



Paul-Henri Bourguignon: An Artist in Columbus and “Elsewhere”

Ann Bremner

In the final pages of *The Greener Grass*, Paul-Henri Bourguignon’s semiautobiographical novel, the narrator boards a plane to fly from Lima, Peru, to Port-au-Prince, Haiti. When the woman seated beside him asks if he intends to stay in Haiti, he replies, “I don’t think so.” Then he goes on to muse to himself:

Why should I stay in Haiti; why not go elsewhere?
Oh yes, elsewhere. That’s the only right place for me.
Where else could I nurture my dreams?

Bourguignon spent nearly forty years, about half his life, in Columbus, Ohio, but you wouldn’t know that by looking at his art. In many ways he remained a quintessentially European, and specifically Belgian, gentleman and artist. He conversed with his wife, Erika, most often in French and followed cultural developments and debates in the pages of *Le Figaro littéraire*, a supplement to the Parisian newspaper *Le Figaro*. Yet his view of the world extended far beyond Europe. His own travels took him to North Africa and South America, as well as throughout Europe, and he spent crucial years living and working in Haiti and Peru. His extensive library, much of which still fills shelves throughout the house he and Erika shared in Columbus, encompasses volumes on the arts of Asia, Africa, the Americas, and the South Pacific. The art objects he collected reflect a similar globe-spanning diversity. After spending countless hours immersed in Bourguignon’s art and the environment of his home, I am convinced that he strove to live as a true citizen of the world, not an easy prospect in mid-twentieth-century Ohio.

Bourguignon was born in Brussels in 1906 and grew up in that city. His family heritage reflected both sides of Belgium’s linguistic and cultural history: his mother was of Flemish background, and his father was a French-speaking Walloon. Although neither was an extensive traveler, his father enjoyed thinking

Fire Dance, 1986, acrylic
Collection of Gary and Janet Reiss



The Florentine, 1956, bears a striking resemblance to Paul-Henri Bourguignon as a young man. Collection of Artists Archives of the Western Reserve



Bourguignon on his travels of the 1930s in Nantes, France (top left), Erbalonga, Corsica (top right), Rome, Italy (middle left), and Nîmes, France (middle right); the artist with a Haitian family in 1947 (bottom left)

about exotic locales: for a time, he had a collection of live birds from around the world, including an American cardinal.

Bourguignon began to study painting as a teenager and had his first solo exhibition, at a commercial gallery in Brussels, when he was twenty-two. He went on to study art history at the Université Libre de Bruxelles and wrote his thesis on the sixteenth-century Spanish painter El Greco. In the 1930s, he worked briefly as an assistant to the consul general of Haiti in Brussels and then for several years as the manager of the official tourism office for Belgium and Luxembourg. He traveled extensively during these early years, and memories of France, Spain, Italy, Morocco, and Bosnia filled his imagination and his paintings in Columbus decades later.

World War II ripped into the fabric of Belgian life when the German army invaded on its way to France in May 1940. Bourguignon, who had been working as a reporter for the Belgian national telegraph agency, was then ordered—along with other able-bodied Belgian men of military age—to go to northern France to join the French army. Although some Belgians were able to reach the Allies, the swift German advance cut off others, including Bourguignon’s group, which was left with no choice but to make its way back to Brussels, a strenuous and hazardous trek through an already war-torn country. During the years of the German occupation, Bourguignon managed to find “essential” work (distributing ration tickets to foreign travelers) in order to avoid being sent to Germany as a “volunteer” worker. Immediately after Belgium’s liberation in the fall of 1944, Bourguignon returned to the reorganized national telegraph agency, reporting on the Battle of the Bulge and the later stages of the war in Europe. Although Brussels did not experience the years of ongoing attacks so many European cities suffered, life there was filled with uncertainties, shortages, and fear. Bourguignon did not portray his wartime experiences directly, yet the hardships and deprivations he encountered then informed his later art, as in the compassion and empathy he brought to such images as the *Via Crucis* series of the 1970s.

