Visions For The Viewer: The Influence Of Two Unique Easel Paintings On The Late Murals Of Pierre Puvis De Chavannes

Geoffrey Neil David Thomas
University of South Carolina

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VISIONS FOR THE VIEWER:
THE INFLUENCE OF TWO UNIQUE EASEL PAINTINGS ON
THE LATE MURALS OF PIERRE PUVIS DE CHAVANNES

by

Geoffrey Neil David Thomas

Bachelor of Science
Wofford College, 2004

Bachelor of Arts
Wofford College, 2006

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Arts in
Art History
College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Carolina
2018

Accepted by:

Andrew Graciano, Director of Thesis

Bradford R. Collins, Reader

Peter Chametzky, Reader

Cheryl L. Addy, Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School
DEDICATION

To Suzie and Neil Thomas, who generated my energy.

To Jim Garrick and Peter Schmunk, who provided the spark to start the fire.

To G.R. Davis and Karen Goodchild, who helped stoke it.

To Andrew Graciano and Brad Collins, who nurtured it to full blaze.

And to Gregory Thomas—another full, undying flame.

Finally, to Caitlin Thomas and Grey Capozzi, the one fire of my life bigger and brighter than the one burning here.
While certainly not lost to the history of art, Pierre Puvis de Chavannes has never enjoyed the status of the titans of the modern canon who openly expressed their indebtedness to him. Georges Seurat, Vincent van Gogh, Pablo Picasso, and so many other artists known to the general public the world over paid tribute to the artist once dubbed “The Painter of France” at a banquet held in his honor to coincide with a retrospective exhibition on the occasion of his seventieth birthday.

Interestingly enough, defenders of the old, academic guard, such as William-Adolphe Bouguereau, Alexandre Cabanel, and Jean-Léon Gérôme also held Puvis in high esteem, despite their pronounced opposition to the avant-garde. Thinkers on both sides of the political spectrum, from the socialist Gustave Geffroy to the nationalist Eugène-Melchior de Vogüé saw Puvis’s œuvre as symbolic of their definitions of Frenchness, strikingly different as they were.

I argue that Puvis’s broad appeal is largely due to the qualities of his canvases that critic Alphonse de Calonne described as “for the viewer.” This evaluation refers to the fact that his compositions are ambiguous enough for
those who consume them to project their own ideas onto their dreamlike realms, which would, understandably, prove satisfying. Such satisfaction is partly derived from a compositional device Puvis developed during a time when he was not working on the murals for which he was so famous. Instead, he was painting private easel works during a period of his career when public commissions were difficult to come by.

These works were marked by extreme isolation and despair due to their environments bearing down harshly on their human figures. The murals that followed inverted that composition, instead having the human figures encircle the space they inhabit. Two of those later murals by Puvis debuted in the early 1890s as part of the decorative cycle for an entrance to the restored Hôtel de Ville—a civic location meant to welcome all citizens of France. In that context, the murals’ being “for the viewer” is not only expected, but appropriate. These murals by Puvis are, in essence, imbued with significance by the countless viewers who see them, thereby genuinely establishing him “The Painter of France.”
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INTRODUCTION

A RANGE OF VISIONS FROM PUVIS’S MOST FAMED PUBLIC DISPLAY

When Pierre Puvis de Chavannes’s mural L’été (Figure I.1) was first unveiled in 1891, right-leaning critic Alphonse de Calonne, writing for the newspaper Le Soleil, pointedly wrote about how unimpressive he found the figures populating the work decorating one of the two entrance halls to the newly rebuilt Hôtel de Ville in Paris, opining that they did not

lift themselves from the background… [are] feeble and limp… pass as if in a dream, without vigor or movement… [Puvis] doesn’t compose. He scatters the figures. Never a mass, never a group, nothing but isolated personages… He places them on the canvas for the viewer, not for the action, not to create a subject to be interpreted, not to bring an idea to light. Everything is nebulous in thought and execution. In addition, his paintings are enigmatic and empty. If he uses allegories, which are the defining character of his compositions, he imagines them to be obscure, hidden, even shadowy.¹

Very clearly, Calonne’s lack of enthusiasm about Puvis’s public work is informed by an idea of what the conservative critic thinks art ought to accomplish. That goal was one Calonne envisioned along with many others who

¹ Alphonse de Calonne, “Le Salon du Champs de Mars,” Le Soleil, 19 May 1891, p. 2. All translations from the original French are my own unless otherwise indicated.
wrote and thought about art at the time, namely, that publicly displayed *objets d’art* should fully and capably encapsulate a discrete, digestible message that is edifying and educating to their viewers. That is, Calonne believed that public art should be plainly didactic; however, the critic did not see that quality in Puvis’s depiction of a summertime idyll at the Hôtel de Ville.

That Calonne was hostile toward *L’été* is not surprising. Indeed, just three days later, Gustave Geffroy, another critic of the era, whose socio-political ideology was much farther to the left than Calonne’s, implored his readers to 

listen well: The City Hall! This is not a banal corner of wall in an official building, not any old place where nobody ever goes that must be covered with colored subjects. This is everyone’s home, the summary of Paris, an architectural assembly of staircases and rooms that the population moves through, a book open to all whose pages must tell of yesterday and today, the history of the beings and things of our time and the times that preceded us.²

Compared to those of Calonne, Geffroy’s words ring a positively populist bell. For the latter, writing about *L’été* in *La Justice*, public art not only is, but *should* be for everyone, and that opinion goes far beyond the obvious situation of such art in the public realm. Indeed, if art is public, then it accepts responsibility for the logical reality that it will elicit a countless array of reactions to its presentation. Some of these reactions may, indeed, be the learning of civic

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lessons, but they are not necessarily so. Art viewed in the context of a place that represents and invites the grand sum of the experiences “of the beings and things of our time and the times that preceded us” is, by definition, going to provoke myriad individualized reactions, perhaps as many as the number of individuals viewing it.³

Proceeding from this reality, then, is the consequence that is anathema to his counterpart who reviewed Puvis’s mural for Le Soleil. If public art is to be viewed and responded to by the sum “of the beings and things of our time and the times that preceded us,” as Geffroy states, then that enormous response, for Calonne, will be indeterminate, unfocused chaos unless the artist stamps his work with a clearly prescribed moral. Because Calonne alleges that Puvis “scatters the figures” in a mural that is “never a group, nothing but isolated personages… nebulous in thought and execution,” any lessons he hopes to teach his viewers are pre-destined “to be obscure, hidden, even shadowy.” For Calonne, Puvis miscarries his duty because the artist “places [his scenes] on the canvas for the viewer, not for the action, not to create a subject to be interpreted, not to bring an idea to light.”⁴

³ Ibid.
⁴ Calonne, 2. My emphasis.
Calonne’s notion of the function of public art is lost in Puvis’s offering exactly because of its encouragement of countless reactions—its ambiguity. In the critic’s estimation, such responses are not arrived at by the artist’s direction of viewers’ minds to a philosophical point bigger than the art object itself. Rather, they are happened upon by the viewers themselves and are due to personal biases and perspectives held by any individual viewer upon his or her arrival before the canvas. That any individual viewer may project upon the artwork his or her microcosmic ideas and experiences means that all viewers contribute to the meaning of the artwork and its interpretation—and that that meaning is not fixed. Chaos erupts from this situation, and, in the end, the artwork accomplishes very little that effects the betterment of the population precisely because its meaning is determined by that population.

Geffroy’s view of the effect of L’été is, of course, quite different from that of Calonne. The critic’s assertion that the Hôtel de Ville “is everyone’s home” might also be applied to Puvis’s canvas that decorates one of the walls of the Salon du Zodiaque. Just as the city hall is a place meant to serve everyone, so too is the space within a painting that was conceived as a decorative piece related to the real-world space it represents. The sumptuous, water-laden greenspace of L’été is perhaps a representation of the shared experiences that galvanize people

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5 Geffroy, 2.
into a sense of community. If so, this sense is most powerful due to its ability to encourage each viewer to imbue it with his or her own perspective as to the idea of what being part of their community means, and the canvas’s compositional and narrative ambiguity is the ideal playground for such building of meaning.⁶ Therein lies the power of the summerscape that Geffroy, the leftist, embraced and Calonne, the conservative, found troubling; through its insistence that viewers’ imaginations fill in the blanks Puvis places before them, the painting promotes community activity, and all the individual perspectives it promotes, that can be both deeply satisfying and terrifying at once.

Puvis’s inspiration of many divergent reactions to his work at the Hôtel de Ville did not happen in a vacuum. His work for years leading up to that commission, arguably his most important and high-profile, had been garnering admirers of seemingly countless points of view. Fin de siècle France, with its state-sponsored embrace of science and reason by the Third Republic, its still-smarting wounds in the aftermath of ignominious defeat in the Franco-Prussian War, its ever-evolving conception of visual culture and the debates and factions that followed from such change, and its furious divisions over the meaning of

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⁶ Background pertinent to the life and career of Geffroy, including the critic’s responses to the work of Puvis de Chavannes, is abundant in the excellent doctoral thesis by JoAnne Paradise. See Paradise, *Gustave Geffroy and the Criticism of Painting* (PhD diss., Stanford University, 1982), later published with the same title (New York: Garland, 1985).
“Frenchness,” most notably illustrated during the Dreyfus affair, longed for symbols around which multitudes could rally and celebrate the nation, no matter how much work it had to do to reach its best manifestation of itself.

The crystallization of all of these competing interests, from anarchism to socialism to Catholic royalism and everything in between around the oeuvre of Puvis de Chavannes seems staggering at first consideration, but it is less difficult to understand when we actually take time to look at what Puvis produced and how viewers responded to it. Puvis operated in indistinction, as Calonne lamented and Geffroy applauded. He suggested ideas and forms but did not fully describe them, and this is, ultimately, what makes his work so engaging. On viewing it, we must truly look at it—delve into it. In doing so, a part of us becomes the work, so, naturally, a part of what we all bring to our viewing becomes part of the work. Therein lies the explanation, in cursory fashion, on which I will dwell more fully in the present thesis.

I will explore a compositional aspect, only very briefly and recently touched upon in the scholarly record, of how, in my view, the oeuvre of Pierre Puvis de Chavannes evolved into an artistic legacy that had the ability to engender such highly dissonant reactions, such as those of Calonne and Geffroy, by the time it reached its apex. I argue that the apogee coincides with Puvis’ commission to decorate an entrance to the restored Parisian Hôtel de Ville, an
honor surely reserved for an artist who was widely respected and admired by his contemporaries. This exploration is not intended as a comprehensive resolution of the numerous issues that must be considered when explaining the artist’s career and output writ large. Instead, my work will focus on the trajectory within Puvis’s story that ultimately makes his art “for the viewer,” which Calonne wrote in order to deride it as chaotic, while also confirming the unifying expectations expressed by Geffroy, who celebrated it as “a book open to all whose pages tell of yesterday and today.”

On the occasion of Puvis’s seventieth birthday, the Galerie Durand-Ruel, long Puvis’s seller, held a retrospective of his work. Part of the celebration that arose from this set of circumstances was a banquet about a month after his actual birthday in the painter’s honor, spearheaded by Auguste Rodin himself, at the Parisian Hôtel Continental. The Symbolist journal La Plume issued a special edition fully dedicated to Puvis (front page is Figure I.2), and many Symbolist writers collaborated on a book of poetry, especially written for the painter, that they presented him at the banquet.

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7 Geffroy, 2 and Calonne, 2.
Not to be outdone, the vehemently anti-Symbolist editor of the conservative literary journal *Revue des Deux Mondes*, Ferdinand Brunetière, asked Rodin to allow him to deliver the keynote address at the banquet. As would be expected, Brunetière offered thoughts about the artist quite contrary to those included amid the special Puvis edition of the Symbolists’ *La Plume*. The traditionalist said in his speech that Puvis had “the power to evoke visions that purify the eyes of men” and that the artist “returned art to the dignity of her social mission.” To be sure, an artist who was celebrated on the cover of a Symbolist journal was, on the very same day that journal was published, promoted as a champion of the long-established didactic mission of art—the very conception of art to which the Symbolists tirelessly strived to oppose!

