

Rob interviewing Caroline Boyle-Turner

Caroline Boyle-Turner: Well, it was by chance, actually. My undergraduate university had an arrangement with the faculté in Rennes, so in the winter of '89, I arrived in January, it was snowing, but I really had always dreamt of living in France. And so, this brought me to it. And my teacher, just again by luck, was Denise Delouche, who was one of the best scholars of the time, and she was the teacher. And, so one of the courses I had to take was art history, and I carefully took notes. And then, when I moved to Paris a few years later, I was writing my dissertation on Paul Sérusier, based on the notes that I had taken in her class. So, I arrived in Pont-Aven, and I was just absolutely enchanted with the place. I could just see Gauguin and see what he was trying to express, and the “otherness” of it and the costumes and the traditions, and the fact that this is Celtic; it's not French. I am from Irish and Scottish background, so there was just a resonance there. I just wanted to put on a pair of clogs and start dancing.

That led from one thing to the other. I started doing exhibitions over here, I taught at the American University in Paris for a while, but every summer I still kept coming out here, and it nurtured everything I was doing, because all of my projects were based on artists who had worked in Pont-Aven. From Sérusier, I moved over to Jan Verkade, a Dutch artist who was here, and then Meyer de Haan. Then I just sort of made the circuit of all of the artists. And I started teaching in the States at the Rhode Island School of Design, and I realised that the young students I had, they just thought that art began and ended in New York. And, I wanted to show them, no, there's a tradition that goes way, way back in French museums that you should learn about. So, I started bringing the students on a trip every January for a month in France. I would take them to Paris for two or three weeks, then we would go to Pont-Aven, following



Gauguin's footsteps, and they were enchanted with Pont-Aven too, and then I would take them to the south of France and we'd climb Mont Sainte Victoire when we were talking about Cézanne. So, then I had this crazy idea, I'm going to start a school here--get them out of Rhode Island, get them out of the States, let them be introduced to France, the countryside in France, not just Paris.

Rob: So, your art school that you set up in Pont-Aven was mostly for foreign artists?

Caroline: Yes, the courses were in English, so we wouldn't be confused with a French art school. Ours was a supplementary program, like an Erasmus program. And the credits would be transferred back to their universities overseas, in England, or in China, or in America. The students came from all over the world. They lived with host families and just experienced living in another culture. The school was founded in 1993 and finally, I left in 2008. It was a great experience and I loved it. And I learned a lot from my students, because they weren't interested in Gauguin. They'd say "Gauguin, Schmoguin, who's he?" They were more interested in very contemporary art.

Rob: Let's talk about Gauguin a little bit. He's the name that everybody seems to know. What do you think it was that brought him here? Was it the same sort of motivation that brought you here?

Caroline: Yes, Gauguin was attracted to the "otherness." Between the age of two and six, he lived in Lima, Peru. And his first language was Spanish. And then he joined the merchant marines, so he spent two years going up and down the coast of America. So, he was seeing lots of exotic places, and then he moved to Paris, got married, had five kids, but then he started painting. Slowly painting took over his life, there was a big stock-market crash in the early 80s. He was thrown out of his job. So finally, he said, "Well, I'm going to

go try to make a living as a painter.” He couldn’t afford to stay in Paris. A neighbour of his said, “Think about Brittany. It’s cheap. A lot of artists go there.” And he realised, hey, that’s like going to a different country, because they speak a different language, the costumes are traditional, they have nothing to do with the French, they don’t like the French. They’re Celts. And so, he jumped on a train and came out here.

Rob: During his time here, in Brittany, Gauguin was very much an inspiration to a whole load of other artists, weren’t they? You’ve been interested in Paul Sérusier, who settled in Châteauneuf-du-Faou and did some fine work there in the church. What attracted you to him, particularly? Is it different character to ...

Caroline: Very different, but meeting Gauguin was life-changing for him. And, it totally changed his career, because he was a much more traditional painter before that, a naturalist. What intrigued me is that – well many things. I didn’t want to start with Gauguin. First place, living out here, there are so many art historians who work on Gauguin in Brittany, and they can do it better than me, because they’ve grown up here, they know the traditions, they can tell one coiffe from the other, and exactly what town this was painted in and what tradition this shows. But, I wanted to do something with an artist I could get a hold on, before I tackled Gauguin. And then maybe by then I’d find another topic that would lead me into Gauguin. So, I chose Sérusier.

Rob: He’s not so well known, is he?

Caroline: No, especially then, back when I started my dissertation, it was in, oh, what was it, ’74. I was a kid.

Rob: Sérusier is known in Kazakhstan, isn’t he, thanks to you?



Caroline: Yes, yes, yes ...

Rob: Tell us about that.

Caroline: O.K., oh, well, the former capital of Kazakhstan has a jumelage program, a twin program with Rennes.

Rob: With Rennes?

Caroline: Yes, so the country wanted to celebrate the 25th anniversary of this jumelage, and somehow, somebody came up with the idea of Paul Sérusier, and so they did some talking around and said, well if you want to do a Paul Sérusier exhibition, it's got to be Caroline Boyle-Turner. And, the first thing I said was, "Where is Kazakhstan?"

Rob: And I imagine the Kazakhstan people wondered where Brittany might be.

Caroline: Exactly. They had no idea, so it as quite a challenge, and I loved doing it, because I had to figure out a way to get into their mindset – things, something they might interested in. They're Muslims, and not Catholics. They knew nothing about Brittany, as I said, but what Sérusier was interested in was many religions. So, he was a Catholic, but he sort of left the every-day Catholic faith behind, as he dabbled in theosophy. He considered even being a priest for a while. He enjoyed reading about other religions. He was fascinated by Krishna, for example—did a couple of paintings about Krishna—and so I tried to bring that in. But the main hook that I thought would attract the Kazaks and make them interested in Brittany was the costumes, because their tradition is heavily influenced by Eastern and Middle Eastern motifs, lots of embroidery, which is the basis of some of the costumes here, also very fancy headgear,



beautiful costumes, absolutely beautiful costumes, and so I chose a lot of paintings for it from the Châteauneuf-du-Foau period, because they really emphasised the traditions of Brittany and the costumes. And so, that's what they were most interested in. And, it worked. I hope that they have been coming to Brittany as a result.

Rob: Dr. Caroline Boyle-Turner, thank you very much indeed for coming to central Brittany to talk with us today and to be on Spotlight.

Caroline: The pleasure is all mine. Kenavo.