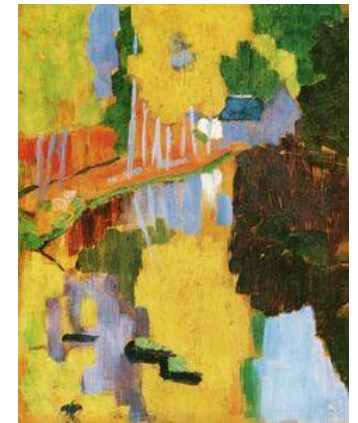


The Nabis

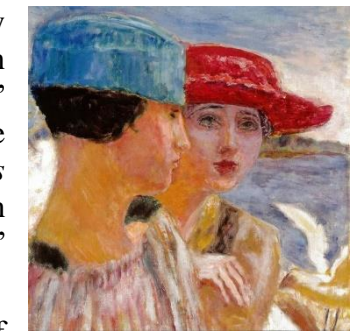


The Nabis ("prophets" in Hebrew) were a Symbolist group founded by Paul Sérusier, who gathered his friends (including Pierre Bonnard, Maurice Denis, Félix Vallotton, Edouard Vuillard, Ker-Xavier Roussel, and sculptor Aristide Maillol) into a secret society. Wanting to be in touch with a higher power, this group felt that the artist could serve as a "high priest" and "seer" with the power to reveal the invisible.



Black-and-white photography had been invented early in the nineteenth century, and by 1850 photographs were being published. Eventually colour photographs appeared. Most of the developments were made by Frenchmen. Photography was, then, to have a major impact on art in France, where artists looked for ways of doing what the camera could not. Impressionism began before colour photography was invented; it then focused on the use of shades of colour, which photography could not achieve. Many artworks by impressionists (and the Nabis) exhibited *Japonisme*, the influence of Japanese art, especially Japanese coloured woodblock prints – such as Yoshitora's *Kusunoki at the siege of Chihaya* 1 (1840s – top left). These were decorative images consisting usually of three or four flat colours.

The Nabis wanted to do more than simply reproduce what they saw: they felt that they were creators of a subjective art deeply rooted in the soul of the artist. While the works of the Nabis differed in subject matter from one another, they all ascribed to certain formal tenets – for example, the idea that a painting was a harmonious grouping of lines and colours, rather than a "photographic" image. However artists made different decisions about how to arrange these lines and colours. Some drew upon *Japonisme*; some painted everyday scenes from unusual points of view – such as Bonnard's *Jeunes Filles à la mouette*, 1917, right; some were influenced by neo-platonism (a merger of Christian and Platonic beliefs which taught that the progress towards the perfection of the "One" and therefore happiness could be gained through philosophical contemplation).



Neoclassical artists in seventeenth-century France had either "invented" scenes of nature, or improved upon what they saw, according to the "rules" dictated by Louis XIV. Unlike impressionists, the Nabis did not seek to make an exact copy of nature either. Gauguin had encouraged Sérusier to approach nature from a subjective point of view – to paint what he felt, rather than what he saw. When Sérusier attempted to paint a scene in Pont-Aven (on a cigar box), Gauguin told him to use colours straight from the tube rather than trying to mix them and match them up to what he saw in nature. He asked, "How do you see these trees? They are yellow. So, put in yellow." Yet he advised that, while a shadow might look blue, Sérusier paint it with pure ultramarine. He suggested replacing the red of the leaves with the brighter colour vermilion. The result – *The Talisman, the*

River Aven at the Bois d'Amour (1888) top right – was far more abstract than anything that had gone before – even than Gauguin's paintings, such as *The Aven running through Pont-Aven* (left), painted the same year. Certain elements of the landscape (such as trees, the path, the riverbank, and the mill) are recognisable, but they have been transformed into something new – with flat areas of bold colour. Sérusier showed his friends in Paris. Maurice Denis, the theorist of the group, proclaimed that it enabled viewers to feel "liberated from all the yokes that the idea of copying brought to [our] painters' instincts." He formulated the theory of "equivalents" – that "... every work of art is a transposition, a caricature, the passionate equivalent of a received sensation."