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equally emphatic use of the primary color, all three women wear the traditional dark Breton dresses and white headwear (although one has an uncharacteristically orange apron). In fact, the dress in Young Christian Girl is typical of the vibrant, loose-fitting clothing brought by missionaries to Tahiti, and Gauguin had presumably acquired it on his recent travels, or had simply invented it based on his experience abroad. Moreover, the woman’s hair is not bound and confined under her cap but falls loosely over her shoulders in a manner similar to the way Gauguin had depicted many Tahitian women just a few months earlier. Yet her fair complexion and orange-gold hair rule out identification as Tahitian. The figure is clearly an imaginative hybrid: her colorful dress would have been as much an adopted import for a Breton woman as her Christian faith for a Tahitian. The devotional pose may derive from still other sources, since it recalls fifteenth-century Flemish portraits and religious paintings, examples of which Gauguin had likely seen during his visit to Brussels and Bruges in February 1894, just prior to returning to Pont-Aven.1 It may also reference sculpted figures on the Buddhist temple of Borobudur in Java, Indonesia, at least one photograph of which Gauguin owned.2 This would add yet another layer, in this case of non-Christian allusion, to the image.

Recent authors have also discussed the implications of the color yellow itself, for it played an important role in the artistic dialogue Gauguin had shared with Vincent van Gogh, most intensely during the two months from October to December 1888 when Gauguin had stayed in Arles in the south of France at Van Gogh’s invitation. For Van Gogh, yellow represented a heightened emotional state; as Druick and Zegers have described it, yellow stood for “the subject of creativity and madness—of the dangers posed by the imagination unfettered in reality.”3 While these implications might be somewhat at odds with the calm, contemplative pose of the Young Christian Girl, the color persisted in Gauguin’s work as it had in Van Gogh’s, further supported by other associations such as those with Japanese prints and popular French posters and novels.4 Druick and Zegers propose yet another possible link, prompted by the work’s religious overtones and by the unusual appearance of the background at the woman’s sides—including several concentric, curved red lines at the right—which is difficult to interpret either as landscape forms or as directly connected to the figure. Taken together, these elements might suggest wings, which in turn might point to a picture of the angel Raphael by Rembrandt

Young Christian Girl has a straightforward visual immediacy—the simplified forms of the figure dominate the canvas, while the vibrant shades of yellow, green, lilac, and coral energize a composition that is depicted without traditional perspective. Even the visibly rough, uneven canvas gives the work a sense of homespun simplicity. As well as presenting this direct appeal, the image is also filled with multilayered, complex significance. Gauguin painted it during a six-month stay in Brittany, his fifth visit since 1886, when he first went to the northwest corner of the country in search of a simpler—and less expensive—way of life than that in Paris. While his initial goal in relocating had been primarily to save money, Gauguin subsequently focused on the long-standing reputation of the region as more primitive, less tainted by modern civilization, than the rest of the country. Its distance from the contentious art world of the capital also encouraged him in developing a new artistic persona and stylistic approach, and ultimately prompted him to seek out locations that were even more distant. In 1887, he spent about four-and-a-half months in Martinique, and in June 1891, having achieved some prominence as the largely self-proclaimed leader of the emerging Symbolist artists, as well as having obtained some funding through a successful auction of his works four months earlier, Gauguin arrived in Tahiti on an official, government-supported mission. He remained there for about two years, returning to Paris in August 1893. The following April he took up his habitual residence in the Breton town of Pont-Aven, and it was at this point that he painted the present work.

Although the narrow, cypress-like trees and the buildings in the landscape, despite their bright, non-naturalistic colors, indicate a location in Brittany, the young woman’s yellow dress and dark blue-black cap are nothing like Gauguin’s previous depictions of Breton women. Even in a painting like Yellow Christ (1889; Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo), with its
that Van Gogh believed to be primarily painted in yellow, though he knew it only from a printed reproduction—a copy of which he had asked his brother Theo to send to Gauguin.8

Clearly, no single interpretive strategy can account for every aspect of 

Young Christian Girl. Even the identity of the sitter—proposals have included Annette Belfis, the mistress of Thomas de Monfried, an artist friend of Gauguin, or Judith Molard, daughter of the musician William Molard, a neighbor at the time—seems less significant than aspects of the image that are based on imagination rather than reality. Similarly, although the work has at times been titled Breton Girl in Prayer, despite having been called Jeune chrétienne (Young Christian Girl) by the artist himself in his 1895 sale, the figure is too hybrid for the regional designation to be accurate. Finally, it is also one of only a few paintings the artist produced in this period, and Druc and Zegers suggest that its innovative nature might indicate that Gauguin was seeking to develop his previous depictions of the region in new directions.6 But he was clearly looking forward as well as back, and in this sense Young Christian Girl can be seen as a transitional work before Gauguin’s definitive departure from France the following year, when he returned to Tahiti.

