

RECURRING THEMES

Recurring themes and variations on them are common to the work of just about all the creative figures I can call to mind: visual artists, musicians, writers, filmmakers, architects, designers—you name them. Those themes can take form in subjects or characters that reappear in different guises across time and in varied mediums and styles. They can show themselves clearly in favorite materials or techniques or speak out more softly through subtle nuances of structure and strategy. Looking for and identifying such patterns is one of the first and most enduring ways we crystallize ideas about individual artists and their works. It may not answer every question, but it's almost always a good way to start.



Woman with Black Hair, 1958

This exhibition reveals many types of recurrences in the paintings and drawings of Paul-Henri Bourguignon (1906–1988). In these works viewers may trace a fascination with faces and figures that links representational images in gouache from the 1950s and 1960s with acrylic paintings made twenty and thirty years later in which hints of a facial profile or body barely emerge from a dense ground of brushwork. They may also come to share the artist's awareness of how light and color combine to establish a sense of locale, whether remembered or imagined, whether depicted with the elements of landscape and cityscape or evoked much more abstractly. On a more formal level, they may notice a tendency to reduce subjects to their simplest essentials—a few strokes of ink, a silhouetted “negative” form—that also transcends the otherwise disparate breadth of Bourguignon's work.

Over the past few months, I've spent a fair amount of time looking at Bourguignon's paintings and drawings—and at his art-filled, book-filled, memory-filled home. It's been a process of getting reacquainted, almost twenty years after I first encountered and wrote about his art in conjunction with an exhibition (*Paul-Henri*

Bourguignon: A Retrospective) held at the Schumacher Gallery at Capital University in the fall of 1989. Then I was so struck by the mutability of his work, its versatility and eclecticism—what I called the artist's “abhorrence of stagnation”—that the continuities



Vivario, Corsica, 1964

scarcely registered. His affection for faces and places certainly came through, but mostly as part of the ground he traveled in common with so many artists navigating their ways between representation, expressionism, and abstraction in the first half of the twentieth century.

This time, cued by the approach of the current exhibition, I've been pondering the qualities his works share. Because I don't want to stop at the surface, I've been engaged in a kind of excavation—rather an accurate word, given the density of some of the paintings—to try to look into the mind that created all these images, plus photographs, a novel, a play, and art criticism too. How did he approach painting and drawing, and how did that practice fit into the totality of his life? My thoughts keep circling around a trio of attitudes or approaches that seems to fit Bourguignon's work regardless of what it depicts or looks like.



Figure in Landscape II, 1987

The Art of Paul-Henri Bourguignon

1906 – 1988

Essay by Ann Bremner

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Visit www.paulbourguignon.com for more information

First off, many of the paintings and drawings you'll see here draw on Bourguignon's memories of or his experiences in places distant from both his native Belgium and his long-time home in the United States. But



Toledo & Catholic Kings Triptych, 1971

those memories are filtered through a pervasive cultural awareness that began with his studies in art in the 1920s and continued with reading, listening, collecting, conversing, and thinking throughout his life. Nearly all the works in the exhibition were painted after 1950, when Bourguignon settled in Columbus, Ohio, where his wife, Erika, had joined the faculty of Ohio State University's anthropology department. In subjects, styles, and sensibility, however, the paintings and drawings rely on all the experiences of his life up until that time. His studies in painting and art history in the 1920s and 1930s introduced him to the work of old masters and young upstarts alike. His activities as an art critic and a gallery owner in postwar Belgium plunged him into an active art scene where the innovations of modernism were fresh and vital, lived as much as learned. His work seems to have sprouted from the same soil as Henri Matisse, Pablo Picasso, Georges Rouault, or Amedeo Modigliani—and in many ways it did. But it was also nourished by travels that took him to southern France, Italy, Spain, Bosnia, and North Africa, and later for extended stays in Haiti and Peru. What he remembers (perhaps a pose, a face, a burst of sunlight, or a tree-lined street) is routed through all he knows of art and art history, including insights gleaned from the folk art and artifacts he collected.

