

The Alps

A glance at modern alpine style

CLAUDE GARDIEN, *France*

translated by Eliza Moran

with special thanks to Mark Twight



Patrick Gabarrou in the Supercouloir on the twentieth anniversary of the first ascent.

CLAUDE GARDIEN

The Alps are, without a doubt, the most used, most often visited mountains in the world. They might even appear too well known, and perhaps climbed out. Today's topos reveal an inextricable muddle of routes overlapping each other, with old and new routes side-by-side, spanning the history and technical evolution of alpinism.

Each generation has proclaimed that the end of alpinism has arrived. However, the evolution of alpine climbing during the last 25 years has allowed the current modern style to exist. It is clear that this old, grand mountain range is still the site of much innovation. Will the Alps continue to inspire climbers in the future? Will the alpinists' dreams ever end?

MODERN ICE CLIMBING

Nineteen seventy-five was an important turning point in the evolution of modern ice climbing in the Alps. During the 1960s and 1970s, climbers competed for first winter ascents and did ever-more-difficult climbs in winter. Equipment development (i.e., the curved pick) and the desire to climb new terrain led to advances in ice climbing. During this era, the North Face of Les Droites (IV WI4+/5 5.9 A1, 1000m, climbed by Cornuau and Davaille over five days in 1955) was still considered an exceptional undertaking; one could still count the number of ascents. With the new, improved ice axes and crampons, however, ice climbing was popularized, and the door to ever-steeper ice routes opened in the process.

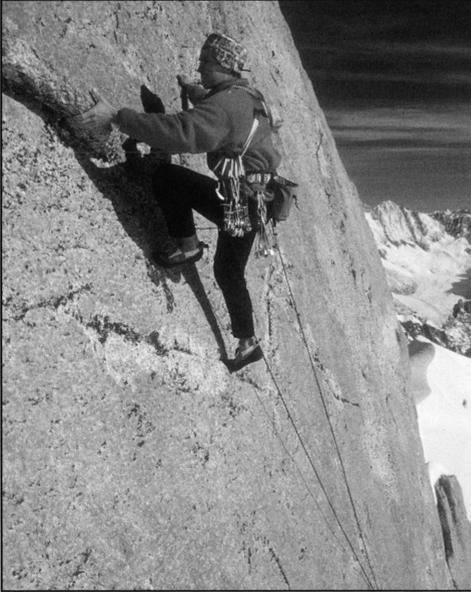
In September, 1971, Walter Cecchinell and Georges Nominé climbed the North Face of the Pilier d'Angle on Mont Blanc, an uncompromising, 750-meter line that hinted at what was to follow. In December, 1973, Cecchinell and Claude Jager climbed the spectacular North Couloir of Les Drus, a line considered impossible prior to the advent of the modern technical ice axe and piolet traction. Following Cecchinell's lead, Jean-Marc Boivin and Patrick Gabarrou, the young, new wave of the moment, climbed the direct north faces of Les Droites and the Aiguille Verte and the *Supercouloir* of Mont Blanc du Tacul, in May, 1975. The elegant features of the *Supercouloir* made it the symbol of the new high-tech technique. The following year, Alex MacIntyre and Nick Colton finished a line on the north face of the Grandes Jorasses that had been attempted by Dougal Haston, Chris Bonington, Mick Burke, and Bev Clark during a 17-day siege in January, 1972. The Colton-MacIntyre is still considered a relevant climb, having swatted down a fair number of talented suitors. Colton and MacIntyre applied modern ice technique on a remote and austere face, taking the discipline to its logical conclusion.



The east face of Mt. Blanc du Tacul. The Supercouloir is the obvious ice climb in the center of the photo; the Gervasutti Pillar is to its right. MARK TWIGHT

ROCK: FROM CLEAN CLIMBING TO HIGH-ALTITUDE CLIMBING

During the 1970s, “free” and “clean climbing” ethics came to France—free replaced aid, and nuts replaced pitons, breathing new life into rock climbing. Influenced by British climbers, the French rediscovered free climbing on cliffs. Jean-Claude Droyer, who made the first solo ascent of the Hemming-Robbins route on the west face of the Petit Dru in 1971, took the idea of free climbing to another level. In 1978, he climbed the Bonatti-Ghigo route on the east face of the Grand Capucin clean, and almost freed it, removing pitons he believed redun-



Modern climbing on the Aiguille du Midi: Francois Pallandre, talented first ascensionist and Chamonix granite specialist. CLAUDE GARDIEN

dant along the way.