In the postwar years, Bourguignon wrote art criticism for the Brussels newspaper *Le Phare* and opened his own gallery, *Le Scorpion*, at Knokke-Le Zoute, a Belgian seaside resort. His work as a critic brought him into contact with such artists as



Bourguignon in Haiti, 1947



Hotel Excelsior, 1967, gouache
Collection of Ruth Ann Newcomer

Modernist pioneer James Ensor, whom he interviewed for *Le Phare*, and French painter, sculptor, critic, and educator André Lhote. He also collaborated with respected Belgian Expressionist artists on three small publications after liberation. Alice Frey illustrated Bourguignon's retelling of the story of the seven days of creation. Marc Mendelson illustrated a new French translation of Fyodor Dostoyevsky's "White Nights." Edgard Tytgat provided illustrations for a play authored by Bourguignon in Brussels dialect. Yet Bourguignon soon became restless. Eager to leave the uncertainty of life in Europe behind, he accepted an invitation from a former colleague to visit Haiti in 1947 and convinced *Le Phare* to support his trip by naming him a correspondent for the newspaper.

Bourguignon's time in Haiti was pivotal for both his art and his life. Although he does not seem to have painted there, he became engaged in the life of Port-au-Prince, meeting diplomats, artists, and writers and capturing the life around him in photographs. His future wife, Erika Eichhorn, then a graduate student at Northwestern University, was conducting anthropological fieldwork for her doctoral dissertation in Haiti, and the two found themselves staying in the same guesthouse, the Hotel Excelsior. (Her Jewish family had left Vienna in 1938,

after the German annexation of Austria, finding refuge in Switzerland and then New York.) They soon became close friends and explored Haiti together, with Paul often documenting Erika's research trips and subjects in photography. Bourguignon continued his travels with an extended stay in Peru. He then joined Erika in the United States. They were married in 1950 and settled in Columbus, where she was teaching at the Ohio State University. (She remained on the faculty until her retirement in 1990).

In Columbus, Bourguignon taught French informally (often to graduate students), read voraciously in several languages, collected art and books and records, wrote *The Greener Grass* (published posthumously), and collaborated with his wife to produce a series about international folk music for WOSU radio. Most importantly, he painted. He traveled the world in his imagination and in his artwork, creating in his studio the elusive "elsewhere" that could be anywhere and everywhere he wanted to be. While assembling a table for the couple's first home in Columbus, he painted its surface with a landscape seen through an open window, a subject familiar in art history and in Bourguignon's own work that might poignantly reflect his yearning for "elsewhere."

But remaining engaged with the world he had once traveled in person was not a simple project. In the ever-connected age of the Internet, the smart phone, and Amazon, it is easy to forget how laborious communications and transactions must have been in the 1950s and 1960s—and even in the 1970s and 1980s. Bourguignon pored over catalogs and ordered books and records and art objects by mail. Weeks or months later, his treasures would arrive, delivered by postal carriers who marveled at the number of weighty parcels he received.

I'm unable to think of a field of art that didn't interest him, and he liked to have complete sets of everything. Histories of European and Belgian art, *Aperture* photography books, studies of notable filmmakers, and volumes on African textiles, Japanese calligraphy, and folk art from around the world filled his bookshelves, along with monographs on the work of just about any twentieth-century artist you could name. (One of the most unusual volumes in his library is a catalog from the 1920s of a Parisian exhibition of contemporary art from Japan.) He surrounded himself with objects he found beautiful or



PAUL HENRI and Erika Bourguignon, a husband-and-wife team, are responsible for arranging and presenting the radio series called "Man and His Music" over WOSU at 10:45 a. m. each Tuesday.

The Columbus Citizen photograph and blurb on the Bourguignons' radio program, 1954

interesting: folk art from Haiti and textiles and ceramics from Peru (some brought to Columbus from his own trips and some acquired later), but also African sculpture, American duck decoys, a Buddhist temple guardian figure, seashells, rocks he deployed in his garden in his own version of a Zen garden, and rather a lot of movable type discarded by the printing industry.

In this museum of his own invention, he returned to art making in earnest, perhaps for the first time since the 1920s and 1930s. (*In the Andes* [p. 37], produced in Peru in 1950, is an anomaly.) He continued to work continuously and prolifically from the 1950s until his death in 1988. Exhibition opportunities in Columbus and its surroundings were relatively few and far between well into the 1980s, but I've always had the sense that Bourguignon was far more dedicated to making art than to exhibiting it. He did present his work in several well-received shows, including a solo exhibition at the then Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts in 1964. In the last years of his life, his art was featured at Renée Steidel's Gallery 200, a notable presence in Columbus's nascent gallery scene. Since his death, his work has found audiences through numerous presentations in Ohio and in New York City, Sedona, Santa Fe, and elsewhere.

I became acquainted with Paul-Henri Bourguignon's art when I was invited to assist with a retrospective exhibition at the Schumacher Gallery of Capital University in 1989. I've been intrigued ever since, fascinated by the story of his life and captivated by the diversity and development of his oeuvre. I harbor a special fondness for his late work, but I also find myself coming back time and again to works from throughout his life, tracing his evolution from a young student absorbing the lessons of the Post-Impressionists to a confident, independent artist knowledgeable about a vast array of predecessors and contemporaries yet secure in his own voice.