After Brunetière’s keynote address, *avant-garde* writer and avowed Symbolist Catulle Mendès stood up and read an ode to the banquet-goers, proclaiming

Master! We celebrate your glory and ours.  
Because, fervent poets who celebrate you here,  
We have, this day our victory also;  
The triumph of God honors the apostle,  
And all come, with palms in hand,  
Those from the past, those from today, those from tomorrow,  
Hugo, Gautier, from their apotheoses on high,  
*And dear Baudelaire with his great sorrowful heart,*  
And De Lisle and Banville, shining from happy skies,

---

And we whose brows are overburdened with sullen years,
Rise still to love or pray,
And Youth mixes its rosy laurels with this ancient tribute.¹⁰

Mendès’s words were, obviously, a direct refutation of Brunetière’s. He was not about to let one of the Symbolists’ biggest detractors claim Puvis for his own. Instead, he insists that Puvis follows in the tradition of such revered titans of modernist literature as Victor Hugo and Charles Baudelaire. Another Symbolist, Gustave Kahn, claimed that “Puvis was the great painter who divided us the least” in referring to the vociferous disagreements that existed among creative individuals who viewed the purpose of the arts, be they literary, visual, or musical as radically different.¹¹

While my work may not necessarily focus on Puvis’s dividing brutally competing groups of individuals the least, I explore the idea that his paintings had broad appeal for many competing interests. I believe that one of Puvis’s last, and perhaps most prominent, public commissions, which I will address in the first chapter, incorporates many of the painter’s compositional strategies for achieving this broad acclaim. Additionally, I believe Puvis found his path to such composition by producing paintings that not only featured quite contrary

¹⁰ Catulle Mendès, poem from 15 January 1895 special edition, no. 138, of La Plume.
¹¹ Gustave Kahn, “Et le Cher Baudelaire,” from Album des Poètes, the book of poetry presented to Puvis at the 1895 banquet by the Symbolists, who counted Kahn, Mendès, Stéphane Mallarmé, Paul Verlaine, Emile Verharen, Paul Fort, Alfred Jarry, Camille Mauclair, Joachim Gasquet, and many other writers among their numbers.
compositions to the type that united but also deviated from Puvis’ s well-established preference to produce art intended for mass public consumption. In some sense, it is fitting that a painter who enjoyed such sweeping admiration from so many varied people found his way to that admiration, in part, by embracing artistic elements and styles that were atypical for him. Puvis himself was, indeed, a man of broad taste that informed his similarly broad reach to others who offered nearly unqualified approbation.
Figure I.1. Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, L’été, 1891, oil on canvas, affixed to wall, 5.9 m x 9.1 m, Salon du Zodiaque, Hôtel de Ville, Paris, France
Figure I.2. Cover of *La Plume: Littéraire, Artistique et Sociale*, no. 138, 15 January 1895
CHAPTER ONE

CONTEMPORARY VISIONS OF TWO ATYPICAL PUVIS PAINTINGS

To begin my examination of a major development that informed the mature style of Puvis, attention must be directed to a period of Puvis’ life that took place a decade prior to his earning the Hôtel de Ville commission in 1889, when he had finished a different major decorative project in another high-profile Parisian location. After the highly positive public reception of his Sainte Geneviève mural cycle for Paris’ Panthéon in 1878, Puvis found himself in a compromised position. Because of an economic downturn, the artist discovered a scant market for private sales to bourgeois Parisian buyers who had once been well-heeled. At the same time, public commissions, on which Puvis had spent the bulk of his time for many years leading up to and through the Panthéon project, were almost exclusively geared toward church decoration, in which Puvis had no interest. The painter fell into a state of relatively significant personal doubt and depression in the middle months of 1879 about his upcoming prospects as an artist, and, by extension, his ability to count on financial security. Add to this frustrating situation the idea that Puvis felt old age creeping ever closer, as his
fifty-fifth birthday approached on 14 December 1879, and the painter was, for lack of a better description, not his typical self during this period.12

Puvis escaped Paris for the Norman town of Honfleur in mid-1879. It was in this locale, which is directly across the mouth of the Seine from Le Havre, that the artist is thought to have conceived one of the most unusual paintings in his entire oeuvre: Le pauvre pêcheur (Figure 1.1), an oil-on-canvas of modest dimensions, by Puvis’s standards, at just more than one-and-a-half meters tall by slightly under two meters wide. Exhibited at the Salon of 1881, the painting was certainly recognized by the artist as a departure from his typical work. As a matter of fact, on the eve of the exhibition, Puvis was desperate to have Le pauvre pêcheur withdrawn, writing to his brother Édouard’s wife, née Anne-Marie Valentine Meaudre, then known as Valentine Puvis de Chavannes,

I don’t merit [inclusion] since I would have been the first to condemn myself. Nothing can give an idea of how this kind of painting jars in the ensemble of the others, which doesn’t at all modify the feeling it can contain, some boob’s first sentiment will certainly be repulsion and there’s no need to put it to the test.13

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In the above-quoted letter to Valentine, Puvis seems certain that *Le pauvre pêcheur* will elicit different reactions from viewers than those to which they are accustomed from his public mural works, and this makes him uneasy. Perhaps the anxiety was rooted in Puvis’s worries about his artistic and financial future. As stated, these troubles were in full flower for Puvis during the Honfleur sojourn when he most likely conceived of the painting, but there seems to be something more to his degree of doubt when more of the canvas’s history is considered. When Jules Castagnary, *Directeur des Beaux-Arts*, selected the painting as Puvis’s contribution to the French national collection for display at the Musée du Luxembourg in late 1887, the painter wrote Castagnary on 26 November 1887, saying, “while far from disavowing *Le pauvre pêcheur*, which can be curious and interesting in a private gallery, I didn’t judge it a museum painting.”

The canvas had been purchased by painter and collector Émile Boivin from the Galerie Durand-Ruel, which represented Puvis at the time, shortly before its appropriation by the government for inclusion in the national collection. Minister of Education, Religion, and the Fine Arts Eugène Spüller repeatedly expressed his desire to acquire a different Puvis painting for the

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14 This letter first appeared in print in a collection of Salon-related documents accumulated by Castagnary entitled *Salons, 1857-1879*, published in 1892 by Charpentier (Paris).
Luxembourg, with the artist himself suggesting what he often called his favorite painting: his reduced version, completed at some point between 1867 and 1870, of the 1867 grand mural *Le Sommeil* (Figure 1.2), from his decorative cycle at the Lille Musée des Beaux-Arts. However, Castagnary threatened resignation if *Le pauvre pêcheur* ended up not being the state’s choice. Puvis expressed his concerns over the entire combination of transactions in a 4 December 1887 letter to Valentine in which he exclaimed, “and there I was between the devil and the deep blue sea with one buyer less… the affair having transpired without any consultation with me.”

Such a scenario surrounding the French state’s acquisition of *Le pauvre pêcheur* begs the question of exactly why Puvis was so incredibly worried about viewers’ thoughts about this one canvas. He wanted to withdraw it from the 1881 Salon, to no avail, after it had already been accepted, and he strongly opposed its serving as the official national example of his artwork at the Luxembourg, going so far as to suggest another work for the honor and intimating that he had irrevocably offended a potential buyer by allowing the state to have it. Émile Boivin was most certainly not turned off to Puvis’s work after the state acquired *Le pauvre pêcheur*, thereby nullifying his purchase from

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Durand-Ruel. He ended up purchasing Puvis’s larger version of *Jeunes filles au bord de la mer* (Figure 1.3) from the Galerie Durand-Ruel in November 1887, no doubt as a replacement selection. It seems unlikely that Boivin would have taken such action if he were as offended by the Luxembourg acquisition, as Puvis had intimated in his letter to Valentine.

Moreover, Puvis began work on a smaller, narrower version of *Le pauvre pêcheur* (Figure 1.4) around the time the state placed the 1881 version in the national collection. This somewhat altered version, now in Tokyo, was sold in 1899, the year after Puvis’s death, by Durand-Ruel, who first hung it in his gallery in 1892 or 1893, to Émile Boivin. Puvis’s misgivings about the painting were surely unfounded, as it ended up being one of his most celebrated works. Aimée Brown Price goes so far as to assert that *Le pauvre pêcheur* was the seminal work of Puvis’s *oeuvre* that cemented his undeniably significant role in the development of modernist art.\(^{16}\) In response to seeing the original work at the 1881 Salon, Maurice Denis called the painting “the definition of neo-traditionism” and reminded his readers to “remember that a painting—before

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\(^{16}\) Price is mentioned here to underscore both Puvis’s importance in the trajectory of modern art and her importance in establishing that argument. Her works, including her 1994 exhibition catalogue for the Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh and her 2010 two-volume monograph were indispensable in the preparation of this study.
being a warhorse, a nude woman, or some anecdote—is essentially a planar surface covered with colors, organized in a certain order.”

Denis, writing under the pseudonym of Pierre Louis in the article “Notes d’Art: Définition du Néo-Traditionnisme” in the 23 and 30 August 1890 edition of Art et Critique, published nine years after the first exhibition of Le pauvre pêcheur, applies his pointed term “neo-traditionism” to the painting because it takes a common art-historical motif, the fisherman in the waterscape, and reduces it to the ambiguous geometries so often seen in Puvis’s public murals. Such reduction of form allows for the myriad of interpretations viewers can glean from the painting, in accordance with what they bring to their viewing in the first place. The lack of clear narrative, relationships, and even motion on the canvas likens it to the ever-popular style of Japanese prints that took the Parisian art community by storm when the Asian nation opened itself up to foreign trade only a few decades prior after a long period of isolation. Denis rightly recognized that Puvis’s public mural works, even if unwittingly, contain these japonizing qualities, and that characteristic is at least partially responsible for their widespread appeal.

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None other than Georges Seurat painted what he dubbed *Paysage avec “Le pauvre pêcheur” de Puvis de Chavannes* (Figure 1.5), which once belonged to illustrious anarchist critic Félix Fénéon, who himself was closely associated with Seurat and his mostly anarchist Neo-Impressionist followers. Seurat marked the bottom of this painting with the term “Puvisse,” meaning, quite literally, “the most Puvis,” a clear indication that he is not simply including a famous painting in one of his works; indeed, he deeply admires the work. Fénéon once wrote that Seurat was the French art world’s best example of a “Puvis modernisant,” meaning that he not only saw the aesthetic style of the elder Puvis in the work of the much younger Seurat but also recognized that Puvis was a direct forbear to the *avant-garde* movement of which Seurat was an outspoken part, even if the older artist did not self-identify as such.¹⁹

Even in the years following Puvis’s death, the impact of *Le pauvre pêcheur* is very evident in some of the works of Pablo Picasso’s Blue Period, as Aimée

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¹⁸ Two volumes consulted during the preparation of this essay delve deeply and piercingly into the anarchist leanings of the neo-impressionists: John G. Hutton, *Neo-Impressionism and the Search for Solid Ground: Art, Science, and Anarchism in Fin-de-Siècle France*, Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1994 and Robyn Roslak, *Neo-Impressionism and Anarchism in Fin-de-Siècle France: Painting, Politics, and Landscape*, Burlington: Ashgate, 2007. While the Seurat painting that is an homage to Puvis is not an example of neo-impressionism proper, these volumes offer numerous thoughts regarding the relationship between Puvis and the neo-impressionists and the latter’s admiration for the former in addition to the main thrusts of their authors’ arguments, namely, the fierce anarchist political leanings of many of the neo-impressionists. The appeal of Puvis’s *oeuvre* to those of anarchist persuasions, as well as those of other diverse political leanings across the socio-philosophical spectrum, will be explored later in this essay.

Brown Price so expertly elucidates. Works like 1903’s *The Tragedy* (Figure 1.6) and the now-lost *The Fisherman’s Goodbye* take clear inspiration from the earlier Puvis work of a mightily struggling fisherman, his similarly harrowed companions, who are probably his family but demonstrate ambiguous associations, and the stark environment they inhabit. To my eyes, *Le pauvre pêcheur* also informs plenty of other works from this segment of Picasso’s oeuvre, including *The Old Guitarist* (Figure 1.7) and *La soupe* (Figure 1.8). Obviously, melancholy, stillness, resignation, stoicism, and passive acceptance of one’s difficult lot in life are major themes in these works. Furthermore, they share with Puvis’s similar works a striking ambiguity of narrative and of relationships among their figures.