The other notable route freed during this period was the Comici route (5.10d) on the north face of the Cima Grande, in the Dolomites. Most of the big rock lines were freed during the 1980s. In one great leap, Marco Pedrini and Sergio Vicari raised the level of free climbing difficulty in the mountains to 5.12a/b by freeing the Directissime Americaine (Harlin-Robbins, 1965) on the west face of the Dru in 1983.

It was within this evolutionary context that Swiss climber Michel Piola made his first appearance in 1979. With Gerard Hopfgartner, he climbed *Les Portes du Chaos*, a difficult (ED3/4), 1400-meter new route on the rock pillars bordering the right side of the Eiger's north face. They were both just 19 years old. Piola then proceeded to investigate the Chamonix Aiguilles. In 1980, he climbed *Nostradamus* (5.11a/b) on the Aiguille des Pelerins. The 600-meter route climbs a harsh, austere wall in a demanding and

straightforward manner. *Nostradamus* introduced two innovations: slab climbing and the use of bolts (two on the entire route) for protection. Up to this time, granite faces had only been considered possible via cracks; on *Nostradamus*, Piola attacked the blank sections directly, solving passages with intricate face climbing.

This route marked the first of a long series of first ascents that Piola claimed throughout the Mont Blanc Massif. Perhaps his best known route is *Le Voyage selon Gulliver* (5.11d) on the Grand Capucin (3838m), which remains a timeless classic for those with an appetite for Mont Blanc granite. "Piola routes" require the use of nuts, but they are equipped with pitons and bolts where necessary. Piola certainly has an eye for the beautiful line, and while his routes are considered generally safe, the occasional bold runout keeps them out of the sport climbing category. Many alpinists saw their level of climbing improve because of Piola's vision and hard work.

While the difficulty attained by Piola's routes was rare in the early 1980s, the style of climbing relentlessly evolved during the ensuing decade toward one that was more athletic, taking on more and more spectacular features. The routes of the 1980s and '90s differed in this way from the classics of the 1960s and '70s, where the most difficult lines followed cracks and dihedrals.

The ideal of freeing the big routes, first introduced by Jean-Claude Droyer 20 years earlier, reached its zenith when Thierry Renault and Alain Ghersen freed the 900-meter *Divine Providence* on the Grand Pilier d'Angle (4243m) in 1990. The route went at 5.12d, with three points of aid where the rock was wet. The pair—neither one a stranger to Yosemite granite—climbed clean with the exception of clipping a few in situ pitons. The crux came at an altitude of over 4000 meters. Even after the first 5.13a routes were climbed on the Aiguille du

Midi, then on the Grand Capucin and elsewhere, it is the first free ascent of *Divine Providence* that is the reference for altitude, commitment, and beauty in a route.

SPEED AND ENCHAINMENTS

By the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the '80s, free climbing had become the norm. In the south of France, the level of difficulty exploded (the first 5.13c routes were established in France in 1981 with the first ascents of *La Haine* at Loubiere by Patrick Berhault and of *Chimpanzodrome* at Saussois by J.P. Bouvier). At the same time, climbers had advanced modern ice techniques to the point that the great routes in the high mountains had become trite, almost easy. Yet tradition, up to this time, dictated that routes were climbed with gear for bivouacs. The best alpinists of the moment, having demolished old speed records, began discarding the extra gear. Of what relevance was bivy gear on a route you knew could be done in just a few hours?

In 1974, Reinhold Messner and Peter Habeler, well ahead of their time, sprinted up the North Face of the Eiger in ten hours. In 1979, Patrick Berhault and Philippe Martinez expressed the new light-and-fast ideal by making the first winter ascent of *Supercouloir* in 12 hours, carrying small day packs. They climbed the North Face of the Droites in ten hours that same winter (ten years earlier, Messner had soloed the same face in 8 hours 30 minutes, albeit in summer). Speed climbing competition was now officially open in the Mont Blanc Massif.

Patrick Berhault, Christophe Profit and Bertrand Couzy went further by soloing routes in record times. Profit distinguished himself on the Petit Dru's American Direct by soloing it in three hours ten minutes. The climbers of the future will have to break two hours to set a new record on the north face of Les Droites, and need to surpass Thomas Bubendorfer's 1983 record up the Eiger's North Face of four hours 50 minutes.

