SC: He didn't die in misery. Well, he had a contract with Vollard, which was a complicated affair. But still, it worked.

So, I don't know -- what's the aim of your question -- but he wasn't miserable and he made it, I don't know when a big change came, probably with Vollard's contract. But then, this isn't something I have studied in detail.

EG: Right, this is the area of Rick Brettell. I'm wondering if you could just give me a little bit of background about Rick, and when you met him and when he got involved in the project. (crosstalk)

SC: Well, it's -- Guy Wildenstein who decided to put Rick on the project. And so, what happened is that Rick wrote me a letter, a very beautiful letter, very diplomatical, saying, "I've read what you've written and feel I know you," et cetera, et cetera. And for some reason, even before I'd met Rick, something really clicked. (laughs) Like, I remember, I wrote back very politely, all European in the way I wrote, "Dear Mr. Brettell." And Rick wrote back saying, "Not Mr. Brettell. I'm called -- Brettell is like braces." And I remember I wrote back, "Watch it, because braces will turn into embraces," you know. And we had a -- it clicked perfectly. (laughs) Perfectly well. Even before meeting. Well, we had a really good time together on committees. Like, if there was a difficult case, we'd sit there and talk about other things. And then, suddenly, we'd make the decision. So, this was a great time. All I can say is Rick was so nice that we had to get along fine, you know.

EG: Well, thank you. Thank you for that. I'm just looking over my notes and I'm wondering if there's any other topic that we haven't covered that you'd like to speak about? (crosstalk)

SC: I'll probably think of it as soon as we've hung up or during the night. (laughs) But let me think, what could we talk about. (pauses)

EG: Maybe we can just talk a little bit about the upcoming publication of the Gauguin catalogue raisonné, both the Tahitian portion and then the portion that you're working on, Sylvie, the Breton portion of the catalogue raisonné. How do you think they will differ from the past Gauguin publications? Are there going to be surprises? Are there new additions?

SC: Oh, I don't know how Rick has organized his part, but I know it's -- anyhow, it's going to be a *catalogue critique*, anyhow, because you have to with Gauguin. Because Gauguin is a very -- it's not Renoir, who just paints away because he breathes and he wants to paint. Gauguin is a guy who thinks more than twice before doing something. And he doesn't do much. I mean, he chooses what he does. He doesn't paint seven thousand paintings, you know. And besides, the more I got familiar with him, the more I see that he's a thinker. So, there are very many hidden ideas in his works.

So, that's why you have to have a *catalogue critique*, because -- (sighs) because the subject is too rich. It's not a little landscape when you say it's painted direction, north, northeast. And you see the spire of the church or so and so. It's much more complex than that. And it's very interesting. Because -- well, because Gauguin was a very intelligent man, you know. And a farsighted man who indicated directions which are still valid nowadays, you know. So, you have to develop, and so, the catalogue has to be much more developed than -- maybe than any catalogue before, because the subject is important even

nowadays. And it's incredibly rich. So, I've also done lots of context studies, I must say, which I hope (laughs) you'll publish, because the problems Gauguin is dealing with, you have to know about them. So, I expose these problems.

EG: I know you write about how he was a very spiritual person.

SC: Spiritual person, of course, of course. And even a philosophical person too, which is not that easy to write about if you haven't the philosophy knack, you know? (laughs) Like, you read the history of art, but reading Hegel is something different -- it's not that easy. But still, you have to know about the contexts to understand his positions. Or sometimes, to discover his positions, because Gauguin writes a lot, but you have to understand what he writes. It's not always quite obvious. So, you have to try to interpret him.

EG: Is there a particular painting in the Breton period that you feel has been misinterpreted in the past?

SC: (sighs) Misinterpreted. No! But you can -- well --

EG: I guess what I'm saying, in light of the information that you've uncovered and the understanding that you now have of Gauguin, have other -- have historians in the past gotten him? Do they understand him in the way that you feel like you do now?

SC: Oh well, look. There are things which I would like to say, but when it's going to be published, you know.

EG: Yeah, sure.

SC: I'll tell them to you now, but maybe you'll cut them off. (laughs) Because for instance, in the *Christ au Jardin des Oliviers*, there are Buddhist allusions, which nobody has ever pointed out. So, I did a study of how Buddhist thought was perceived in Gauguin's days, to understand what there might be behind these Buddhist allusions. Also, something which I've very much developed, and you know about that, is *La famille Schuffenecker*, because there's so much behind this portrait, collective portrait. That if you don't talk about it, you miss lots of the point. What other paintings -- *Belle Angèle* has a lot of hidden meanings, too. (pause)

I guess -- or I could find other examples, but they don't come up to my mind right now. Well, you can always try to -- make slight *rapprochement*, bring things together, even in the *Femme aux Tournesols*, who was Marie Henry's -- you can think of lots of things which are connected with it. Which is -- this Gauguin catalogue raisonné opens the door to lots and lots of developments, and I don't think another artist is Gauguin -- well, yes, probably you could find other artists where you can do the same thing. But Gauguin is particularly apt to call forth lots of developments. Because it's a very rich character.

EG: Well, thank you very much Sylvie. I think we've covered quite a lot, and I very much appreciate hearing. (laughs)

SC: (laughs) Maybe not everything, of course, but some of the things, anyhow.

EG: Well, thank you again.

SC: Well, thank you too. Thank you too.

EG: Okay.

SC: Okay, bye bye, Liz.

[END OF AUDIO FILE]