Interestingly, these works were produced during a period in Picasso’s life history when he was suffering from deep episodes of depression and self-doubt, much like Puvis experienced when he fled Paris for Honfleur after the Sainte Geneviève cycle was completed and few palatable commissions were available. That dearth of work for Puvis led to the production of the strikingly anti-Puvis-esque *Le pauvre pêcheur*, about which the artist admitted he “borrowed this vision of misery only from myself” and that he had “a horror of illustrating novels in

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20 These connections between the oeuvres Puvis and Picasso are further explored in A.B. Price, 1994, pp. 48-51, and in the conclusion to A.B. Price, Volume I, 2010.
These descriptions of the painting chosen to represent his artistic career by the French state at the Musée du Luxembourg, and the creation of that painting itself, demonstrate that Puvis had at least some degree of understanding of what Charles Baudelaire termed *le mal du siècle* as he described the work of Eugène Delacroix in his review of the Salon of 1846.²²

*Le pauvre pêcheur* captures the narrow focus of the regular person’s life as she or he struggles with the melancholia of modernity, a sense of being that is painfully inward, reflective, and private, even alienated, and that runs quite contrary to the calm of Puvis’s typical arcadies. The fisherman and his cohorts, the flower-picking girl and oddly posed, possibly dead, infant, yearn for an âge d’or where they can escape their isolation. They trawl, pluck, and dream against the malaise that is integral to their place in human history. They occupy the same space but are not at all connected to each other, much like the residents of the bustling, alienating, modern city of Paris felt as they went about their mundane lives.

The photographer Félix Nadar said, in recounting critic Alfred Grévin’s comments about the display of *Le pauvre pêcheur* at the 1881 Salon, “[the

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fisherman] is there, he fishes in the water, the water which isn’t water, what do you expect him to catch?” Puvis would likely counter that, while his angler may not catch any fish, just as the young female may not pick any robust flowers and the grotesque-looking infant may not breathe, he will hook that modern combination of profound isolation and grief that the artist labeled “misérabilisme.” This term is what Puvis used in his letters to encapsulate his periods of depressive moods surrounding the completion of his work at the Panthéon, his malaise in response to the stagnant Parisian art market he found in that project’s wake, his unenthusiastic yet seemingly necessary pilgrimage to Honfleur to combat that malaise, and the out-of-character artistic output the trip inspired.

The various responses to Le pauvre pêcheur, from Castagnary’s to Seurat’s, Denis’s to Boivin’s, Grévin’s to, indeed, Puvis’s, brings us back to the question of why Puvis would explore a type of artistic output that was such a stark departure from that which had gained him extraordinary renown to that point in his career. To my mind, it is important to remember that Le pauvre pêcheur was not the only out-of-character canvas Puvis produced in the time period between

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24 “Misérabilisme” is, again, the term Puvis used to describe his frame of mind in the letters he wrote to friends and family during his period of mental anguish. Refer to n. 16.
the Sainte Geneviève cycle and his next major public commission, the decorative cycle for the main staircase landing at the Musée des Beaux-Arts in his native Lyons. Another work that has already been mentioned in this essay qualifies: the 1879 Jeunes filles au bord de la mer, the work Émile Boivin purchased from the Galerie Durand-Ruel as a replacement when the state appropriated Le pauvre pêcheur.

Jeunes filles au bord de la mer (henceforth referred to as Jeunes filles) is a standalone canvas not painted with the intention of decorating any public wall space, and it is considerably smaller than the canvases Puvis conceptualized as murals, despite its scale of over two meters high by just over one-and-a-half meters wide. To be sure, during the period between the decoration of the Panthéon and the Lyons Musée des Beaux-Arts, Puvis was experimenting, but with what, exactly? And why?

Frankly put, Jeunes filles is a strange painting. It evokes strange feelings in its viewers. These feelings are perhaps even stranger than those evoked by Le pauvre pêcheur, which, at the very least, has a grouping of people who we can imagine do, at some moments not seen on the canvas, interact. The three young,

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25 These three works, Le bois sacré cher aux Arts et aux Muses, La vision antique, and L’inspiration chrétienne, have been extensively written about in A.B. Price, exhibition catalogue, 2004; A.B. Price, 2010; J.L. Shaw, 2002, chapters 2-3; M. Werth, 2002, chapter 1. They, however, are not crucial to this chapter and are only mentioned in passing here.
partially clothed, women in *Jeunes filles* occupy the same canvas but do not seem truly to occupy the same plane of existence. They are each posed quite differently. The middle figure stands with her back to us, the left figure slinks and curls uncomfortably into the rocky outcropping on which she rests, and the right figure is recumbent in an uncomfortable pose, though we cannot be sure because most of her body is cropped by the edge of the canvas. Moreover, all three women’s bodies are delineated in such a way that their various parts do not harmoniously relate to or complement one another. Instead, adjacent bodily sections seem to be simply perfunctorily adhering to each other. The women depicted are not so much complete women as they are amalgamations of individual human components, and these arrangements of human parts most certainly do not relate to each other as a cohesive trio of people.26

Considered in the context of the long history of academic painting, this arrangement of parts that apparently derive from different sources further subverts long-held expectations for the viewing of art. To be sure, countless painters did what Puvis seems to do with the women in *Jeunes filles*: they created composite figures by arranging parts from disparate sources to make the individuals to populate their canvases. In the longstanding tradition of art-

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26 This description derives in part from my own visual analysis of *Jeunes filles* and in part from that in J.L. Shaw, 2002, pp. 14-32.
making, however, such composite figures were developed by artists not simply to imitate Nature. Instead, they were conceived of as emulations that improved upon what Nature provided. In a sense, figures in this vein were further idealizations of already ideal components. Puvis, however, does not conceive of his figures in *Jeunes filles* in this manner. The parts of each individual figure fit together in disjunct, inconsistent ways, and that mismatch adds to the discordance among the overall figures.

Another point to be made about how *Jeunes filles* fits poorly into the main thrust of artistic tradition is the fact that there is absolutely no narrative at all to be found in the painting. This is clear when the picture is compared to one also exhibited at the Salon of 1879, *La Naissance de Vénus* (Figure 1.9) by the academician *par excellence* William-Adolphe Bouguereau. Both canvases feature a grouping of nude or seminude figures in a seaside setting, but that is where the similarities end. Bouguereau’s canvas is painstakingly composed so that the figures flow seamlessly from one to the next, and the painter has done all that he can to conceal his facture, as his brushstrokes are smoothed over and the scene is essentially as photographic as it can possibly be for a mythological image and, because of that circumstance, cannot, in fact, be represented via a photograph. There is little occurring in Bouguereau’s scene that could rightfully be called narrative because the frolicking figures are almost solely on display for viewers’
gratification, but the numerous figures who fill the canvas, undoubtedly emulative composites of the most beautiful parts that Bouguereau could conceive, certainly interact easily with one another in the painted realm they occupy.

*Jeunes filles*, when viewed through the lens of comparison to the contemporary Bouguereau work, feels even more suspended in a dimension where time and space have no meaning, where the three figures are not even aware of each other, and where the full scene is genuinely devoid of activity. Nineteenth-century caricaturist Stop hilariously mocks this aspect of Puvis’s painting on a page of the 31 May 1879 edition of *Journal Amusant* (Figure 1.10). In trying to make sense of what is happening in Puvis’s painting, Stop suggests that the standing figure is using her hair to fight off an attack of “unspeakable aggression” by one of the canvas’s seagulls, barely made visible by Puvis, enlarged in the caricature to menacing proportions. The right figure is still recumbent and cut off at the edge of the image, as in the original painting, showing only her head and torso from a rear angle, and the left figure is drawn to follow suit, only in opposite. The left part of her body, meaning the head and torso, are cut off by the edge of the drawing, leaving her as nothing but a disembodied right arm stretched atop a mound of drapery and legs. The rocky outcropping that appears in the Puvis painting to act as a shield to separate the
viewer, and the painted figures, from the distant sea, is further exaggerated in
the Stop caricature as well, undoubtedly to heighten the atmosphere of patently
obvious “doom.”

While humorous, Stop’s image touches on something important about
*Jeunes filles*. The caricaturist makes it abundantly clear that everything in the
original Puvis work is nothing but an arrangement of modular forms. A piece
may be removed, added, or altered, and the sense inspired by the work would
not change much; it remains a mute, bizarre arrangement of poorly composed
bodily forms and abruptly intervening landscape elements, themselves not
rendered with any significant detail.

Puvis did not finish his figures or their setting as an academic painter like
Bouguereau would because he did not want to provide his viewers with
everything they need to digest the image. In making the figures odd
mishmashes of disjointed components and tacking on elements of the setting
they populate almost as if they were afterthoughts, Puvis encourages his viewers
to complete the scene in their imaginations. Some viewers, like Stop, would
undoubtedly end up poking fun at this approach, and that, surely, was
something to which Puvis was not averse. For him, his viewers’ completing the
puzzles he laid down on canvas was an issue of paramount importance, no
matter how they chose to carry out that completion.
Georges Lafenestre took what he saw in *Jeunes filles*, and the rest of the 1879 Salon, much more seriously. In his article “L’art au Salon de 1879” in the 15 June 1879 edition of *Le Correspondant*, Lafenestre, a member of the state arts administration, wrote of how he saw in Puvis’s work an opportunity to restore high art in the visual cultural production of France by re-discovering a commitment to basic geometries in draftsmanship and an insistence on dialogue with the viewer. Such a dynamic, according to Lafenestre, had been under siege from the overly prettified yet insubstantial glossiness of academicians like Bouguereau, Alexandre Cabanel, and Jean-Léon Gérôme, whose works amounted, in the opinions of many, to not much more than thinly veiled erotica.

Viewers did not need perfectly drawn figures to commune profoundly with works of art. Indeed, the gaps and questions raised by Puvis’s drawings were what made them stimulate viewers, who were informed enough not to need to be shown every detail by a painfully thorough compositional structure à la Raphael. That sort of explicit visual description is what Bouguereau and his ilk offered up, and it did not offer much that genuinely engaged viewers. Puvis’s method of drawing and composing opened a path to individual interaction with his paintings, and that led to far weightier experiences with art objects. He did not overwhelm their senses with perfectly delineated boundaries and intense

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patches of color. He encouraged them to feel things in the way the *Jeunes filles* were feeling things in their world. Symbolist poet Théodore Banville said it well when, in response to *Jeunes filles*, he claimed that

> there are moments when, disgusted with…the enormous crazy noises, with theories of the picturesque and of the importance continually claimed for itself by the riffraff in turbulent circumstances, [we] would like to take refuge in something naked, something infinite, in a nothing-at-all that at least is calm and silent…before the immobile waves, where nothing will ever stir, under an unchangeable sky, in an atmosphere without movement or life…where neither the flight of white birds nor the gaze of human eyes will glide over [us]. Ah! I understand.\(^{28}\)

In the Symbolist poetic strain of seeing the world, Banville looked upon *Jeunes filles* and found an opportunity to feel the corporeal fullness of a charged yet tranquil, still yet emotional moment of human existence. In the ambiguous figural composition and nondescript landscape of the painting, he begins to feel something like the noble simplicity Winckelmann felt when he described looking at Classical works of art, despite engaging with a work of a strikingly different style. He implies that the Puvis work encourages something of a body scan and an awareness that is lost in much of what was being produced in contemporaneity. Did he, though, uncover this opportunity all on his own?

That is a question to which my concluding chapter shall posit an answer.