Although few new speed records have been set since the early 1980s, speed climbing permitted the next alpine evolution: enchainments, the linking of several climbs into one marathon day. The idea actually began when Tita Piazz, a guide from the Dolomites, climbed eight routes in seven hours in the Catinaccio Range—in 1898! In 1961, Claudio Barbier expanded the idea when he climbed the five north faces of the Cime di Laveredo in the Dolomites in a day. In 1983, Profit managed the north faces of Les Droites and the Aiguille de Talefre and the *Shroud* on the Grandes Jorasses in 23 hours, opening eyes in Chamonix.



Alain Gheron on a solo ascent of the American Direct on the Petit Dru during an enchainment of the Dru, the Walker Spur on the Grandes Jorasses, and the Peuterey Ridge on Mont Blanc in 66 hours in August, 1990.

ALAIN GHERSON COLLECTION

In April, 1984, Eric Escoffier soloed the Croz Spur on the Grandes Jorasses, took off on a tandem hang glider piloted by Christophe Vaillant, landed back at the base, and promptly soloed the Walker Spur. The following summer, Profit raised the bar further by soloing the "Trilogy"—the 1938 route on the Eiger, the Schmid route on the north face of the Matterhorn, and the *Shroud* on the Grandes Jorasses—in just under 24 hours, using a helicopter to transit between peaks. Clearly, the remaining prize was to repeat this enchainment in winter.

Profit and Escoffier dueled for the honor during the winter of 1986, but conditions shut them down. The big news that winter came from Jean-Marc Boivin, who climbed the north faces of the Aiguille Verte, Les Droites, and Les Courtes, and finally the *Shroud* of the Grandes Jorasses, transiting between peaks with paraglider or hang glider. Finally, in 1987, Profit managed the winter Trilogy in 43 hours, while Escoffier missed the weather window and the limelight.

Patrick Gabarrou traversed the Mont Blanc Massif, climbing seven north faces along the way, in 1988. Alain Ghersen, an extremely talented sport climber-turned-alpinist, upped the ante yet again by enchainning the American Direct on the Petit Dru to the Walker Spur (using a paraglider) followed by the Peuterey Integrale on Mont Blanc (commuting by paraglider and foot) in 66 hours.

FROZEN WATERFALLS

In 1977, the evolution of ice-climbing skill and equipment tempted a few alpinists onto frozen waterfalls—a new discipline on the European continent. Bold, new routes were opened in the Cirque de Garvarnie in the Pyrenees by Dominique Julien and Rainier Munsch, most notably *Overdose*, a 400-meter WI6 climbed with M. Boulang and Serge Casteran in February, 1978. It still retains its fame today, the second ascent having been made as recently as 1999 by the Spanish climber Joan Quintana.

The debut of waterfall climbing was low key, but enthusiasm for the discipline soon swept the Alps. From the Argentiere Glacier to the slopes of the Ecrins Massif and the valleys of the Grand Paradis, waterfall-climbing sites now abound throughout the Alps. The early 1990s were the most frantic evolutionary period of the discipline, with practitioners like Francois Damilano, Gian-Carlo Grassi, Godefroy Perroux, and Thierry Renault establishing demanding lines reminiscent of what had been climbed in North America a decade earlier. The first technical grade 7 waterfalls appeared in France in 1992 when Thierry Renault, Wilfried Colonna, and Denis Condevaux made the first ascent of *Cascade de la Lire*, and Francois Damilano, with Philippe Pibarot, climbed *La Massue*. Both routes are in the Cirque du fer a Cheval, and both were done the same day.

The influence of the water-ice revolution was not lost on alpine climbers: when one is accustomed to climbing on fragile stalactites or poorly attached and thin features, alpine ice climbing presents rather limited challenges. Improved gear and sport climbing-type movements rendered routes like the North Face of the Droites or the *Supercouloir* into classics. Waterfall climbers, accustomed to genuinely steep terrain, began downgrading former alpine test pieces. Recently, waterfall-ice techniques and attitude have been exported to big Dolomite faces: limestone presents relentlessly steep walls that simply do not exist in the predominantly granite and gneiss features of the central Alps.