The Columbus Museum of Art exhibition this volume documents and accompanies includes paintings and drawings from throughout Bourguignon's working life, from a 1924 pastel of Bruges (p. 34) that the artist described as among the first efforts he considered worthy of framing and keeping to *Les Faux Témoins* (*The False Witnesses*) of 1988 (p. 75), completed just a few days before his death. A pastel of Marseilles as seen from

Marseille, Le Vieux Port (Marseilles, The Old Port), 1928, pastel
Collection of Keith and Anne DeVoe



a hotel window (1928) offers another glimpse of the young artist's approach to landscape, steeped in Impressionism and Post-Impressionism, as he seeks his own vocabulary of color and composition. *Couple with Dog* (1925, p. 35)—a pastel found this year behind the frame of another painting—gives, perhaps, a more personal view, introducing Bourguignon's ability to suggest character and personality through nuances of posture or facial expression, as well as his wit and his affection for animals. The simplified form and enormous eyes of *St. Paul* (1934, p. 36) prefigure strategies Bourguignon would employ in the 1950s and 1960s but also recall the imagery of El Greco and of Belgian Expressionists such as Tytgat.

When Bourguignon began painting again in Columbus, he brought his familiarity with art history and European Modernism with him. As a student and later as an art critic and gallery owner, he was deeply engaged in analyzing the styles and innovations of old masters and contemporary artists alike. Many of his paintings of the 1950s and 1960s draw liberally from the history of Modernism, freely borrowing and blending techniques used by varied artists, among them Paul Cézanne, Henri Matisse, and Pablo Picasso, but also Georges Rouault,

Italian Town, 1958, gouache
Collection of Jan Glaser



Amedeo Modigliani, Marc Chagall, Paul Klee, and the Belgian artists Bourguignon had known in his younger days. *The White Dress* (1951, p. 38)—the first painting Bourguignon did in Columbus—and the drawing *The Open Window* (1955, p. 43) are explicitly Matissean, as much homage as invention. And many viewers will see strong echoes of Vincent van Gogh's 1888 *Chair*, now in the National Gallery in London, in Bourguignon's *Chairs* (1963, p. 48), even though, as Erika recalls, her husband's painting was inspired by Eugène Ionesco's absurdist play *Les Chaises* (*The Chairs*). Numerous other works from these years—the robust *Italian Peasant* (1953, p. 41) and the delicate *Les Mariés* (*The Bridal Couple*) (1962, p. 47); *The Red Sail* (1952, p. 39), *Trujillo (Spain)* (1964, p. 49), and other landscapes or cityscapes—fuse Modernist strategies with Bourguignon's memories and imaginings of his own past journeys.

His mind, and his paintbrush or pen, often turned to his time in Haiti and Peru, probably aided by the photos he took in those locals. *Woman with Donkey* (1963), with a white-clad woman on a balcony and a pack donkey waiting patiently outside a shadowed building, shows a scene similar to many Bourguignon must have seen and photographed in Haiti. The brilliant sunshine and deep shadows of the subtropical light particularly impressed him in Haiti, as did the busy street markets and the "ceaseless activity of women, going to market (whether in the city or out of town) carrying heavy loads on their heads," according to Erika. He gave those Haitian memories visual expression in paintings including *Busy Street* (1968, p. 54), *Tropical Sun* (1972, p. 58), *In Her Room* (1972, p. 59), and *Le Petit Café* (*The Artist and His Friends*) (1973, p. 60), which depicts the milieu, loosely based on his own experiences, Bourguignon created in *The Greener Grass*. He brought a quite different palette to his images of Peru, such as *Women of the Andes* (1968, p. 55). Its blues, greens, brownish grays are reminiscent of the colors he chose when painting *In the Andes* (page 37) on site in Peru in 1950, and its figures are simplified masses that suggest the clay Peruvian folk art figures the artist collected.