\(^{28}\) Théodore Banville, “Salon de 1879--IV,” *Le National de 1869*, 21 May 1879.
Figure 1.1. Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *Le pauvre pêcheur*, 1881, oil on canvas, 155.5 cm x 192.5 cm, Musée d’Orsay, Paris, France
Figure 1.2. Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *Le Sommeil* (reduced version from original mural at Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lille), 1867-1870 (original mural 1867), oil on canvas, 66.4 cm x 106 cm (original mural 380 cm x 600 cm), Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York, United States
Figure 1.3. Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *Jeunes filles au bord de la mer* (larger version), 1879, oil on canvas, 205 cm x 156 cm, Musée d’Orsay, Paris, France
Figure 1.4. Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *Le pauvre pêcheur*, 1887-1892, oil on canvas, 105.8 cm x 68.6 cm, Matsukata Collection, National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo, Japan
Figure 1.5. Georges Seurat, *Paysage avec “Le pauvre pêcheur” de Puvis de Chavannes*, ca. 1881, oil on parquet panel, 17.5 cm x 26.5 cm, Musée d’Orsay, Paris, France
Figure 1.6. Pablo Picasso, *The Tragedy*, 1903, oil on wood, 105.3 cm x 69 cm, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., United States
Figure 1.7. Pablo Picasso, *The Old Guitarist*, 1903-1904, oil on panel, 122.9 cm x 82.6 cm, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, Illinois, United States
Figure 1.8. Pablo Picasso, *La soupe*, 1902-1903, oil on canvas, 38.5 cm x 46 cm, Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto, Ontario, Canada
Figure 1.9. William-Adolphe Bouguereau, *La naissance de Vênus*, 1879, oil on canvas, 300 cm x 218 cm, Musée d’Orsay, Paris, France
Figure 1.10. Stop, caricature of *Jeunes filles au bord de la mer*, “Attaquée par deux mouettes, l’une d’elles se défend avec ses cheveux contre cette inqualifiable agression.” *Journal Amusant*, 31 May 1879, 5
CHAPTER TWO

THE TRAJECTORY OF SCHOLARLY RESPONSE TO PUVIS’S VISIONS

From an art-historical perspective now, during the early twenty-first century, scholars would be hard-pressed indeed to find secondary ruminations about the career and oeuvre of Pierre Puvis de Chavannes that are anything but laudatory. The insistence of the painter’s influence on the visual culture of France that portended the explosion of avant-garde art around him and immediately following his death is fully, and quite convincingly, argued. My own research has, of course, drawn heavily upon the work of Aimée Brown Price, mentioned earlier as perhaps the foremost expert on Puvis in the anglophone academy, but the significance of the contributions of Jennifer L. Shaw, Margaret Werth, John G. Hutton, Robyn Roslak, and Joseph J. Rishel cannot be understated within anglophone art-historical discourse on the painter.29

Before I critically examine those recent sources of secondary scholarship, however, I feel it is important to track the course of the academy’s treatment of Puvis before his prominent placement as a forbear of the *avant-garde* proper. Of course, the secondary scholarly record pertinent to Puvis arose early in his career in France. The earliest mention of the artist in such a text appeared in the 1860 volume *La Peinture decorative et grand art*, written by Charles Ernest Beule.\(^\text{30}\)

While Beule was by no means focused on Puvis himself, he cited the mural works of Puvis as examples of paintings he classified as *décorations*, as opposed to *tableaux*. The former category was less grave in nature than the latter, according to Beule, and it generally was thought of a type of painting that was conceived of to strike pleasant thoughts in its viewers as they looked upon it. Essentially, *décoration* served a function similar to wallpaper, aesthetically pleasing but with little depth, while a work categorized a *tableau* was always the highest of high art, complete with narrative and moralizing purpose. Discrete stories told on single canvases, be they history paintings, landscapes, genres, or still-lifes, that were intended for display at exhibition was generally bestowed a status far more important to the edifying, didactic mission of art than any *décoration* could ever hope to achieve. For this reason, in Beule’s estimation, while Puvis was quite an exemplary *artiste décoratif*, he was not a peer of the great *tableau* painters of the

French record, from Poussin to Watteau to David to Ingres to Delacroix and beyond.  

Writing a few years later, Ernest Alfred Chesneau was kinder to the work of Puvis. In a book written to survey the great French painters of the nineteenth century, Chesneau includes Puvis’s name as “un nouveau maître” in the visual arts who held the potential to rise one day to the ranks of those artists he included in the title of his work: David, Gros, Géricault, Decamps, Flandrin, and Delacroix. Chesneau was largely responding to Puvis’s pendant mural works *Concordia* (Figure 2.1) and *Bellum* (Figure 2.2) at the Musée de Picardie in Amiens, one of the artist’s earliest large-scale public commissions, which was also exhibited at the 1861 Salon. Chesneau rightly, in my opinion, characterizes these visions of times of peace and war not only as successful allegorical works typifying their titular concepts but also, and more germane to the ultimate direction of Puvis’s career, as capable wall adornments that allow viewers to become lost in their pairing of ambiguous and rich detail. A reader today can fairly easily see in these murals why Chesneau saw grand potential in their artist to grow into one of France’s greatest painters of his century.

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31 Chapter 2 of Price, 2010, vol. I, also delves into this early perception of Puvis, even citing the work of Beule.

Charles Blanc, the famed nineteenth-century art critic and color theorist, had plenty to say about Puvis as well. In 1867, he made sure to reference the artist in *Grammaire des arts du dessin*, a text that unsurprisingly, given Blanc’s gigantic status as a theoretician of the day, was not so much about specific artists as what makes art successful. Without delving too deeply into Blanc’s theories, which are not the purview of this study, successful art is designed, that is, conceived of in a thoughtful manner. For the writer, Puvis’s art fit the bill. By the time of Blanc’s volume, Puvis had completed his work in Amiens, incorporating *Le Travail* (Figure 2.3), *Le Repos* (Figure 2.4), *Le Moissonneur* (Figure 2.5), *L’Industrie* (Figure 2.6), *Le Désespoir* (Figure 2.7), and *Le Triomphe* (Figure 2.8) to his previously commissioned murals, *Concordia* and *Bellum*. Blanc wrote of masterful handling of color and form in these works, although he acknowledged that they seemed to be imbued with far less narrative sense than the earlier Amiens murals. The author, however, did not deem this to detract from Puvis’s work. As a matter of fact, the critic felt that simplifying what he was painting, particularly in the context of the four individual figures, opened Puvis’s career to new possibilities that could only heighten his importance in the trajectory of nineteenth-century art.33 Some one hundred years before the English scholar

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record began to delve extensively into the multiple possibilities that Puvis’s murals offer, Charles Blanc saw their potential as they were being produced and, indeed, refined.

Blanc also wrote about Puvis in *Les Artistes de mon temps* of 1876. Six years before his death, Blanc set out to acknowledge the most meaningful artists from his lifetime, and Puvis made the list. By this time, the painter was solidly established in the hearts and minds of the French art world, and his inclusion in Blanc’s testimony was, surely, unavoidable. Academics and progressives alike turned to his murals for inspiration, and Blanc made certain to mention this in his endorsement. Blanc himself enjoyed widespread acclaim by this late point in his career, so this book was published by a Parisian firm with a broad reach among the educated public, thereby furthering Puvis’s position in the minds of his city neighbors and countrymen. The thoughts and feelings that artists and thinkers of all stripes held for Puvis ultimately begat the moniker “The Painter of France.” This honorific title was bestowed upon Puvis at the seventieth-birthday banquet Rodin arranged for him in 1895 to accompany a retrospective exhibit of his work at Durand-Ruel. It was an obvious example of how those who held

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dozens of competing points of view situated themselves around the artist and considered him one of their own.\textsuperscript{35}

The year 1878, two years after Blanc’s ringing endorsement of Puvis, saw the publication of the first work that may be classified as a monograph dedicated to the artist. Marius Vachon, a well-regarded Parisian journalist, wrote a brief homage to the artist upon his induction into the French Legion of Honor. The text also included a rundown of Puvis’s murals to date that was not especially incisive about the life and overall \textit{oeuvre} of the artist, but the words in a volume entitled simply by the artist’s surname inspired a multitude of similarly focused works of lengthier detail, including another by Vachon in 1895 and one by Léon Thevenin in 1899, soon after the painter’s death.\textsuperscript{36} While these works may seem pedestrian compared to the type of art-historical scholarship produced today, their importance cannot be understated, particularly when the fact that Puvis’s acclaim in his own lifetime was largely lost after the earliest years of the twentieth century.

Additionally, E. Siriyex de Villers incorporated some references to Puvis in a work published in Lyons, the artist’s hometown: \textit{Les Grands mystiques de la}

\textsuperscript{35} The conclusion of Shaw, 2002, explores this birthday party in some detail and will be further examined in the next chapter of this essay.

peinture. As the title implies, the volume explores the work of painters whom the author felt suffused their works with a great degree of metaphysical atmosphere. To be sure, modern-day conceptions of Puvis’s oeuvre are quick to attribute these intangible, nebulous qualities to the painter’s work, but the establishment of such an opinion in the 1920s, when interest in Puvis was beginning to flag, strikes me as significant. De Viller’s treatment of the artist certainly proved to be one that held sway in the work that was to come many years into the future.

A year before De Villers, Leon Werth wrote an entry in the series Artistes d’hier et d’aujourd’hui entitled Quelques peintres avec douze phototypies, which, on the surface of its title, is not terribly striking as a revelatory work about the art of Puvis de Chavannes. However, in identifying the artist as a painter whose work had inspired numerous masses of prints, Werth helped to establish Puvis as a wildly popular artist in his own lifetime and immediately following his death. Three years later, Werth followed up this brief allusion to Puvis with a book from a series about renowned painters and sculptors that was completely

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37 E. Siriyex de Villers, Les Grands mystiques de la peinture, Lyons: 1924.
39 Werth’s use of the French word for “twelve” seems to have simply been a means of indicating that the artists he discussed had plenty of works transferred to the medium of printmaking. There is no special status in the volume, so far as I can tell, of that number. Puvis’s inclusion, again, is simply another acknowledgement of the popularity of his work.
dedicated to the artist. Again, this, and the book from three years prior, were written as appeals to a mass art-going audience. They advanced the idea that Puvis would remain a solid feature of the French art consciousness.

Following a significant scholastic record of Puvis by French academics that accumulated before his death, two months to the day before his seventy-fourth birthday, and shortly thereafter, Kenyon Cox loudly acknowledged the painter in the anglophone record with an essay in his generic *Old Masters and New*, published for mass consumption. To be sure, inclusion in such a work, alongside the likes of Perugino, Michelangelo, Dürer, Rubens, Rembrandt, Millais, Whistler, and Sargent, was certainly a ringing endorsement of the artist. That said, Cox devoted little of his efforts to anything other than providing some of Puvis’s biographical background and repeatedly referring to him as a decorator, whose work, while highly celebrated, is difficult to contextualize outside of the mind Puvis himself. No reference is made to Puvis’s influence on already established stars of the French avant-garde movement, such as Picasso, Gauguin, and Cézanne. He is treated as if his work occurred in a vacuum.

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42 Cox, 215-222.
Ultimately, therefore, Cox does a disservice to the artist in introducing him to the larger anglophone art-consuming audience.

Indeed, in the 1911 six-part lecture series Cox delivered at the Art Institute of Chicago, his inclusion of Puvis missed the mark regarding the painter’s influence on the development of modernist art, as the series itself was entitled *The Classic Point of View.*43 The series was surely developed as part of an effort to address the cultural isolation of the United States that was not nearly overcome until 1913’s Armory Show in New York. The conventional appearance of Puvis’s murals on a superficial level were the highlight of Cox’s focus, as he presented the artist as something of an anomalous figure among artists of the later nineteenth century: one who valued a traditional, finished appearance in his works, which were, by design, intended for countless viewers’ eyes. Coming from a twenty-first-century perspective regarding Puvis’s work, I have quite a difficult time looking at the painter’s murals and seeing them as anything approaching traditionally finished in appearance. Their ambiguity and simplification to basic geometries is, without putting too fine a point on it, their

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43 These lectures were published in a volume of a serial publication devoted to a lecture series, to which more scholars than Cox contributed, sponsored by the Scammon Foundation at the Art Institute of Chicago. They, too, were lectures targeted at a generic art-going segment of the population and delved very little into the importance of the artists they featured. Kenyon Cox, *The Classic Point of View; Six Lectures on Painting Delivered on the Scammon Foundation at the Art Institute of Chicago, in the Year 1911, by Kenyon Cox*, New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1911.
most obvious hallmark. Cox either did not see this integral aspect of Puvis’s oeuvre, or he willfully chose to ignore it to suit the purposes of his own argument.

Little was written about Puvis in English following Cox’s perfunctory and, frankly, inaccurate reading of his works until the master’s thesis by Carolyn White Delaney, entitled “Puvis de Chavannes and American Mural Painters,” was submitted to New York University in 1939. As Delaney’s title suggests, her work focuses on American muralists of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, many of whom studied in Paris and had seen the murals of Puvis firsthand.44 One of the works she discusses is Corrupt Legislation (Figure 2.9), an 1896 work commissioned for the Jefferson Building of the Library of Congress. The mural was painted by New Yorker Elihu Vedder, who, before going to Rome, trained in Paris. His French teacher was François-Édouard Picot, a Prix de Rome winner who himself trained under Jacques-Louis David. Another is the regionalist masterpiece A Social History of Missouri (Figure 2.10), by Thomas Hart Benton, which has decorated the entire wall space of the Missouri capitol’s House of Representatives Lounge since 1936 and was referred to by Benton as the greatest of his many works.45 Despite his decidedly midwestern American

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style, undoubtedly influenced by his studies at the Art Institute of Chicago, the Missouri-born Benton also studied in Paris at the Académie Julien.