What I mean is especially well illustrated in the triptych called *Toledo and the Catholic Kings* (1971): a moody view of the Spanish city flanked by eerily similar male and female donors recalled (or imagined)

from a Peruvian village. The sweep of the Tagus River defines the city's position; the silhouette of the Alcázar fortress punctuates the horizon. This is the final and most fully realized of several views of Toledo in the current exhibition—and it looks to me as if the artist carefully tried out different approaches to the composition several years before settling on his choice. The image clearly points toward El Greco, who was the subject of Bourguignon's art history thesis, and the Spanish artist's famed views of Toledo must have been constantly in his mind and memory. But the perspective on the city doesn't replicate El Greco's, and the geometric simplification of the landscape suggests instead comparisons with Cezanne or early cubism.

Bourguignon's memories of Lima, Peru, where he found many echoes of Spain, are also at work, and the donor figures recall drawings such as *Women of the Andes* (1968), as well as the clay figures of Peruvian folk art. Of course the donor figures also recall those in a host of Flemish late gothic/early renaissance paintings (including Jan and Hugo van Eyck's Ghent Altarpiece) that Bourguignon could doubtless conjure up simply by closing his eyes. Yet despite this array of references—all, I believe, very conscious—the whole is neither at all derivative nor fragmented as a pastiche. It simply reflects a mind's eye steeped in art history, European modernism, and the experiences of a sophisticated traveler and sensitive observer.



Women of the Andes 1968

The second attitude I see recurring in Bourguignon's work involves a taut balance between observation and stylization. Drawing from the model and

painting outdoors were both surely part of his artistic studies and probably of his early work. But, as Erika Bourguignon remembers, neither played a role in his art making during their life together. What she does remember is catching her husband staring at people, nearly to the point of rudeness, in restaurants or at parties or other social gatherings. Sometimes she would recognize a face, or maybe just an expression or a gesture, in a subsequent picture. Yet even when Bourguignon's images seem most closely observed, they are stylized, simplified. Instead of conveying his observations by accumulating details, he sought to



Kratovo (Serbia), 1980



Street in Morocco, 1980



The Florentine, 1956

capture them with the sparsest means possible. How little can he tell us about the man in the painting called *The Florentine* (1956) while still conveying his aristocratic flair and quizzical gaze? (Erika Bourguignon recognizes a semblance of her husband's own face in this image.) How few lines can he use to summon up a coffee party in Bosnia—



Coffee Party, Bosnia, 1963

or to distinguish three women walking from three men walking (all in drawings from 1963)? Did he walk the streets staring in his youth, too, and so take mental snapshots to spark the glimpses of Serbia or Morocco he painted years after being there?



Three Women Walking, 1963

In any case, he also chose very reductive means to capture their particular qualities of sunlight and shadow, heat and dust.



Three Men Walking, 1963

In the later 1970s and 1980s, Bourguignon's work became much less immediately descriptive in its imagery. He produced acrylic paintings densely layered with paint and gesso, applied with kitchen

spatulas and other tools he found or constructed. Sometimes forms (usually figurative) push their way to



Don Quijote, 1985

our eyes as if carved out from the dense ground. Other times a thin line of white describes a surface pattern that just might resolve into a suggestive image. In these works the observation/stylization balance reverses, but the artist's means are just as economical. He reveals enough clues for our observing eyes to recognize a stylized shape as a profile or a figure in motion. As if staring at clouds in a summer sky or an inkblot, he waited to see what form suggested itself from the painted surface, then helped it gain that identity: look at *Horses and Riders* or *Japanese Jugglers* (both 1985) to see what I mean.



The Thinker, 1984

A final approach that asserts and reasserts itself throughout Bourguignon's art, and so

throughout this selection of his work, is a current of teasing playfulness that sometimes shades into provocations aimed at imagined viewers. Puns and other elements of wordplay figure into this, as does the artist's encyclopedic familiarity with a vast assortment of art and literature.



Horses and Riders, 1985



Japanese Jugglers, 1985



One of many drafts for *Leda and the Swan*, 1964



Leda and the Swan, 1964

I find that playfulness in a series of drawings Bourguignon did in 1964 depicting the classical myth of Leda and the Swan. One of the many tales of the loves of Zeus/Jupiter, the story recounts how the god turned himself into a swan to seduce (or possibly rape) a mortal woman. Familiar from accounts in Ovid and elsewhere, the story became a fairly standard part of the artistic repertoire during the Italian renaissance and later. Leonardo da Vinci, Antonio del Correggio, and many others depicted the event, often with strongly erotic overtones; Bourguignon's rendition, in a sequence of line drawings, seems to set himself the project as a challenge: to imagine how such an awkward assignation could take place, and to see how he would acquit himself with a famed subject. Earlier drafts of the first drawing show subtle differences.