PROVENANCE The artist (his sale, Paris, Hôtel des Ven
tes, 18 Feb. 1895, no. 46, as Jeune chrétienne);7 Amé

EXHIBITIONS Barmen 1912, no. 30; Berlin 1913, no. 37, as Mädchen aus der Bretagne; Winterthur 1922, no. 45;10 New York 1929c, no. 37, ill., as Breton Girl, lent by Flechtheim Gallery; New York 1932b, no. 5, as Bretonne en prière; Paris 1935, no. cat.;11 London 1937, no. 14, pl. VIII, as La Bretonne; London 1948, no. 16, ill., as A Girl from Brittany in Prayer; Edinburgh–London–Oslo 1955, no. 50, as Breton Girl Praying (Norwegian ed., no. 32, as Bedende Bretagne-pike), lent by Kessler; Paris 1960, no. 128, as Jeune fille bretonne en prière, lent by McRoberts; Munich 1960, no. 62, fig. 36, lent by McRoberts; Vienna 1960, no. 35, fig. 9, lent by McRoberts; London 1963, no. 68, ill., lent by McRoberts; Williams


TECHNICAL REPORT The support is a very coarse, short-fi
tered fabric (9 x 13 threads/cm) with irregular threads visi
ble throughout the surface. Due to uneven stretching by the artist, the fabric weave has cusp ing between tack locations. The painting has a paste strip lining of finer weave linen which extends 1 cm under the image area. The five-member pine stretcher appears to be a replacement. The paint and ground layers have a series of vertical cracks of various aper
tures stemming from a combination of the uneven weave, a possible size layer, a friable ground, and somewhat des
iccated paint. Pinpoint losses have occurred at crack inter
sections throughout the image due to the brittleness of the whole structure. There is solvent abrasion in the thin blue, black, and purple areas. The picture may originally have been left unvarnished, but may once have been waxed. In 1996, a restoration layer of PVA varnish was removed, along with Acryloid B-72 and Soluvair applied in 1986, and replaced with a nearly invisible layer of B-72. The painting is very striking in ultraviolet light due to the artist’s use of a zinc white admix
ture in numerous passages.

The ground is a thin, artist-applied off-white gesso, com
prised of calcium carbonate and animal glue with a small
Théodore Géricault
French, 1791–1824

149 | Trumpeter of the Hussars c. 1815–20
Oil on canvas, 96 x 71.8 cm; original dimensions, 72 x 58 cm
1955.959

Style of Théodore Géricault
French, 19th century

150 | Study after Trumpeter of the Hussars c. 1815–27
Oil on canvas, 35.7 x 27 cm; original dimensions 32.5 x 24.3 cm
1955.745

Géricault first established his reputation by showing a monumental painting of a mounted military figure, the Charging Chasseur, at the 1812 Salon, followed two years later by the Wounded Cuirassier Leaving the Field of Battle (both in the Musée du Louvre, Paris). He continued to depict similar figures at both large and small scale for a number of years. His attention to details of the sitters’ uniforms generally allows for precise identification of the type of soldier depicted, and he devoted equal care to the depiction of horses, in military as well as many other contexts throughout his career. Trumpeter of the Hussars, although much smaller than the two Salon works, clearly relates to them both formally and thematically. Despite the precision of his subjects’ external forms, however, perhaps the most striking aspect of nearly all his military-themed works prior to about 1818, including Trumpeter of the Hussars, is their ambiguity. The connections between these evocative figures in their closely focused, abbreviated settings and the complex political situation at the end of the Napoleonic era in which they were made are open to interpretation; the paintings have, for example, been seen as embodiments of Imperial power and its defeat, or as a “real and very subtle allegory against war,” among many other readings. Even the figures’ role as soldiers is unclear, since Géricault never showed his subjects actually engaged with an enemy, although evidence...