MODERN MIXED CLIMBING

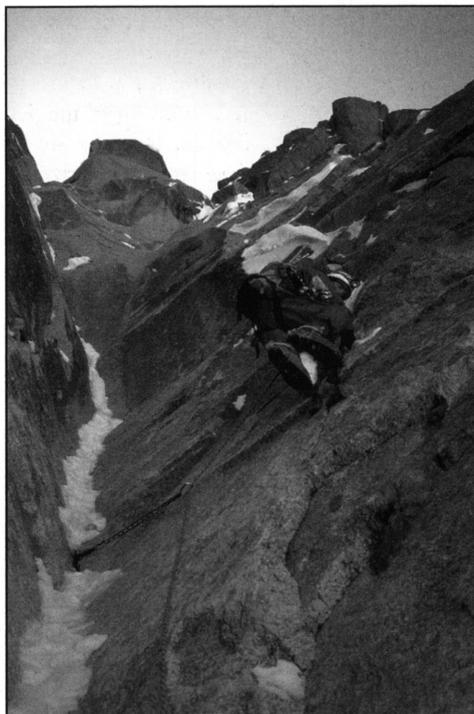
Ice climbing also evolved toward so-called modern mixed climbing—a pursuit that was not born yesterday. It was mixed climbing, after all, that got Harrer, Heckmair, Kasperek, and Vorg up the Eigerwand in 1938, and Bonatti and Zapelli up the north face of the Grandes Jorasses in the winter of 1963. However, climbing ice gullies was so prevalent in the early 1980s (when amazing routes like *Cascade de Notre Dame* [V WI6, 700m], *Hyper Goulotte* [V WI6+ 5.9 A1], *Freynesie Pascale* [VI WI6], and Gian-Carlo Grassi's opus on the south face of the Grandes Jorasses, *Hypercouloir* [V WI5+, 500m], were done) that mixed climbing was altogether forgotten. This in spite of the fact that many climbers (such as Jean-Marc Boivin) viewed mixed climbing as the quintessential manifestation of alpinism.

The rebirth of mixed climbing came a bit late, in April, 1992, with the first ascent of *Beyond Good and Evil* on the north face of the Aiguilles des Pelerins by Mark Twight and Andy Parkin. Mark's bold, alluring topo frightened the resident climbers for several years, until Francois Damilano and Francois Marsigny made the second ascent in 1995. Today, all of Twight's new routes (*There Goes the Neighborhood* on the Aiguille Sans Nom and *Birthright* on the Grands Charmoz, both climbed with Scott Backes, and the *Richard Cranium Memorial* on the north face of Les Droites, with Barry Blanchard) are repeated when favorable conditions permit.

THE BIG NEW ROUTES

By the late 1970s, many great new alpine routes remained unclimbed. On rock, ice and mixed terrain, climbers using the latest techniques pushed limits in a search for these new routes. The north face of the Grandes Jorasses is still in a class of its own, with new routes climbed by none but the very, very best climbers of any given period. J. Kutil, T. Prochaska, L. Schlechta, and J. Svejda made the first ascent of the difficult and dangerous *Rolling Stones* left of the Walker Spur in September, 1979. Jan Porvasnik and Stanislav Glejdura climbed *No Siesta* in July, 1986, overcoming pitches of grade 6 ice, and 5.10 and A1 rock during their two-day ascent.

Finally, also in 1986, Herve Bouvard and Patrick Gabarrou did a superdirect route on the Walker Spur. Gabarrou is one of the most prolific climbers in the world, a climber's climber, with several hundred new routes throughout the Alps to his credit. Perhaps his greatest route



Andy Parkin on pitch 7 of the first ascent of *Beyond Good and Evil* on the north face of the Aiguille des Pelerins. MARK TWIGHT



Alain Ghersen on the first winter solo ascent of *Divine Providence* on the east face of the *Pilier d'Angle*, Mont Blanc. The ascent was made from February 10-14, 1993. ALAIN REVEL

was *Divine Providence*, on the east face of the Grand Pilier d'Angle on Mont Blanc, with Francois Marsigny in 1984. The route's name derives from a fall that ripped all the gear except one Friend, after which Patrick, a devout Christian, recognized the intervention of a greater power. Everything about this climb—its altitude, isolation, difficulty, and magnitude—made it the crown jewel of alpinism in the twentieth century. It's a true prize, a must for any aspiring alpinist.

THE GREAT SOLOS

Fascination with being alone on a wall is not new. Alpine winter solos offer a solution to those looking for greater challenges and perhaps notoriety.

The forerunner of this new direction was Renato Casarotto, who spent 15 days in February, 1981, alone on the Italian side of Mt. Blanc. Later, Marc Batard followed his lead, making two winter ascents on the west face of the Dru, and another on the north face of the Grandes Jorasses. Jean-Christophe Lafaille soloed routes on the Grandes Jorasses, the Dru, and linked the Grand Pilier d'Angle to the Freney Pillar.

Catherine Destivelle soloed a route on the Dru, the north face of the Eiger, the Walker Spur and the north face of the Matterhorn in winter. Alain Ghersen soloed *Divine Providence* in winter.