I think other variants of art historical teasing are at play in subjects chosen from the canon of modernism's development (as if the artist were saying, well, here's my laundress, or my model in-the-studio, or perhaps deliberately pushed in the direction of another artist's signature style, as in one or two very Matissean ladies. I can't help but think the artist

recognized the resemblance after a few lines and developed it for his own amusement, perhaps to see how close he could get.

Teasing whimsy also comes out in the painting *Rêve pour un cheval de bois* (*Dream for a Wooden Horse*, 1951), which shows a little horse prancing and pulling a small caravan, perhaps escaping from a carousel to fulfill a dream of living independently and being his own master, a dream that the artist could certainly understand. One image from 1954 recalls en plein air painting rather playfully, as an artist turns his back on a blank canvas on an easel under a tree. Or how about *Woman with a Long Neck* (1985), which can be hung upside down and still suggest the same title? Is it a wink at viewers, an invitation to play along or—most likely—both?

Although I never met Paul-Henri Bourguignon, I've come to think of him as a bit of a wanderer, a somewhat restless spirit. He moved through professions, and enthusiasms, rapidly as a young man: art, art history, what we might now call public relations, journalism, among others. Even before he left Belgium for Haiti, Peru, and the United States he sought out ways to connect with other places. Once in Ohio, he continued to roam the world not as an "armchair traveler" but as an artist whose drawing paper or easel could transport him across oceans and through time. He wove his experiences, his learning and cultural awareness, his acute observations, recognition of essentials, and sense of play into an artistic fabric that remains vibrant, varied, and wholly his own. ■



The Open Window, 1955



Rêve pour un cheval de bois, 1951



The Last Canvas, 1954



Woman with Long Neck, 1985



The Laundress, 1955



The Studio, 1957

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About the artist

Born in Brussels, Belgium, in 1906, Paul Bourguignon studied painting with a well-known Belgian artist in the 1920s (and sold out his first solo show in 1928), then took a degree in art history at the Université Libre de Bruxelles in 1935, writing a thesis on El Greco. During these formative years, he worked through a succession of postimpressionist and modernist stylistic influences and traveled to France, Spain, and Italy, as well as to Bosnia and North Africa. In the later 1930s and through the years of WWII, he turned away from art making and channeled his creative energies into writing, translating, and other literary activities. During these years, he worked for the Office Belgo-Luxembourgeoise du Tourisme (OBLUT), a quasi-governmental organization that promoted tourism, and Belga, a national news agency. His job during the German occupation of Belgium involved distributing ration stamps to foreigners. Later, after the war, he worked as an art critic for a daily newspaper and weekly magazine. His assignments brought him meetings and interviews with many notable artists, including James Ensor, the famed Belgian expressionist pioneer (best known for *Christ's Entry into Brussels in 1889*). He also briefly ran his own gallery, Le Scorpion, in the coastal town of Knokke-LeZoute.

In 1947 he decided to visit Haiti, where he stayed for about fifteen months, while continuing to write cultural commentary and travel reports for the newspaper. He took up photography in Haiti but did not paint, although subjects from his time there later figured prominently in his work. He met his future wife, Erika, in Haiti in 1948, when



she arrived there to do anthropological fieldwork. Next he spent about two years in Peru, where he engaged in writing and photography and began to collect folk and pre-Columbian art. In the summer of 1950, Bourguignon settled in Columbus, Ohio, where his wife, Erika, had joined the faculty of the Department of Anthropology at The Ohio State University. He resumed painting and drawings and began to exhibit his work, with

exhibitions in the 1960s at the Columbus Gallery of Fine Arts (now the Columbus Museum of Art), Ohio State, and Battelle Memorial Institute in Columbus, as well as at Grinnell College and the Blanden Gallery in Iowa and as far afield as Edmonton, Alberta. After a period of withdrawal in the 1970s and early 1980s, he began to exhibit again in 1987 at Gallery 200 in Columbus, then one of the city's first commercial galleries to exhibit contemporary works by artists and craftspeople from this region.

Bourguignon died in September 1988, but his work has continued to be shown in Columbus and elsewhere. A retrospective of his work was held at Capital University's Schumacher Gallery in 1989. Other exhibitions have taken place at the Ohio Governor's Mansion, the Pontifical College Josephinum, the Ohio State University Faculty Club, and at Gallery V in the Short North, Art Access in Bexley, and Island Weiss Gallery in New York City. His paintings are in private and public collections in the U.S. and Europe, and his writings on art have been deposited in the collection of Musée Royal in Brussels.