At first glance, these two murals seem nothing alike in scope, style, location, and subject. Vedder’s lunette-shaped work is manifestly Symbolist and captures some of the allegorical stillness viewers may have come to expect from the work of artists like Puvis, albeit with an unsettling imbalance appropriate to the mural’s title. It decorates a room that is perhaps imbued with one of the United States’ greatest atmospheres of elite study. Therefore, while a public commission, it was never conceived of as a painting that would be viewed by a large volume of people. On the other hand, Benton’s much grander work is situated in a hall intended to invite all Missourians, not only the state’s educated elite, and it is rife with both the heroic and melancholy energy so commonly associated with the regionalist movement.

Because of the striking differences in these works, I struggle fully to grasp the presumed influence of Puvis de Chavannes’s murals on them both. While I can certainly appreciate the experience of each artist having studied mural painting in Paris, which surely included significant exposure to Puvis’s public offerings, as Delaney indicates in her writing, placing them in the same argument about Puvis’s effect of American mural-making strikes something of a hollow chord to my mind. Furthermore, to cite Puvis de Chavannes as a major influence
on muralists who have any knowledge of the history of art simply seems so fundamental as to probably not even deserve mention. Delaney does little to explore incisively the stylistic approach of Puvis in her thesis, and, by extension, her study leaves much to be desired as to why, exactly, the American artists about whom she writes owe a debt to his legacy in particular.

There is perhaps no greater art historian in the record of the United States than Linda Nochlin, and she made her own contribution to the inclusion of Puvis de Chavannes in the broader discourse on later nineteenth-century art in France. Rightly, Nochlin incorporates Puvis, both things said by him and about him, in her exploration of the dueling strains of modernism and traditionalism in French art during years that were consistent with his greatest flourishes of artistic production. For me, this approach to Puvis proved groundbreaking, as it opened the doors to our present-day understanding of the genuine importance of the artist to so many of his contemporaries. While her 1966 volumes delve into issues far broader than Puvis de Chavannes alone, Nochlin is certain to include testaments to his impact on and admiration by a veritable litany of the most prominent French modernists of the later nineteenth century in the public consciousness: Vincent van Gogh to Camille Pissarro, Paul Cézanne to Auguste

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Rodin, Georges Seurat to Paul Gauguin, and many more titans of the history of art.

Certainly, the impact of Puvis on artists whose works populate the most renowned museums the world over was well-known, though perhaps not so well understood in Nochlin’s time because of the nascent state of scholarship on the issue. To help promote necessary scholarly dialogue on the subject, she made sure to incorporate all of the testimonials to Puvis’s stature in the art community of his own time into her work. His status was decisively announced to the section of the public who prided themselves on consuming and appreciating the artistic canon of the West. What Nochlin also, and perhaps even more importantly, did in her 1966 publications, particularly in *Realism and Tradition in Art*, was to establish the fact that artists of the *avant-garde* were not the only broad group who celebrated Puvis.

Academicians who practiced alongside Puvis in Paris, such as William-Adolphe Bouguereau, Jean-Léon Gérôme, Alexandre Cabanel, Paul Chenavard, Louis Janmot and others, were clearly shown to be advocates of the work Puvis produced. Where the vanguard of artists who so vehemently opposed the Davidian Neoclassicism that had become the standard for French art in the nineteenth century held Puvis up as one of their inspirations, those painters of that long-established style viewed him as a defender of the proper, entrenched
way of making art. Nochlin astutely recognizes this curious dichotomy, and her incisiveness played a large role in developing the conception of Puvis’s broad appeal that persists to this day.\textsuperscript{47}

Nochlin’s work arrived on the heels of an important francophone study by Adolphe Tabarant that included the work of Puvis, \textit{La Vie artistique au temps de Baudelaire}.\textsuperscript{48} Tabarant’s volume was the first for some time that attempted to look at Baudelaire’s view of a bohemian, \textit{flâneur} in a different context, as a century had passed since the writer and critic had introduced the concept. This re-emphasis of \textit{flânerie} in art-historical scholarship, no doubt, derived from Walter Benjamin’s philosophical exploration of Baudelaire’s idea, meted out a couple of decades before the writing of Tabarant. While Puvis was not the prototypical \textit{flâneur} about which Baudelaire wrote, neither in his daily activities and certainly not in the style and subject matter of his paintings, he was an artist who captured the imaginations of many who thought of themselves as such, and his works have been held up by countless thinkers, from almost every imaginable perspective, as evocative of the French spirit, as the next chapter of this essay will

\textsuperscript{47} In focusing a portion of this chapter on the work of Nochlin \textit{vis-à-vis} the work and influence of Puvis, I do not intend to suggest that the thrust of the scholar’s work was situated around Puvis, as it most certainly was not. Instead, I simply wish to acknowledge that Puvis’s repeated inclusion in her broader discussion of the entire artistic landscape of the later nineteenth century in France serves as a harbinger to the wealth of Puvis scholarship that would begin to appear subsequent to her work.

explore. In that sense, one may be able to see that Puvis wandered the global landscape of French art, and I believe that contextualizing his career in this way helped to connect him with Baudelaire’s definition of what an artist should be if he is to gather inspiration from the world in which he lives.

A few years after Nochlin’s 1966 treatment of the French artistic landscape in the later nineteenth century, John Milner published a volume that, for me, was a step backward in how Puvis is conceived: Symbolists and Decadents. Given Milner’s title, it should come as no surprise that his study classifies Puvis among the ranks of Symbolist painters like Gustave Moreau and Odilon Redon, despite the fact that the acmes of those artists’ careers, not to mention the primary thrust of the movement itself in the visual arts, were reached well after Puvis’s death. Without question, Puvis’s oeuvre played some part in presaging the output of these artists, who certainly claimed admiration for the older painter. For their part, they gladly considered him one of their forbears, but Puvis himself never directly identified with their school of art. This tacit disavowal, clearly, existed even in spirit, to say nothing of the fact that, again, the Symbolist school proper in the visual arts largely flourished after his death. Puvis’s paintings are often

50 Puvis’s inclusion in Milner’s study may have largely been inspired by the painter’s close relationships with several Symbolist authors, though those friendships are not significantly explored in Symbolists and Decadents. Those connections are delved into more fully in the conclusion chapter in Shaw, 2002.
described as dreamscapes because of their stillness, tranquility, and lack of specificity, but to understand Puvis’s *oeuvre* is to realize that he was not attempting to delve into the depths of his imagination to create his arcadian views.

To help illustrate my opinion on this front, I now refer back to the group of paintings Puvis executed for the landing of the main staircase at the Musée des Beaux-Arts in his native Lyons, which followed the period of private introspection that led to *Jeunes filles* in 1879 and *Le pauvre pêcheur* in 1881. Receiving in 1883 the commission for the major art museum in Lyons, then France’s second city, represented a major honor for Puvis, and his decorative works for the stairway were to represent the artistic process itself. The central panel, completed in 1884, was *Le Bois sacré cher aux Arts et aux Muses* (Figure 2.11, henceforth referred to as *Le Bois sacré*), which was flanked by *Vision antique* (Figure 2.12) and *Inspiration chrétienne* (Figure 2.13), completed in in 1885 and 1886, respectively. In the language of the commission, *Vision antique* was to represent the “form” of art, while *Inspiration chrétienne* was to be evocative of art’s “sentiment.” The intervening *Le Bois sacré*, which literally bends to occupy a small portion of the walls decorated by the other two works, is meant to indicate
the role of the Muses in joining the form and sentiment that are vital to any work of art.51

There is no doubt that Puvis’s three murals on the Lyons staircase landing symbolize certain aspects of the process of producing objets d’art, but that circumstance does not necessarily make the paintings Symbolist. For one, the scenes are all situated in contexts that seem to be of the earthly realm, with the caveat that they are populated by either imagined human individuals of bygone eras or Classical goddesses who inspire the very real human pursuits in the arts. The mind-blowingly ornate precincts of Moreau, as perhaps most famously illustrated by Jupiter et Semele (Figure 2.14), and the haze-cum-matter, à la Le cyclope (Figure 2.15), that constitutes the province of Redon are not even close to the neighborhood in which Puvis’s Lyons works reside. That Puvis would have refuted the label “Symboliste” for his artistic practice, combined with the reality that his canvases, while perhaps dreamlike, are not full-on dream worlds, makes the categorization Milner offers quite ineffective and unsatisfying.

Incomparable in her study of Puvis de Chavannes in English, Aimée Brown Price is the next person whose academic work dedicated to the painter I will consider, namely, in the form of her groundbreaking doctoral dissertation,

51 More background about this cycle, including the original language of the commission, can be found in Price, 2010, vol. II, 273-288; Werth, 2002, 21-82; Shaw, 2002, 43-64.
developed under the tutelage of famed nineteenth-century art historian T.J. Clark and submitted to Yale University in 1972 and entitled *Puvis de Chavannes: A Study of the Easel Paintings and a Catalogue of the Painted Works*.\(^2\) This extensive study is the first anglophone body of work to deeply scrutinize Puvis’s paintings that do not fall under the umbrella of murals. Two paintings that are vital to my work here, *Le pauvre pêcheur* and *Jeunes filles*, as mentioned before, of course, fall into this category, and they will help to elucidate an important point about Puvis’s work, in my view, in the next chapter.

Returning focus to Price, her work, more so than any that had come before it in English-language scholarship, examined paintings by Puvis that had previously been ignored, despite the fact that they, as Price quite capably demonstrates, provide a window of fundamental understanding to Puvis’s artistic process and goals. They represent a period in Puvis’s career when he was not only trying something different, nay, they embody his tireless efforts to hone his craft as a painter who much preferred creating works on a much larger scale intended for a significantly broader viewership. In these more private easel paintings, the ambiguity of meaning and form, the reduced geometry, the archetypal characterization, and, yes, the potential for countless reactions and

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interpretations that have come to be so closely associated with the oeuvre of Puvis de Chavannes are sharpened in oil paint before our very eyes as customers of his visual output.53

Price’s insights about the easel paintings played a major role in inspiring my own contribution to the discourse on Puvis in this thesis, which will be further delineated in the next chapter. Suffice it to say, Price’s scholarship on Puvis, for me, is spot-on and has played a larger role than that of any other academic in advancing the current conception of the artist in the English-speaking world.

Some seventeen years after his initial foray into publishing thoughts about Puvis, John Milner returned to the fray in 1988’s The Studios of Paris, the Capital of Art in the Late Nineteenth Century.54 This volume, while a more global treatment of the Parisian artistic landscape during the years corresponding to the production of Puvis’s most mature works, helps to rescue some of the less convincing arguments he had posited about the artist in Symbolists and Decadents.

53 Price’s first published assertions of this phenomenon in Puvis’s oeuvre appear in her dissertation, but, make no mistake, she spends much of her subsequent career as a Puvis specialist making her arguments more pointed and sophisticated, as evidenced in the 1994 exhibition catalogue she edited and wrote much of for the Puvis show at the Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh in Amsterdam, particularly the chapter “The Poor Fisherman: A Painting in Context,” 45-53. This work continues in the first volume, the monograph entitled Pierre Puvis de Chavannes: The Artist and his Art, of her 2010 magnum opus about Puvis, certainly in “Chapter 5: The 1870s” and “Chapter 6: The 1880s,” 69-142.

For one, Puvis is no longer classified as a Symbolist, which, in my conception of the artist, is an absolutely proper and quite useful addition by subtraction to his legacy. Milner acknowledges that the work of Aimée Brown Price has helped to cultivate his new, more nuanced, view of Puvis. Additionally, by focusing on the artistic context in fin de siècle Paris writ large, he is better able to capture just how important a place Puvis de Chavannes held in the hearts and minds of so many other individuals in creative circles, be they other artists (both academic and revolutionary), critics, novelists, poets, journalists, or other members of the Parisian cultural community. Milner surely adds to the growing discourse that Puvis’s art represents a cultural richness that cannot be summed up via the quick and simple attachment of labels to his work. To be sure, this was the prevailing line of thinking that had taken root in the discipline of art history during the decade-and-a-half since his publishing of Symbolists and Decadents, but Milner deserves credit for refining his arguments.

