

Oral History with Françoise Marnoni

Interviewer: Elizabeth Gorayeb, with Jennifer Gimblett	Interviewee: Françoise Marnoni	Date of interview: October 29th, 2020
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ELIZABETH GORAYEB: I'm Elizabeth Gorayeb, and it's October 29th, 2020. I'm speaking with Françoise Marnoni and Jennifer Gimblett, remotely, as part of the WPI's Gauguin oral history series. Françoise, do I have your permission to record this interview?

FRANÇOISE MARNONI: Yes, you have.

EG: Thank you. Thanks very much for joining us and doing this. I'm wondering if you could give us a bit of a personal introduction about yourself and your work and what you were doing before you started working on the Gauguin catalogue raisonné?

FM: Yes. I have always worked in art. I started working at Wildenstein Institute in 2000, on the Pierre-Auguste Renoir catalogue first, and after, Maurice de Vlaminck catalogue. Before working on this project, I was working on the critical catalogue of Maurice de Vlaminck and the catalogue of Kees Van Dongen. I still continue to prepare the Van Dongen committees. Van Dongen and Vlaminck are, for me, two figures of the Fauves movement which were initially inspired by examples of Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin, especially in the paintings of Tahiti. So, I had a general knowledge of the work of Gauguin, his masterpieces of the Breton and Tahitian periods.

EG: Well, that's fantastic. So, you really did have quite an important foundation of understanding not only this work, for Gauguin, but also the process of creating a catalogue raisonné. You've had quite a bit of experience on this. So, could you talk a little bit about your research project and your approach with the Gauguin catalogue raisonné?

FM: The corpus of the paintings included in the Tahiti period was established by Rick Bretell and Sylvie Crussard. They have examined for several years all works during the Gauguin committees, examined physically with the file. So, my first task was to observe each dossier of each work.

EG: And so, those dossiers were compiled from the examinations, or in preparation for the examinations -- is that correct?

FM: Yes, that's correct.

EG: Great. And working on this project, did you find that it was exciting, intimidating? Was it completely different from any of the other projects that you did?

FM: Um -- yes. It was first, for me, intimidating to begin working on Gauguin, especially on the Tahiti period, the best-known to the public. His painting with Tahitian titles was enigmatic to the public. I think that working with an artist which decided to leave his country and move to Tahiti in 1891 is really exciting. It is not so common, especially at this period. When Gauguin first showed his work in Paris in 1893, during the Durand-Ruel exhibition, the public was offended and did not understand the artist. And today, Gauguin is one of the major painters of the 19th century and a pioneer of modern art. This period is, for me, the most complicated of the artist, because the painter was far from his country and had to send his production to Paris. And (laughs) believe me, Elizabeth, it was not so easy to find the trace of his shipments.

EG: (laughs) I bet.

FM: Yes. Thankfully, Gauguin has handled an important correspondence which was published in different publications. We use them -- a major part of this publication. For example, the book edited by Jean Loize in 1950 -- no, excuse me, '51 -- *De Maillol et Codet à Ségalen: Les Amitiés du peintre Georges-Daniel de Monfreid et ses reliques de Gauguin*, and the publication of the letters from Gauguin to Georges-Daniel de Monfreid. And another book edited by Maurice Malingue, the letters to his wife and his friend. And the publication *Letters to Ambroise Vollard & André Fontainas*, edited by John Rewald. And finally, the *Correspondences croisées; Monfreid Gauguin Vollard*, edited in 2016 by Palau-Ribes and Payrou-Neveu. All these publications with letters were so essential sources of study and for the elaboration of the provenance of the artworks.

EG: Mm-hm. So, you worked with research files from a number of scholars, including Douglas Cooper, John Rewald, and then, of course, the files that were prepared by Sylvie Crussard. Did you find that there were some contradicting opinions, and how did you resolve some of the conflicting information that you found in these files?

FM: First, I would like to -- to explain how I compose these files.

EG: Yes, great.

FM: You know a catalogue raisonné is a methodical, descriptive, and critical compilation of the work of an artist. And when I started this project, I had the chance, a really, really -- chance to have the definitive corpus of the work included in the

Tahitian period. The corpus established by the author Rick Bretell and Sylvie Crussard.

And the second chance is to -- you know exactly -- we are an important center of research, which has for several years compiled what we call in Paris *dossier d'oeuvre*, for each work. These folders have been created for the publication of the 1964 Wildenstein catalogue and completed until today by different researchers and scholars. You know first, Raymond Cogniat worked on Gauguin since '65 until his death in '77. After, Douglas Cooper, since the 19-- until his death in 1994. And since '78, Sylvie Crussard. And since 2009, Rick Bretell. These files comprise archives, correspondence, letters of the artist, letters of collectors, letters of museums, sales cat, exhibition cat, publication. And these files provide us an excellent working basis.