Portaledges made their appearance, introducing a world of vertical camping. However, the limits of this new gear were soon apparent. For climbers used to speed ascents, haul bags were an unwelcome problem. Besides, steep routes favoring big wall techniques were not abundant. The solo, big wall-style climbs up the north face of the Grandes Jorasses and the Dru were accomplished by sheer thuggery and endurance. Few protagonists repeated these efforts, as it is too much hard work to haul and move big-wall gear on the Alpine faces.

TODAY: THE STATE OF THE ART

The direction, the evolution of climbing, is still not clear. Several recent climbs of great difficulty (the Russian routes on the Dru and Grand Capucin) have "borrowed" large portions of other routes. Yet a few new and original lines have been climbed. In the summer of 1999, Valeri Babanov climbed *Eldorado* (5.11b A4, 1100m), a superb route that is almost completely independent, on the difficult north face of the Pointe Whymper of the Grandes Jorasses. In 2000, Dominique Brau-Mouret found a virgin line on the Grand Capucin. The second winter ascents of the Desmaison route on north face of Grandes Jorasses, by Patrice

Glairon-Rappaz and Stephane Benoist, and of *Divine Providence* by Glairon-Rappaz and Paul Robach, and a new route on north face of le Râteau in Les Ecrins by Jérôme Blanc-Gras, show the high level of the new generation: the climbers managed to reach their goals in very poor weather conditions (“Russian style”). Finally, in February, 2001, Jean-Christophe Lafaille climbed a big new route on the west face of the Dru, featuring spectacular and difficult aid climbing (up to A4). Modern aid climbing, after having been eclipsed by free climbing, finds favor with today’s young climbers. Although innovation is possible, big wall-style routes are rare in the Alps. Outside of the Dolomites, verticality is rarely sustained. But perhaps we just can’t see the lines that will allow future generations to express themselves. It would not be the first time that older climbers have made the error of saying there is nothing left to do.

Free climbing on big walls offers adventure to the young climber of the future. A new high point was reached in 1999 when Mauro “Bubu” Bole freed the Couzy route on the Cima Ovest in the Dolomites. He rated it 5.13d and used only existing pitons for protection (after gluing a few of them in place). Elsewhere in the Dolomites, big new routes have been done using a mixture of bolts, pitons and clean gear for protection. On the pillar that borders the right side of the north face of the Eiger, Robert and Daniela Jasper climbed a new route that goes free at 5.13d. Erik Svab and Maruzio Oviglia climbed *Noir et Blanc* (5.12a, 900m) on the southeast face of the Aiguille Noire de Peuterey without bolts. This is an example of the best that free climbers can do when they combine their technical skill with the mental force of the mountaineer. The evolution of climbing may yet come from this direction.

However, big solos are still in vogue today as well: Alain Ghersen, after several attempts, finally made the first winter and first solo ascent of the Gabarrou-Silvy route on the north face of the Aiguille Sans Nom. First done in 1978, it has received less than ten ascents. The stout grade (5.10d A1 WI5+/6) keeps the tourists away. Farther afield, Marco Anghileri soloed the Solleder route on the northwest face of Civetta in winter 2000. The 1200-meter-high route is 5.10b and poorly protected in summer. Anghileri’s climb was one of the best of the year 2000.

In 1998, Patrick Berhault and Francois Bibollet revived the enchainment, but did so with a technical twist by linking the hardest ice and mixed lines on Les Droites, the Grandes Jorasses, the Pilier d’Angle and the south face of Mont Blanc into a massive, cumulative ascent. Beginning August 26, 2000, with the Triglav in Slovenia and ending January 29, 2001, with the Marguerais in the Italian Maritime Alps, Berhault traversed the Alps from east to west totally under his own power, climbing 22 great routes and exhausting a variety of partners along the way. Berhault’s traverse capped his long and brilliant career from alpinist to free climber, from guide to guide’s instructor, and finally back to alpinist, always wed to the land. His journey represents an evolution in the state of alpinism and points toward the multifaceted, renaissance climber of the future: expert at many sub-disciplines, chasing the best conditions as they develop according to the seasons. The future ascents in the Alps—no matter the style—cannot be divorced from the mighty range’s history, nor from the protagonists who measured themselves on these great mountains.

Claude Gardien, 47, lives in Chatillon, France, and has been a mountain guide since 1978. He is also a writer and photographer; he works for *Vertical* magazine and has authored several technical and historical books about climbing and mountaineering. He has climbed in the Alps, the Pyrenees, the Sahara, Jordan, Morocco, Pakistan, and Nepal.