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55 An aspect of the broader social conversation in Paris and, indeed, all of France that Milner does well in contextualizing in his 1988 book is the political discourse that falls outside of the purview of this essay. Particularly, he highlights the government’s emphasis, in the wake of France’s complete and utter defeat at the hands of the more industrialized Germans in the Franco-Prussian War and the subsequent civil unrest that accompanied the establishment of the Paris Commune, on the critical role of science and reason in ushering the Third Republic toward the twentieth century. The implications of increasing French colonialism and its related transformation of the French population, brought to a head in the fervent national debates surrounding the Dreyfus affair, are also examined. Milner’s willingness to delve into these overarching issues is the reason his 1988 book, for me, is far more successful than the volume he published in 1971.
Speaking of a more global approach to art historical scholarship as it related to Puvis de Chavannes, cultural historian Daniel J. Sherman produced further meaningful scholarship on the artist in his 1989 book *Worthy Monuments: Art Museums and the Politics of Culture in Nineteenth-Century France*. As the artistic community and society in general grew more democratic and capitalistic at the end the nineteenth century, finding ways to accessibly display products of the fine arts to as many people as possible became paramount. With the Salon losing its luster and total authority, readily available venues for display of artwork began to proliferate, from galleries to cafés to temporary venues artists themselves secured and arranged and beyond. Sherman discusses Puvis’s first large-scale solo exhibition at the Galerie Durand-Ruel in late 1887, which was replicated in 1894, in 1896, and, posthumously, in 1899, and its impact on the artist’s stature in the public eye. What he more expertly emphasizes about Puvis, and art in general, during this time period is the reality that work that did not follow the centuries-old prescriptions for moralizing, concealing of brushwork, and attempting to improve upon Nature was becoming more and more openly displayed in well-regarded public spaces.

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The fact that the French state appropriated the original version of *Le pauvre pêcheur* for display at the Musée du Luxembourg is a testament to this evolution. The fact that Puvis himself had misgivings about its prominent public display, as discussed in the previous chapter, is a testament to the fact that circumstances were rapidly changing, even for well-established artists. Adjustment to new cultural mores was paramount if artists were to remain relevant, and, as Sherman elegantly elucidates, those who learn to make such adaptations will find themselves displayed in a worthwhile manner for countless eyes, a scenario that could not have been dreamt of only a few decades prior. In my next chapter, I argue that significant compositional adjustments Puvis made to his canvases in light of his artistic experimentation helped his star to continue to rise even after he had already gained significant fame and exhibited in some of France’s most high-profile locations.

The work of John G. Hutton and Robyn Roslak, from the last decade of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first, respectively, is not really focused on Puvis de Chavannes *per se*.

57 Neo-Impressionism and its political implications, and endorsements, in an ever-changing French social landscape represent the main thrusts of these two scholars’ work, but their insights have importance for even a non-Neo-Impressionist in Puvis, and not

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57 Hutton, 1994; Roslak, 2007.
simply because Puvis had an active working relationship with the followers of Seurat.\(^58\) Simply put, the Neo-Impressionists were very closely aligned with the radically leftist strains of anarchist political philosophy that was taking hold in populist French circles during the *fin de siècle*. Puvis fits into this conversation because many of the Neo-Impressionists saw their vision for France’s future in his work, which I will also address in the next chapter of this essay. Interestingly enough, though, as I also demonstrate, rearguard conservative factions saw their ideas for the nation’s future in the exact same elements of Puvis’s work. How could this be?

The answer lies in how, exactly, people of numerous political stripes responded to the way in which Puvis chose to compose and populate his canvases. The brilliance of the work of Hutton and Roslak, beyond their obvious expertise on the nature of the Neo-Impressionist movement, is their uncovering of the fact that during this era of French history, art of multiple types was being used to promote propagandistic agendas, and the intention of the artists themselves became close to moot. The perception of their works became more

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\(^58\) The merit of the Hutton and Roslak volumes has already been acknowledged in n.14 of chapter one of this essay, and, while the broader scopes of those studies are not critically germane to my study, it is important to note that they contain numerous references to historical interactions between Puvis and the neo-impressionists. While the work of these scholars is addressed in this chapter in order to underscore the growing intertwining of specialized artistic movements with particular political bents, the contextual importance of Puvis’s relationships with these artists cannot be denied.
powered than any reality that may have been intended in them, and that
conceptualization of art is something that we take for granted in the twenty-first
century but was only gaining traction at the tail end of the nineteenth.
Figure 2.1. Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *Concordia*, 1861, oil and wax [?] on canvas, 340 cm x 555 cm, Musée de Picardie, Amiens, France
Figure 2.2. Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *Bellum*, 1861, oil and wax (?) on canvas, 340 cm x 555 cm, Musée de Picardie, Amiens, France
Figure 2.3. Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *Le Travail*, 1863, oil and wax on canvas, 450 cm x 665 cm, Musée de Picardie, Amiens, France
Figure 2.4. Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *Le Repos*, 1863, oil and wax on canvas, 450 cm x 665 cm, Musée de Picardie, Amiens, France
Figure 2.5. Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *Le Moissonneur*, 1864, oil and wax on canvas, 353 cm x 114.5 cm, Musée de Picardie, Amiens, France
Figure 2.6. Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *L’Industrie*, 1864, oil and wax on canvas, 356 cm x 114.5 cm, Musée de Picardie, Amiens, France
Figure 2.7. Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *La Désespoir*,
1864, oil and wax on canvas,
354 cm x 114 cm, Musée de Picardie, Amiens, France
Figure 2.8. Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *Le Triomphe*, 1864, oil and wax on canvas, 353 cm x 114.5 cm, Musée de Picardie, Amiens, France
Figure 2.9. Elihu Vedder, *Corrupt Legislation*, 1896, oil on canvas, Main Reading Room, Thomas Jefferson Building, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C., United States
Figure 2.10. Thomas Hart Benton, *A Social History of Missouri*, partial view, 1936, oil on canvas, House of Representatives Lounge, Missouri State Capitol, Jefferson City, Missouri, United States
Figure 2.11. Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *Le Bois sacré cher aux Arts et aux Muses*, 1884, oil on canvas, 460 cm x 1040 cm (overall, 670 cm central panel with 185 cm folded onto lateral walls), Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lyons, France
Figure 2.12. Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *Vision antique*, 1885, oil on canvas, 460 cm x 578 cm, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lyons, France
Figure 2.13. Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *Inspiration chrétienne*, 1885-1886, oil on canvas, 460 cm x 578 cm, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lyons, France
Figure 2.14. Gustave Moreau, *Jupiter et Semele*, 1894-1895, 213 cm x 118 cm, Musée National Gustave-Moreau, Paris, France
Figure 2.15. Odilon Redon, *Le cyclope*, ca. 1914, oil on cardboard mounted on panel, 64 cm x 51 cm, Kröller-Müller Museum, Otterlo, Netherlands
CHAPTER THREE

THE MULTITUDE OF VIEWERS’ VISIONS REFLECTED IN THE 
OEUVRE OF PUVIS

I now return to a question I posed in my first chapter about the fullness of bodily spirit Théodore Banville expressed upon looking at *Jeunes filles*. Namely, how, exactly, could Banville experience such plenitude when, even upon cursory deliberation, one could easily imagine multiple reactions to Puvis’ s canvas.\(^{59}\) Was the reaction unique to Banville, as Alphonse de Calonne may have suggested?\(^{60}\) Did Puvis lead him to this visceral response in the way he put together *Jeunes filles*? At the end of my first chapter, I indicated that I would hazard an explanation for these queries.

On re-examining the painting, we find the three unmoving, indeed, immovable females compactly contained on a small plot of land, trapped among a heavy rectangle of mauve-grey sky, an even denser block of impenetrable ocean of the darkest blue, and a highly obstructive brown rocky outcropping that limits the experience of their own environment. Consequently, this setup, quite

\(^{59}\) Banville, 21 May 1879. See ch.1, n.24.

\(^{60}\) Calonne, 19 May 1891. See ch.1, n.1.
obviously, abridges our experience of their world as interlopers. Simply put, these three women are trapped, and Puvis is the one who trapped them. Given this, it is no wonder that they appear to be completely out of kilter to our viewing eyes. They do not fit together as a group, they do not mesh well with their landscape, and their body parts do not even fit properly into place with other parts that are literally adjacent. To play on a common ditty, the hip bone does not connect to the leg bone.

Puvis did begin to compose this sense of dissonance in *Jeunes filles*, but he did not give us viewers all the cues necessary to feel fully its power because, if he had, we would never have felt it at all. Instead, we would have just been *voyeurs*, as we are with the completely displayed sex romps of Bouguereau and *fin de siècle* academicians. No, Puvis left some significant cues, in the form of questions about what, exactly, is going on in the painting’s scene, undeveloped so that we, as viewers, could work them out for ourselves. Only in doing that do we truly reach the moment of clarity that Banville had when he exclaimed, “Ah! I understand.”

We come to understand that these fulsome women who abut the canvas plane are mired in a heavy haze from which they cannot escape be we internalize what they are experiencing. Their empty setting becomes a total trap, thereby

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61 Banville, 21 May 1879. See ch.1, n.24.
rendering the figures still and disconnected for eternity, though that status is not as painful as it may seem. Indeed, there is a warm resignation intrinsic to it which provides some level of comfort in the face of deep discomfort, hence Banville’s satisfied exclamation of understanding.

It also explains Georges Lafenestre’s glee that Puvis’s art actually represents a communion with the viewer again, right on the heels of high art’s devolution to tawdry, unengaging exhibitionism at the hands of Cabanel and others. It is a complete human experience, containing multitudes of characteristics that may initially seem incompatible, but, in the end, that seeming incongruency is precisely the thing that makes the sensation authentic, instinctual, and, thus, representative of a true connection with the art object.

Puvis coaxes us viewers in the same way in the other atypical canvas I have discussed from the period in his artistic career that gave rise to *Jeunes filles*, to which I will now redirect my attention: *Le pauvre pêcheur*. Félix Nadar reported that Alfred Grévin could not imagine any fish in the water in which the fisherman rummages for a catch. Why, though, are there no fish to catch? For one, Puvis makes the water appear as an abiotic browning and yellowing glassy surface with but two dimensions that harshly zigzag atop the equally two-

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62 Ibid. and Lafenestre, 15 June 1879. See ch.1, n.23.
dimensional canvas and recede into the background, seemingly forever and into oblivion. How could any fish subsist beneath a surface that has no third dimension beneath? Even if there was any depth to the pool, how could any living thing endure in that putridly colored morass?

The fisherman obviously knows the answers to the previous questions and has resigned himself to going hungry. The frail young girl with whom he is, apparently, associated, too gaunt for her tattered dress, seems to use every ounce of strength she has in reserve to pick flowers that many would likely call weeds, and an unclothed, inhuman-looking infant lies naked, perhaps even dead or close to death, on the cold, hard ground of the shoreline. What we see is an ugly, ugly sight. It tears at our souls as viewers. We truly feel pity for the people in the scene, unlike Stop, who derisively caricatures this painting as well in a drawing from the 28 May 1881 edition of *Journal Amusant* (Figure 3.1), joking that the fisherman has contracted cholera from a dead toad and his wife is gathering nicely scented flowers to cover the horrid smells emanating from his decaying body.

The critic Louis de Fourcaud wrote:

[O]ne can fault M. Puvis de Chavannes for everything, the placement of his figures and their naïve construction, the drawing, the color, the impression… [but he is one of the *peintres de cerveau*], painters of the mind or brain… [who] realize their furtive vision
with the most adroit hand, [making] the sweetness of their pleasure radiate around them.\textsuperscript{64}

Fourcaud, of course, was correct to identify Puvis as a \textit{peintre de cerveau}, as this essay has already laid out about \textit{Jeunes filles}. How, though, does the artist use his “adroit hand” to guide his viewers to his “furtive vision” in \textit{Le pauvre pêcheur} if it is so compositionally ambiguous?\textsuperscript{65} He did it, or, better put, did not explicitly do it, in much the same way he presented \textit{Jeunes filles}, using space that is equally flattened with a high horizon line and amorphous landscape elements. However, he uses a seemingly unending open space, instead of the tightly enclosed one of \textit{Jeunes filles}, to engulf the fisherman and his party, thereby making them freeze stagnantly in a place where they cannot survive.