EG: Mm-hm. That's wonderful. Now, it's -- you have a lot of material to work from. Among this material, did you find any recent -- any new discoveries? Were there any surprises among the files? So many people had been studying Gauguin prior to you. What were some of the surprises?

FM: You speak about a new discovery, for example --

EG: Yes.

FM: -- okay. The digital catalogue raisonné contains a lot of new information about the provenance, the exhibitions, the sales, and publications. Our important, for me, discovery or rediscovery concerns the early provenance of his works. We well know that his friend Georges-Daniel de Monfreid takes care about

the sale of Gauguin's works. But he was not the only one during the period 1895-1899. The dealers Gaston Lévy, Auguste Bauchy, Georges Chaudet were also involved. Before Gauguin left Paris in 1895, he made an agreement with these dealers, like a contract. We have tried to identify paintings which passed into the hands of these dealers. Support by the scholar, for example, Douglas Druick with the Chaudet inventories in 1896 and second inventories in 1898, and a lot of letters from Gauguin.

In letters to Georges-Daniel de Monfreid dated April 1896 and October 1897, Gauguin clearly explains the contract he made with Lévy and Chaudet and left his paintings to them. The contract with Ambroise Vollard would begin in 1900, after Chaudet's death in 1899. We have been able -- and we are so happy -- to distinguish the separate shipments of works of Gauguin from Tahiti to his dealer, Ambroise Vollard. We found that in 1900, Gauguin sent ten paintings. In August 1901, he sent five paintings. In April 1902, 21 paintings. And the last shipment before his death in April 1903, 14 paintings. But the reader will discover this in detail with many letters from Gauguin as support.

EG: That's amazing, Françoise. And this is really research that you yourself did with your colleague, Evgenia Kuzmina, who we also spoke with. I imagine that this is really going to change people's understanding of Gauguin's involvement and further clarify exactly what he painted during those years. Congratulations. Were you very excited when you found this?

FM: Yes, really exciting. It was like -- the discovery for us, to understand what Gauguin had sent to Vollard, because the early provenance was not very clear, I think, from now.

EG: And just to clarify for me, where did you find this information? Was it in the dossiers or did you find it from sources that hadn't been collected by past researchers?

FM: Both.

EG: Mm-hm.

FM: Of course, we used first our own file. Because for each work included in the catalogue raisonné, we have -- I repeat myself -- but we have at the Wildenstein Plattner Institute a dossier which composes an extensive archival material for writing the first data. Many of the Tahitian works are located in museums, so we have to of course write then to each museum and request the official records of the provenance, the exhibition's history, and bibliography. And also, the image of the back of the painting. Because we are sure that the back of a work with the inscriptions and labels are also important to support the provenance.

In addition, the Wildenstein Plattner Institute has almost -- in digital or on paper -- the most important exhibitions and publications we use, which composed a solid groundwork for writing the first data. And by processing the exhibitions, you can have the name of the lender and with the publications, the name of the collector. In fact, it's like an investigation. By accumulating data, this has given us provenance information for each work. So, after, we initiated to check all the mentions of dealers or owners in external resources.

For example, I will give you a small list of external resources. At the Musée d'Orsay, for example, for the Vollard archives, we have a lot of stock books, we have a lot of letters, at the Vollard archives. They have also Gauguin -- they call it like a *dossier d'oeuvre* -- they have Galerie Barbazanges archives, Monfreid archives, Segalen archives, Galerie Rosenberg and Etienne Bignou archives. At the Getty, for Knoedler, Arthur Tooth, Gabriel Frizeau. We checked, too, at the Bibliothèque centrale des Musées Nationaux, the Matsukata archives. At the Bibliothèque Kandinsky, the Galerie Charpentier archives. We used also the website ZADIK for the Thannhauser archives, the website Archives of American Art -- for Seligmann and more. We contacted also the museum -- I just speak about this -- and the Rosenberg archive, for example. The Durand-Ruel archives. The Wildenstein Gallery & Co. And really, really thanks so much to all these persons for their precious help.

EG: That is extraordinary. And I hear, as you are describing all of these research venues, that many of them are digital venues, in fact. And I wonder if you could talk a little bit about how digital art history and digital research made this catalogue raisonné possible. Would you have been able to do this work ten years ago to such a degree as you've done it now?

