



VISUAL ART

Exhibitions on a lesser-known French master, gardens and Libyan art draw in John Russell Taylor

Usually, when the National Gallery stages one of its small exhibitions focused on one or two works, it is going to involve names big enough to ring bells in almost everyone's mind. But Puvis de Chavannes? Even today the name will resonate with relatively few — even among those who account themselves generally cultivated in matters artistic. I say "even today" because in some ways the show **Puvis de Chavannes: The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist**, created by the National Gallery and the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham University, proves unexpectedly topical.

Pierre-Cécile Puvis de Chavannes (1824-1898) belonged to the generation of French painters which came between Ingres and Delacroix on the one hand and the major Impressionists on the other. Along with Gustave Moreau he is usually credited, and pigeonholed, as the father of Symbolism in painting. In the long years when Symbolism was seen as the alternative to Impressionism which did not lead anywhere, this reputation was more a liability than an asset. But earlier this year there opened a very striking exhibition at the Palazzo Grassi in Venice which proposed the extraordinary notion that Puvis was possibly a key figure in the development of 20th-century art, founding a tradition of painting monumental nudes which continued at least until the late Picasso of the 1950s.

The National Gallery exhibition offers, at the very least, a useful way of documenting such a claim. It centres on two pivotal works in Puvis's career, the finished versions of a theme which seems to have obsessed him, the death of John the Baptist at the behest of Salome (a prime Decadent subject if ever there was one). The smaller, rather dark-toned version belongs to the Barber Institute, and the larger, more (it is tempting to say) cheerily coloured version to the National Gallery — hence the unique collaboration between the two institutions.

These two are accompanied by a large oil study of the



Puvis de Chavannes's painting *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* (later version) is a fascinating study in how a masterpiece develops in an artist's mind

A masterly execution

subject from a private collection in Paris, which oddly leaves the centre of the composition empty, as the saint enters from the left with his executioner, along with sundry sketches, X-rays and such.

Both finished versions are undeniably monumental, curiously immobile (even the figure of the executioner about to strike seems frozen), semi-nude, and strongly centred on the kneeling figure of St John. In the Barber version, apparently carried to completion later, he is seen head-on, looks dark and emaciated. In the London version his head is turned slightly away from us and the approaching executioner, and he looks much healthier and less agonised at

the prospect of imminent death. The earlier version has three figures to the right, Salome in white, along with a bearded figure, presumably Herod, in a brilliant red cape, and an anonymous weeper half-glimpsed behind them; the later version reduces the onlookers starkly to just Salome on the right, now in dark colours, nervously clutching a salver.

It is a fascinating study in how a masterpiece (as, surely, both versions are) develops and changes in the artist's mind, and indeed under his hand as he works. And suddenly, both versions (it is quite legitimate to prefer either, by the way) look extraordinarily modern. Time, surely, to carry the Venice rethink one stage further.

Since the epoch-making *Time Machine* exhibition at the British Museum, which insinuated contemporary works into the main Egyptian gallery, the idea has been taken up widely. Its latest manifestation is *Diversions* at the Museum of Garden History, where a variety of works from the dealer Danielle Arnaud's stable of artists have been placed strategically

Puvis de Chavannes

National Gallery

★★★★★

Diversions

Museum of Garden History

★★★★★

The Desert is not Silent

Albert Memorial Gardens

★★★★★

in and around the museum's permanent collection. The idea works rather well, since most of the new works reflect, one way and another, on gardens.

Or sometimes the absence of gardens: David Cotterell's video in a vitrine entitled *Shangrila* (is mischievously?) presented as a celebration of "creativity, flamboyance and quiet struggle" in the suburban garden's assertion of its owner's individuality, when in fact what it mostly shows is tiny front gardens relentlessly paved and cemented to provide parking for the owner's car. Two works are actually in the garden. Dan Howard-Birt's pattern-planted installation *Sundays and Public Holidays* reflects wryly on the fact

that John Tradescant the elder, the Jacobean botanist and plant-collector who gives his name to the foundation controlling the museum, had no sense of smell. More alarmingly, Theo Kaccoufa's *One Minute to Love* is an apparently normal tree that unexpectedly springs into motion every now and then. **The Desert is Not Silent** is another example of art in a strange place. This time it is on the East Lawn of the Albert Memorial Gardens.

A huge marquee holds an oddly heterogeneous assortment of Libyan art over the past 2,000 years. At least, that is how it is formally described. Some of the antiquities are particularly beautiful, notably the marble head of Septimius Severus (born in what is now Libya) and the strange, deliberately faceless figure of the goddess of Death. But then there is a dizzying gap until the work of three contemporary Libyan artists, and more especially the paintings of Saif Gaddafi, architect son of Libya's leader.

This makes it very difficult to separate the aesthetic dimensions of the show from the polit-

ical. Undoubtedly at one level it is a plea for the reintegration of Libya into the international community, and the consequent return of tourists to the country. But it is also staking Saif Gaddafi's claims to fame as an artist in his own right.

Here the jury is still out. Some of his simplest works, evoking the desert sands with a minimum amount of elaboration, are quite effective, and so are a couple of pieces painted on desert rugs or hangings. But the more "western" paintings, deriving something from his architectural studies in Vienna, are disturbingly crude in colour and execution, while some attempts at the surreal might be more at home on park railings.

There may be talent lurking there somewhere, but it has yet to throw off the trammels of the Sunday painter.

● Puvis de Chavannes is at the National Gallery, Trafalgar Square, WC2 (020-7747 2885), until October 27. *Diversions* is at the Museum of Garden History, SE1 (020-7401 8865), until August 31. *The Desert is not Silent* is in Albert Memorial Gardens, W2 (0870-777 7678), until August 10.

WHAT'S IMPORTANT

What the critics say: first-night reviews are on page 17 of the main paper

THE TIMES