The alternation of small spits of land with tiny inlets along the shore creates a jagged pattern around the decrepit figures that underscores the danger in which they find themselves. Across the vast vista that surrounds them on all sides, not a single sign of food presents itself. They are resigned to their fate of starvation. The fisherman is taciturn in his acceptance of it, as he stands up in his useless trawler. The young female, widely thought to be the fisherman’s young-adult daughter, decides to make the best of an impossible situation by picking

\textsuperscript{64} Louis de Fourcaud, “Salon de Gaulois,” \textit{Le Gaulois}, 02 May 1881, 1.
\textsuperscript{65} Ibid.
some meager flowers to experience a miniscule bit of happiness amid her despair. The baby, unable to contribute anything to this hopeless situation, simply lies naked and unconscious, either from sleep, sickness, or death, amidst the cold. These resigned souls succumb to their destiny of poverty, hunger, and probable death like the honest, humble folks they are: with dignity and quiescence.

Fourcaud sees the figures’ filling of the middle of the flattened scene and their predicament of being surrounded by emptiness as the lack of any sort of maternal embrace and the nourishing care it provides. Mother Earth is not going to provide for these people. Indeed, Nature has nothing to offer this meager slice of humanity, figurative children that depend upon it while daring to brave the severe environment into which we, the viewers, have a window. Nature situates herself as being akin the unseen, dead mother of the fisherman’s two children, as one who cannot nourish offspring because of her permanent absence. By surrounding the figures with which the viewers sympathize with the heaviest imaginable emptiness, Puvis suggests the cold, despondent reality that no help is on its way, but the ultimate realization of their fate has its force because the

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66 There is much debate about the identity of the female figure in the painting, but the prevailing idea is that she is not the infant’s mother and fisherman’s wife. Instead, she is most often viewed as the baby’s older sister, a child of poverty who is all too keenly aware of her family’s destitution. This is the identity Fourcaud assigns the female figure in his readings of Le pauvre pêcheur from 02 May 1881. See n.47.
viewer feels it deep in his or her gut. Puvis readily invites his viewers to read the canvas as they will, as Geffroy so giddily praises. At the same time, though, the painter imperceptibly influences that reading. The combination of the blanks Puvis places before the viewer and the viewer’s active role in filling those blanks, again, as Lafenestre attests, is what makes the work so undeniably strong.

Yes, as Calonne wrote, Puvis “places [figures] on the canvas for the viewer,” but the painter of France does slightly help his viewers gather the satisfying ideas of the canvas. In the end, the viewers see what they, and they alone, will see. Nonetheless, what they see is influenced by Puvis, who strategically left the gaps that their minds fill in to help them arrive at important truths—important truths for them. This, above all else, is why he enjoyed universal admiration, both in life and posthumously, from those who knew his art. It is also why Aimée Brown Price was so sure to highlight Puvis’s critical role in the development of modern art, that is, art that privileges the response of its viewers above all else. To be sure, as Geffroy would have argued, the preponderance of reactions to Puvis’s oeuvre is indelibly tied to whatever

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67 Geffroy, 22 May 1891. See ch.1, n.2.
68 Lafenestre, 15 June 1879. See ch.1, n.23.
69 Calonne’s idea of Puvis’s figures being aimed at his viewers, again, comes from his article “Le Salon du Champ de Mars” in the 19 May 1891 edition of Le Soleil. See ch.1, n.1.
70 See ch.1, n.12.
meaning the artist’s works have acquired since their debuts. What some of those multitudes of meanings are is where I will now turn my attention, as they offer indispensable insight into precisely why Puvis meant so much to so many, indeed, why he was anointed *Le peintre de la France* at that landmark 1895 banquet in his honor.

In 1882, not long after his escape to Honfleur to overcome his depressive malaise, Puvis completed *Doux Pays* (Figure 3.2) for display above the staircase in the private hôtel of a fellow artist, Léon Bonnat, who offered a full-length portrait of Puvis (Figure 3.3) as remuneration. *Doux pays*, along with *Jeunes filles*, proved the inspiration of two works by Neo-Impressionist painters, *In the Time of Harmony* by Paul Signac (Figure 3.4) and *Evening Air* (Figure 3.5) by Henri-Edmond Cross, which, like the paintings of Puvis and Bonnat, were exchanged between friends.

More importantly, however, both younger painters were inspired by Puvis’s canvases to render visions of the futures for which they longed. The “beautiful place” they saw in Puvis’s gift for Bonnat was, of course, one the older master’s non-specific, timeless arcadian scenes, but the Neo-Impressionist homages to it were, perhaps surprisingly, given their pointillistic arrangement of

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71 Geffroy’s take on Puvis’s artistic output is addressed above via n. 2, regarding Geffroy’s review of *L’été* in “Salon de 1891,” *La Justice*, 22 May 1891.
supersaturated colors, intended as evocations of real places, the Plage des Graniers outside Saint Tropez and a beach near Cabasson, that Signac and Cross, respectively, considered actual paradises that would suit the government-less futures where humankind fully re-communes with the earth of which their anarchic philosophy allowed them to dream.72

Signac and Cross were far more pointed in the messages they wished to convey in their works than Puvis ever was. They had quite particular political goals and highly localized, personally meaningful venues at which they felt they could achieve them. Their representing such places in pigment on canvas, though, was in some part, contingent upon their laying their eyes upon the more generalized utopia of Puvis. Calonne’s words about the artwork of Puvis being “for the viewer” ring loudly in this context, as the two Neo-Impressionist admirers of the elder artist used what he put before them to ultimately express what mattered to them. If Doux pays said anything specific at all, that point is moot for Signac and Cross because they used it as a springboard to express their own deeply considered morés. The striking gaps in storytelling that are inherent to Puvis’s incomplete style encouraged the other painters to fill in the blanks in the way in which they felt was best, just as Stop did in his sketches satirizing Le

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72 The site-specific details integral to these two Neo-Impressionist works and their effects on the paintings’ creators are discussed in Roslak, 2007, 143.
pauvre pêcheur and Jeunes filles. For the cartoonist of Journal Amusant, lampooning images displayed in the most highfalutin places was of paramount importance. For Signac and Cross, championing their radical leftist political ideology held that role. Despite the differences in their viewers’ objectives, the art objects of Puvis de Chavannes allow for the inclusion of all such goals, no matter how misaligned they may be, in the complex stories they ultimately tell. They are stories that do not exist only in the intentions of the artist himself, which are nebulous at best. Instead, Puvis brilliantly recognizes the reality that the power of his and, indeed, any objets d’art is mostly derived not from any intent of the artist but, instead, from effect, namely, the effects those objects conjure in their viewers. It is those stirrings that the art-going public always carry forth into their daily lives, not any memory of the crude materials laid down by the creator whose offerings inspired such dynamic experiences.

For his part, Puvis was perpetually cautious of identifying himself with any one school of art or political philosophy. Depending on with whom he was convening, the artist was known to espouse leftist or conservative social views and to fancy himself a protector of the great lineage of centuries of pre-existing French artistic legacy or an innovator who was actively working to rupture that
longstanding tradition. On a superficial level, Puvis’s dissimulation on these fronts was good for his business as an artist, and his worries over the market’s poor prospects following his completion of the Sainte Geneviève cycle at the Panthéon suggest that he was thinking about such practical considerations. More fundamentally, though, Puvis wanted to be considered an important artist. As the avant-garde began to take root, so too did the importance of privileging the response of individual viewers to works of art. Even though Puvis trained as an artist during the years when the approaches of such renowned masters as Ingres and Delacroix, and the messages they crafted, he was savvy enough to see the changes transforming the consumption of art.

That Neo-Impressionist artists like Signac and Cross saw their anarchy in the work of Puvis was no bother to the older artist at all. Indeed, Puvis expressed admiration for paintings like In the Time of Harmony and Evening Air and never openly disavowed the association of his art with the Parisian strain of the Félibrige movement of the 1880s and 1890s that derived from Frédéric Mistral’s original Mediterranean-based cause félibréenne, which advocated for independent, self-sustaining communities of small numbers of people to thrive.

\footnote{Aimée Brown Price does an excellent job of reporting multiple examples of these seemingly contradictory episodes in Puvis’s life in her chronology of his career in the monograph that represents the first volume of her landmark project published in 2010.}
in their communion with nature in the mild, fertile climate of Provence and the Languedoc. Signac and other Neo-Impressionists envisioned a future where such communities could truly take hold throughout France, in such locations as his beloved Plage des Granières. Élie Fourès, a literary critic of the Félibrige in Paris who published the periodical *La revue félibréenne* wrote “M. Puvis de Chavannes saw another heaven and another earth as the common run of painters…a beautiful vanished dream, a lost Eden, a golden age which no longer exists” to describe the dreamy provinces that populate Puvis’s canvases. Those enclaves are precisely the types of environments that the members of the Félibrige felt would lead to a brighter, more authentically human future.

But what did Puvis do to help them feel this way? The quick answer is probably nothing. There is little doubt that paintings like *Doux pays* and *Jeunes filles* offer up idyllic locales where humanity could at once live comfortably and replete with its most tranquil ideas and a total comfort with its corporeal reality, as Henri Matisse perhaps most famously illustrated in the Western artistic canon in *Luxe, calme et volupté* (Figure 3.6). The question begs itself, though, did Puvis set up that sense on his canvases with intentionality?

Bearing in mind the fact that thinkers whose ideology was in no way aligned with that of the members of the Félibrige also held up Puvis’s art as

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illustrative of their radically right-wing points of view, we must wonder if Puvis was specifically intentional about anything he spread across his canvases. Far from the socialist anarchy espoused by Mistral, Fourès, and their cohorts, Charles Maurras, a conservative critic who was among the most prominent members of the ultra-nationalist, xenophobic, anti-Semitic Action française, wrote often about how he saw his own vision of France in the work of Puvis de Chavannes. In his 1895 essay “Le Goût de Puvis de Chavannes,” Maurras wrote that in bygone ages, an art of “noble realism and natural realism” had been practiced in France with “primary marks” that “[its] masters [had] carried to perfection!”

Unfortunately, those noble artists of the distant past had “corrupted themselves before the inferior models proposed from foreign lands,” such as the “naturalist impasto of Flanders and Holland” and the “Gothic thinness of the supposed idealists of Germany.”

Maurras and others in the traditionalist camps of the Société des Champs de Mars and Action française were wary of the worldly, positivist aims of the Third Republic and longed for a return to a France steeped in what they termed its heritage of “Latinity,” owing the nation’s cultural lineage to an uninterrupted link from Greece to Rome to France itself. Other influences adulterated the

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76 Ibid.
Helleno-Latin-Western clarity that was not valued in parts of Europe derived from Germanic stock. Maurras and his compatriots, as indicated earlier, saw their aesthetic, social, and, indeed, national values in the murals of Puvis, claiming that their calm atmospheres and still lines pay tribute to the superiority in design and thought that made France more successful in centuries prior whose values needed to be reclaimed. The seemingly endless revolutionary tumult that the 1789 overthrow of Louis XVI had set into a motion had squashed those values, and that chaos was always gaining more and more destructive momentum. Puvis was a pocket of calm in the midst of this massive societal maelstrom.

Another proponent of Puvis’s efforts from the right side of the political philosophical spectrum was the nobleman Vicomte Eugène-Melchior de Vogüé, whose title and generational wealth allowed for his amateur life of the mind. Vogüé’s very lineage, that is, his place in the social hierarchy and, therefore, access to intellectual pursuits, derived from an older way of organizing French society. A leader within the state-sponsored literary academy, Vogüé used his aristocratic status to promote the neo-Catholic movement within French society.

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scholarly circles as a means of countering the positivist, scientific approach to problem-solving espoused by the nation’s republican government.

For Vogüé, the communal values of *liberté, égalité, et fraternité* around which the French population rallied to achieve the revolution of 1789, toppling *l’Ancien Régime*, had given rise to a social order that, perhaps ironically, promoted an emptiness of spirit among the people, leaving them, once again, longing for those core values for which they fought so hard. He argued that no one need look any further than the isolation marking the faces of the folks populating the purportedly democratic streets of Paris to witness the anxiety.