FM: No, (laughs) no. I think -- it was not possible. Because -- since early, I saw the difference between the time I prepared the catalogue of Maurice de Vlaminck and this Gauguin catalogue. Sharing resources and data archives make it more efficient and accurate.

EG: That's right.

FM: Oh, yes. While the research and analyzing work remain fundamental, the technical development related to digital are now facilitating the production. But also, we can speak about it later, the updating of the catalogue.

EG: That's right. Well, do tell me about that. When the catalogue raisonné for Gauguin is live, it's something that can be edited and changed if new information comes into being. How do you feel about that? Will you be updating this catalogue raisonné with more information as it becomes available digitally?

FM: Yes, of course. (laughs) A digital tool allowing the permanent update and offers the possibility of being completed over the years. It's a chance for us and for the researcher. And our database, CAT, is constantly evolving and will allow us to continuously improve and update the catalogue raisonné Gauguin. And I'm very proud to explain a little, but the reader will not only have access to the catalogue data. Because we will be able to make the link to some sales catalogues, some sales exhibitions, and publications. I think it will be an amazing catalogue raisonné, a digital catalogue raisonné, but the reader will discover it very soon.

EG: Well, Françoise Marnoni, you really are a pioneer in digital research and I think that all of the amazing work that you have done on this project certainly puts you in a position of being one of the most experienced researchers working today. So, I very much thank you for speaking with me. I wonder if you have anything else you'd like to tell us about the Gauguin catalogue raisonné before we finish?

FM: I think -- yes, it will be possible to continue to speak. For example, we don't speak about my particular emotional or revelatory moments.

EG: Oh, tell us, tell us about that. (laughs)

FM: As I explained just previously, the difficulty of the Tahitian period was the early provenance of the work. Because, you know, Gauguin was in Tahiti, after in Marquise, so he was very far from the Parisian life. He could not take care of the promotion and selling his work; he was completely cut off from his dealers. And between his two trips to Tahiti, Gauguin came back to Paris and handled his exhibition at the Galerie Durand-Ruel in 1893 and his auction at the Hôtel Drouot in 1895 before his departure. This exhibition and auction were not a financial success.

So, after 1895, the circle of Gauguin's dealers, as I previously said, was composed by Gaston Lévy, Georges Chaudet, Auguste Bauchy, Ambroise Vollard, and of course, Georges-Daniel de Monfreid, his friend. But for me, the most important discovery is we managed to identify as many paintings as possible in the hands of these dealers and this was our first revelatory moment. And the second moment was when we were able to identify the majority of the paintings sent by Gauguin to Ambroise Vollard in each shipment. It was supported, of course, by letters from Vollard archives and publications, like Loize and Druick. But we are very proud to have been able to recognize the artwork from these shipments. But you will see in detail it once it will be online. And we -- the reader will see data, but each provenance was checked and each provenance is supported by evidence. And I

think this is new, and the reader will have always an explanation.

EG: Well, you've set a very high standard for provenance research in years to come, and I thank you very much for all of the work you've done on this extraordinary digital publication. So, I think that should probably conclude our interview. And Françoise Marconi, thank you very much again for participating. We're very grateful for all of the research and new findings you've done for the catalogue raisonné.

FM: Well, it was a pleasure to work on it.

EG: Wonderful.

FM: Really, really.

EG: Thank you.

[BREAK IN AUDIO]

FM: I forgot to speak about -- because you asked me and I forgot to answer about the previous opinion of Douglas Cooper and Raymond Cogniat, yes?

EG: Oh, that's okay. That's okay. You're totally fine. It's totally fine. I mean, I think you've answered the question in the sense that you found new information that concretely supports the conclusions that you've made. It's very exciting. And you know, I frankly didn't realize that Rick only started in 2009. I thought he came on earlier than that. So, I'm glad that you clarified that.

FM: Yes, about Rick Bretell. Yes, he just began at this date, because after -- a long time after the death of Daniel Wildenstein, asked him to work on this catalogue. But it's not very old, no.

EG: Mm-hm.

JENNIFER GIMBLETT: I didn't know that you started on Renoir.

FM: Yes, three years. It was my job to -- right, it was amazing, because at this date, we receive all the archives from [Françoise]Daulte, dossier from Daulte, and I began to classify all the file.

JG: Wow.

FM: And after to classify, too, the archive of Vollard, from Renoir. And in 2003, I had a baby, so after when I came back, I just continued on Vlaminck.

[END OF AUDIO FILE]