Remembered or imagined faces were among Bourguignon's most frequent subjects in Columbus. He rarely if ever worked from models, but he did "collect" heads and faces by closely

observing individuals he encountered. One of Erika's stories tells of her mild embarrassment as he studied—stared at—acquaintances and strangers on the Ohio State campus and her amusement when she recognized their physiognomies in paintings or drawings completed days or months later. Through the early 1970s his faces and figures stayed close to recognizable representation, expressively rendered in such images as *Black Hair* (1962, p. 46), *La Mantilla* (1964, p. 51), or *The African* (1970, p. 56). By the later 1970s, Bourguignon's approach was changing, becoming increasingly abstract. Sometimes he suggested movement or multiple viewpoints, offering hints of noses, eyes, or chins seen frontally as well as in profile, as in *Turning Girl* (1977). In this he followed an impulse that Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque, and other artists had pursued decades before in Cubism. But he developed his own vocabulary of forms emerging from heavily worked grounds and features barely indicated with white pencil.

As a young man, Bourguignon worked most often in pastel, a medium favored by many artists for its quickness, adaptability, and convenience of use outdoors, *en plein air*. In his Columbus studio, he turned to gouache, a kind of opaque watercolor paint, which he preferred to oil since it allowed him to work more quickly. Sometimes he mixed gesso into the gouache, which gave the paint more body and allowed for more painterly effects. The stylistic shift in his paintings noted above loosely coincides with his adoption of acrylic, a relatively recent addition to the pigments available to artists. (He was not at all picky about his painting grounds, using virtually any kind of paper he could find at hand.) He drew in pencil, ink, and charcoal throughout his working life, producing many of his most elegantly succinct images with just a few strokes of pen, brush, or pencil.

He also explored the possibilities of collage, although to a relatively limited extent. In the 1970s–1980s he made compositions of type and images cut from magazines to serve as cover designs for the portfolios in which he collected his unframed paintings and drawings.

Bourguignon's paintings of the 1970s and 1980s reveal his joyously obsessive investigation of painting. I think he was

Woman and Donkey, 1963, gouache



Turning Girl, 1977, acrylic

Italian Cypress, 1955, charcoal



energized by the coloristic possibilities of acrylic paint, which were still relatively new to him. He set colors side by side, mixed them on his palette or on a painting's surface, and layered them into thick patterns. In some works he then laid on yet another layer of paint, or white gesso, to conceal much of the underpainting and leave only selected sections as silhouetted figures. In addition to a plethora of paintbrushes, he employed an assortment of rags, spatulas, lids, stamps, and repurposed household tools to apply his paintings' fields of pigment and then to coax and tease out the figures, animals, and elements of landscape or architecture he found hidden in them. He must have loved the incredible range of vivid colors available to him, both right from the tube and in his own blends. Perhaps that sparked his interest in conveying the hues of a sunlit church window in *Vitrail (Stained Glass Window)* from 1986 (p. 71).

Along with faces or figures, remembered places recur as frequent subjects in these late paintings. The figures in *Three Figures Walking* (1986, p. 73) echo the postures of the women in the exquisitely simple drawing *Haiti: Going to Market* (1965, p. 53). The high-keyed palette and landscape forms barely discernible in *Sunlight* (1982, p. 64) might also recall Haiti. *Ste. Gudule, Brussels* (1985, p. 68) shows the elegant towers of the cathedral of Brussels, titled with the familiarity of a native son. (Although it was once formally known as the Cathedral of St. Michael, locals tended to call the church St. Gudula—Ste. Gudule, in French—because a statue of that saint was found above the entrance. The official name now honors both saints: Cathedralis SS. Michaelis et Gudulae.)

I often find myself describing the imagery in these works with such terms as "hidden," "buried," or "excavated." Sometimes I wonder if the artist sought to invite viewers to join him in a game of painterly hide and seek, like watching for castles in the clouds. I doubt if Bourguignon set out to paint jugglers in *Japanese Jugglers* (1985), for example, but something he saw in his layers of paint or skeins of overlaid lines (often arcs and circles) brought those subjects to mind. Then he worked to accentuate the resemblance or perhaps simply offered the title as a clue to help viewers see (or seek) the connection for themselves.



The Race, 1985, acrylic

Although Bourguignon's paintings are rarely larger than about twenty-four inches in either height or width, his late works blend intimacy with a surprising monumentality. They are so dense that you want to study them closely, but they also have breadths and depths in which you can lose yourself. The visual links to the work of other artists, so readily recognizable in his earlier paintings, are much less evident, although affinities certainly can be found. I sometimes think of the paintings of Mark Tobey, or more accurately, of "white writing," the phrase sometimes applied to Tobey's work, which comes to my mind as a way to describe the white lines that dance across the surfaces of some of my favorite paintings by Bourguignon. (The two artists shared an abiding interest in Asian art and calligraphy along with their enthusiasm for mark making.) I'm tempted to call Bourguignon's late paintings "Abstract Expressionist," not in the sense of the New York School