Amplifying to this sense of languish was the near-constant upheaval and replacement of existing governments with different, ultimately unsuccessful, political experiments, from the replacement of the First Republic that followed the seminal events of 1789 with the empire of Napoléon Bonaparte, to the Restoration under Bourbons Louis XVIII and Charles X, through the July Revolution that established Louis Philippe as *le Roi Citoyen* in 1830, up until the February Revolution established the Second Republic in 1848 under Louis Napoléon, who, just three years later as Napoléon III, established the Second Empire that suffered a total and disastrous defeat at the hands of the Germans in the Franco-Prussian War in 1871, prompting the brief rule of the Paris Commune, which gave rise to the Third Republic that remained in its infancy during the
time of Vogüé’s political scholarship and activity. If the previous sentence was long, winding, and unwieldy, it was meant to be in order to underscore how Vogüé’s argument, centered on the idea that full, genuine democratic rule, tempered by the cool logic of science and reason, did not offer the populace enough in the way of instilling the true spirit of liberté, égalité, et fraternité for which is so yearned.⁷⁸

By the time of Vogüé’s writings, the Third Republic had been in place for roughly two decades, a veritable period of stability after the smörgåsbord of French governments that preceded it in the long nineteenth century.⁷⁹ The upper-class thinker felt it was only a matter of time before the disaffected people teeming in the streets of Paris, and cities throughout France, would demand more fulfillment from the ways in which they went about their daily lives. Vogüé’s solution to this quandary was to return to the life of the spirit. Because the positivist insistence of the Third Republic, which drew from the original revolution of 1789, the experiment was destroying itself, as it was collecting

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⁷⁹ Here, as in most treatments of French and broader European history, the term “long nineteenth century” refers to the hundred years contained in the century proper, plus the years prior to the technical onset of the century that started with the French revolution of 1789 and the years after 1900 leading up to the beginning of the World War I in 1914. In the context of French governments, the long nineteenth century refers to the period from the overthrow of Louis XVI and subsequent establishment of the First Republic to the end of the Third Republic at the dawn of World War I.
extensive evidence that the positivist experiment itself was disaffecting the
people, disenfranchised during through the eighteenth century via the old
Church-married monarchy, it intended to bolster. To avoid the establishment of
a complete moral vacuum heading into the twentieth century after the failure,
and resulting disillusionment of the people, of republican-sponsored empiricism
in the nineteenth, Vogüé called for a kinder, more inclusive re-establishment of a
lifestyle rooted in metaphysics and mysticism, writing that

The metaphysical dream of the past century proposed science to men
as an unrealizable ideal...physical realism of our century re-establishes
summary order, at the price of servitude, fatalism, a return to the life of
the animal horde. To avert these results would require that a moral
principle, representing the reaction of conscience against the harshness
of natural laws, come to soften that which would be intolerable in
legislation inspired only by the laws of physiology. One will search in
vain in the world of rational ideas for this principle, which was the only
one able to give a solid foundation to the notion of duty: humanity will
find it again only in the stronghold where it resides, in religious
sentiment.⁸⁰

In the dreamlike murals of Puvis, such as *Doux pays*, Vogüé saw the
utopian, anti-positivist future for which he was calling. Humanity exists in
communion with nature but is not obsessed with unearthing every last scientific
detail that would explain how it works, which would be the goal of nineteenth-
century-style positivism and ultimately ring hollow to the discoverers when

compared to the pleasures that arise from simply being in a state of harmony with nature. This harmony provides the “religious sentiment” for which Vogüé was advocating, and, to be sure, those who find themselves in its midst seem to have captured “a solid foundation to the notion of duty” in their simple, unambiguous existences. Furthermore, the individuals in Puvis’s scenes, at least in some cases, certainly have their roles that may lead to one individual giving direction to another, but the residents of his realms exist on equal footing to one another. No one holds more importance than another, so the citizens of his visions carry on in comfortable harmony with each other in the same fashion they do with their setting. The circumstance outlined in the previous sentence was also a strong ideal of the left, to which Vogüé sat in strong opposition, thus further underscoring just how broad the appeal of Puvis’s sacred precincts is.

Besides the one painted by Bonnat that was mentioned earlier, two other portraits of Puvis, both rendered in 1895, help to further underscore the fact that individuals as different as Ferdinand Brunetièrè and Théodore Banville, Catulle Mendès and Eugène-Melchior de Vogüé, Charles Maurras and Paul Signac all considered the painter significant and demonstrative of their points of view. The first, by Marcellin Desboutin (Figure 3.7) shows a painterly swirl of energy push an actively ruminating Puvis, presented in a dynamic frontally diagonal

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81 Ibid.; Ibid., Dix-Neuvième Siècle, 15 January 1895.
arrangement, into the plane of the picture, with hazily defined figures and landscape elements drawn from the artist’s oeuvre in the enclosed background. In the universe of Desboutin’s painting, they appear to be nothing more than figments of the Puvis’s fertile and prolific imagination.

Standing in stark contrast is a sharply delineated scene in painted enamel by Georges Jean (Figure 3.8) that essentially apotheosizes Puvis, who maintains a rigid posture in heroic profile. The figures and landscape elements behind him seem precisely to serve him rather than occupy the nebula of thought that envelopes him in the Desboutin treatment. Puvis is masterful in Jean’s rendition, but he is in such a way that is quite different than the manner in which he is also virtuosic according to Desboutin. Jean shows the artist as a man at ease with the rigidly defined world where he himself lives, and, by extension, he brings his expertly considered artistic realms into a state of similar sharpness in a world that will not relent in its, often positive, judgments of them. Desboutin’s Puvis is a thinker and creative genius. He prefers to reside in the transitory states of his own mind, which is the place where we see his figures and landscape elements. They seem to have the ability to metamorphose, expand, contract, or disappear in nanoseconds, whereas Jean’s pictorial details appear eternally congealed.

When looked at in tandem, Desboutin’s and Jean’s portraits of Puvis de Chavannes provide us with something approaching a complete portrayal of the
man’s extensive, and sometimes seemingly oppositional, qualities that were so roundly admired and uplifted by his contemporaries, who held essentially every conceivable point of view in the context of life in fin de siècle France. A man who possesses all of the impressive characteristics that both Desboutin and Jean show us is a man who would garner the adoration of individuals from across the artistic, political, philosophical, and social spectra. He would be a man who was as esteemed as Puvis, indeed, was.

Before concluding, I want to return to the four paintings by Puvis that are, in my estimation, the most crucial to grasping his broad appeal—his ability and tendency to paint “for the viewer,” as Alphonse de Calonne decried in 1891 yet also could not help but to enjoy. The critic’s account of the L’été intended for the restored Parisian Hôtel de Ville in Le Soleil, despite its pointed efforts to harshly review Puvis’s painting, ultimately grows into an account detailing how Calonne himself is drawn into the mystic territory Puvis paints, which he enjoys due to its appeal to him, thereby undermining the most negative thrust of his critique.82 The four paintings are two murals that decorate the Salon du Zodiaque at the Hôtel de Ville, the previously cited L’été and its contrasting pendant work, on the opposite wall, L’hiver (Figure 3.9), and the two easel paintings for more private

82 Calonne, 19 May 1891. See ch.1, n.1.
viewing that were atypical for Puvis’s *oeuvre*, both previously discussed in great detail, *Le pauvre pêcheur* and *Jeunes filles*.

As I have already outlined, the two easel works are scenes of high oddity. *Le pauvre pêcheur* is a scene of gut-wrenching despair, showing a group of people, probably a family, taking on an environment that is so harsh, it will ultimately spell their demise, yet the humble folks do not show any fear toward their circumstances nor fight against their assaulting surroundings. To my mind, *Jeunes filles* is even odder. The three women simply exist in some ambiguous place that is mostly featureless. They do not interact with each other, similar to the figures in *Le pauvre pêcheur*, but they differ from the figures of the other work in that they do not even seem capable of being *able* to interact. Whereas the former canvas’s characters choose quiet stillness, the latter’s are seemingly inextricably bound to it.

What is it in Puvis’s composition that makes the figures in the two easel paintings so quiet and still? I would argue that the primary culprit is the enclosed space the figures in both paintings occupy, as I described in an earlier chapter. They are all trapped. The places in which they reside bear down on them, pressure them, perhaps even crush the life out of them.

Compositionally speaking, the figures in the murals Puvis painted for the re-opening of the Hôtel de Ville are arranged in exactly the opposite way.
Instead of enduring the bearing down of their surroundings on them, they encircle the provinces they occupy. Whether it is the fertile, lush greenspace, traversed by a waterway, of L’été or the severely weathered environment of L’hiver, the main compositional character of the two works are active human beings creating something of a circular or ovular form to encompass the places in which they find themselves.

In L’été, the people are compelled to leisure—they frolic on a lovely summer’s day. In L’hiver, the residents of the settlement we look upon unite to do the work that must be done to survive the meager time of year. In either case, cooperation among the inhabitants of the spheres of the paintings is paramount, and the spirit that cooperation conjures makes the precincts in which it takes place seem decidedly secondary. Whereas the harsh location shown in Le pauvre pêcheur offers no embrace of the desperate people in it and the rocky outcroppings and overwhelming sea of Jeunes filles seems to bear down mightily to dismember the young women as they exist, the residents of Puvis’s summer and winter scenes for the entrance to the Hôtel de Ville offer a different scenario—they show a community of people enveloping the space in which they live in order to make it function more ideally to their needs.

I believe that this aspect of envelopment in Puvis’s later mural works, like those at the Hôtel de Ville, proved to be a deciding factor in the ways in which
individuals from all philosophical bents admired the painter’s work. If Puvis put forth such inviting, collaborative scenes that, at the same time, left out enough detail for viewers to fill in the remainder of their stories with the ideas most important to them, it comes as no surprise that they saw their own conceptions of the world and society in the artist’s works. It is almost as if Puvis is embracing the ideas of his viewers when he paints figures who ensconce their settings. He makes his viewers feel comfortable to let their own intellects and imaginations, surely influenced at all times by their values, populate the atmospheres of his imprecise scenes.

When Puvis escaped to Honfleur to work on the two easel paintings I highlight in this essay, it is almost as if he was working out how not to make paintings intended for broad public consumption that, by their very nature, needed to make viewers feel positively about them. He was able to accomplish just that by doing two things. The first was that he composed his scenes in negation to the foreboding views he worked out in his private works, meaning that the public works would, if rendered appropriately, be inviting. Second, he reduced his forms to their most basic elements so as not to particularize them into telling a single story. Because the forms present in his murals, both figural and atmospheric, were so unfinished and indistinct, Puvis allowed his viewers to fill in the blanks, so to speak, of the visions he put before them. The artist
provided the template for storytelling, but the stories of his scenes were told in the minds of his viewers, minds that were already rife with heartily crystallized ideologies.

If Pierre Puvis de Chavannes was indeed “the painter of France,” as many called him toward the end of his career, he was so because he acknowledged the wide variety of people who called themselves French. Across the board of ideas, Puvis could find a way to encourage his viewers to find all of those ideas in his public murals. The key to the artist’s success was to not tell the ideas himself. Instead, he let his viewers find them. In this way, the murals of Puvis de Chavannes are not only visions of the artist himself but also, quite clearly, the visions of his viewers.
Figure 3.1. Stop, caricature of *Le pauvre pêcheur*, “Un crapaud crevé donne le choléra à un pauvre pêcheur; sa femme cueille des fleurs odorantes pour neutraliser les misames.” *Journal amusant*, 28 May 1881, 5
Figure 3.2. Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *Doux Pays*, 1882, oil on canvas, 230 cm x 430 cm, Musée Bonnat, Bayonne, France
Figure 3.3. Léon Bonnat, *Portrait of Puvis de Chavannes*, 1882, oil on canvas, private collection
Figure 3.4. Paul Signac, *In the Time of Harmony*, 1894-1895, oil on canvas, 300 cm x 400 cm, Mairie de Montreuil, Montreuil, France
Figure 3.5. Henri-Edmond Cross, *Evening Air*, ca. 1893, oil on canvas, 116 cm x 164 cm, Musée d’Orsay, Paris, France
Figure 3.6. Henri Matisse, *Luxe, calme et volupté*, 1904, oil on canvas, 98.5 cm x 118.5 cm, Musée d’Orsay, Paris, France
Figure 3.7. Marcellin Desboutin, *Portrait of Pierre Puvis de Chavannes*, 1895, oil (color absent), Musée de Picardie, Amiens, France
Figure 3.8. Georges Jean, *Portrait of Pierre Puvis de Chavannes*, 1895, painted enamel (color absent), private collection, France
Figure 3.9. Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, *L'hiver*, 1892, oil on canvas, affixed to wall, 5.9 m x 9.1 m, Salon du Zodiaque, Hôtel de Ville, Paris, France
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