The Art of Paul-Henri Bourguignon

1906 – 1988

Historical information compiled by Ann Bremner

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1	Woman with Hat	gouache	21 x 14.5	43	Festival	acrylic	12 x 9
2	Woman's Head	gouache	18 x 15	44	Bacchanale	graphite and ink	7.5 x 11
3	The Florentine	gouache	24 x 17.5	45	Rêve pour un Cheval de Bois	gouache	4.5 x 5.5
4	Woman with Black Hair	gouache	12 x 9	46	The Strong Woman	ink	12 x 9
5	The French Jurist (le juge)	gouache	12 x 9	47	Nightlife	gesso	13 x 20
6	Red Face	gouache	12 x 9	48	Four Figures	ink	9 x 12
7	The Laundress	gouache	32 x 22	49	Seated Woman	acrylic	13 x 10
8	The Studio	gouache	32 x 22	50	Young Boy	acrylic	19 x 13
9	Janice	gouache	12 x 9	51	The Thinker	acrylic	12 x 9
10	Spanish Face	gouache	11.25 x 15	52	Standing Nude	gouache	12 x 9
11	The Apostle	mixed media	18 x 12	53	Seated Nude (Torso)	gouache	12 x 9
12	Anticipation (Red Boy)	acrylic	24 x 18	54	Women of the Andes	gouache	32 x 22
13	Ready to Dance	acrylic	24 x 18	55	Don Quijote (set of 2)	acrylic	18 x 12
14	The Procession	acrylic	24 x 30	56	Ducinea (set of 2)	acrylic	18 x 12
15	Japanese Jugglers	acrylic	13 x 20	57	Italian Peasant	gouache	24 x 18
16	Horses and Riders	acrylic	13 x 20	58	Marseille, Le Vieux Port	mixed media	18 x 24
17	Untitled (85/3)	acrylic	13 x 19	59	Sunshine (Haiti)	acrylic	14 x 17.5
18	Untitled, Figures in Landscape	acrylic	19 x 25	60	Royal Palms (Haiti)	acrylic	18 x 20
19	Ballets Russes	acrylic	19 x 25	61	Toulon-1900	gouache	20 x 34
20	Don Quijote	acrylic	21 x 15	62	Street in Morocco	acrylic	18 x 18
21	Untitled (Embedded Figure)	acrylic	30 x 25	63	Dubrovnik-Ragusa	gouache	14 x 18.5
22	Woman with Long Neck	acrylic	20 x 13	64	Erbalonga Corsica	gouache	15.5 x 20
23	Cityscape	acrylic	18 x 24	65	Kratovo (Serbia)	acrylic	15 x 18
24	Untitled (Figure in Landscape II)	acrylic	12 x 9	66	Toledo III	gouache	18 x 24
25	Triptych: Haiti	acrylic	12 x 9	67	Toledo I	gouache	12 x 18
	left		12 x 16	68	Toledo II	gouache	12 x 18
	center		12 x 9	69	The Last Canvas	gouache	30 x 19
	right			70	Port-au-Prince	acrylic	18 x 24
26	Untitled (Figure in Landscape)	acrylic	14.5 x 12	71	Vivario, Corsica	gouache	20.5 x 25.5
27	The Professor	gouache	9.5 x 7	72	Street Market (Haiti)	gouache	12 x 9
28	The Roman	graphite	10 x 7.5	73	Interior: The Gallery	gouache	18 x 14
29	Coffee Party, Bosnia	graphite	7 x 9	74	Still Life	gouache	9 x 12
30	Three Women Walking	graphite	6 x 8	75-77	Toledo and the Catholic Kings (triptych)	left center right	24 x 12 24 x 30 24 x 12
31	Three Men Walking	graphite	7 x 8.25	78	The Red Sail	gouache	18 x 24
32	The Open Window	pencil	10.5 x 8	79	Ile Rousse (Corsica)	gouache	18 x 24
33	Haitian Profile	graphite	9.5 x 7	80	Village in Flanders	acrylic	15 x 18
34	Leda and the Swan (draft)	graphite	7 x 11				
35-41	Leda and the Swan (series)	graphite	each 7 x 11				
42	The Temptation of St. Anthony	graphite and ink	7 x 11				

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