Japanese Jugglers, 1985, acrylic



paintings of Jackson Pollock or Willem de Kooning, but in the way that phrase can also be applied to the work of Vasily Kandinsky or Paul Klee or the French artists associated with *Art Informel* and Tachism or the vanguard Northern European artists of CoBrA (for “Copenhagen, Brussels, Amsterdam”; Marc Mendelson, whom Bourguignon knew in Belgium, was associated with this group). Not surprisingly, Bourguignon’s library contained books on all these artists and artistic tendencies, as well as on Pop art, Minimalism, Conceptual art, and pretty much any other direction of note through the 1980s. Whether he felt affinities or not, he seems to have made a concerted effort to stay informed about contemporary art internationally.

In a number of Bourguignon’s paintings I see him taking stock of his own identity as an artist, selecting subjects and strategies that allowed him to position his work in the context of the distant and more recent art history he knew so well. Both *The Last Canvas* (1954, p. 42) and *The Model* (1957, p. 45) grapple with questions about the kinds of imagery an artist chooses. In the first, is he perhaps turning away from portraying the landscape before him as he learned to do as a student? In the latter, is he seeing how his painting might measure up in the long lineage of images of artists and models, or possibly offering his own riff on Diego Velasquez’s *Las Meninas*, one of the most celebrated examples of such images?

Toledo and the Catholic Kings, 1971, gouache



Bourguignon liked to deploy his paintings in multipart arrangements, like the diptychs, triptychs, and many paneled altarpieces so familiar to him from the churches of Brussels, Bruges, Ghent, and other cities in Belgium and elsewhere in Europe. In *Toledo and the Catholic Kings* (1971), a view of the Spanish city once painted by El Greco is flanked by male and female figures that stand as silent witnesses like traditional donor figures. These figures, like those in *Women of the Andes*, recall the forms of Peruvian folk art. A triptych titled *Sonata for Flute and Bird* (1966, p. 6) features a female in a short shift (similar to the figure in *The Model* [1957, p. 45]) and a seated male playing a flute in the central panel. This time the side images show two musicians playing double basses. In another artist-and-model image from 1960, Bourguignon created a triptych with wings that, when closed, show two images of the model clothed and then, when open, reveal the central panel with the artist and a nude model, as well as half-length nudes on either wing.

He definitely had a taste for grand projects, as in the *Via Crucis* and *Bible* series, both of which he assembled and sequenced as cohesive totalities, although they were not exhibited as such until after his death. The images of *Via Crucis* (p. 57) present specific incidents from the Stations of the Cross; the two hundred drawings of the *Bible* relate to particular verses from the King James Version of the Old Testament. In both series he is concerned not with the details of dogma but with the human condition and human emotion, even when that emotion is conveyed through the bewildered and frightened eyes of a beast, as *The Golden Calf* (1965, p. 52). With these series, as well as paintings titled *Mother and Child* (among them those of 1957 and 1987, p. 74) and *Les Faux Témoins* (*The False Witnesses*) (1988, p. 75), is Bourguignon asserting his work’s place among the Madonnas and biblical scenes of artists from Albrecht Dürer, Jan van Eyck, El Greco, or Rembrandt van Rijn to Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, and Marc Chagall? He followed the progress of Matisse’s chapel at Vence, France, and Chagall’s stained glass window projects of the 1950s–1970s with interest, and he certainly would have been aware of Chagall’s own *Bible* illustrations of the 1930s.

One aspect of Bourguignon’s work that I have barely mentioned is the sly wit and playful humor that permeate



Mother and Child, 1957, gouache

a number of his images. It's there in the seductive snake and listening woman of *Genesis III "And the Serpent said to the Woman..."* (1966, p. 52) from the *Bible* series and in many other drawings, as well as quite a few of the animal images collected in a portfolio he labeled *Bestiary*. It comes through perhaps most strongly in Bourguignon's activities beyond painting. In addition to drawings, these projects include miniature sculptures made from Styrofoam packing materials, tableaux of folk art figures and other small objects carefully

Dog, 1982, acrylic



Mother and Child, 1986, acrylic and cloth

arranged in egg cartons or trays for printers' type, and a framed assemblage of paint rags, also titled *Mother and Child* (1986).

In his vibrant and engaging paintings and epic series Bourguignon sought his own place in the history of art he cherished. In these other, more varied works he celebrated the restless and relentless creativity that allowed him to find fuel for his art everywhere and anywhere he looked, in Columbus and "elsewhere."