

Paul Gauguin

Gauguin was a financially successful stockbroker and self-taught amateur artist when he began collecting works by the impressionists in the 1870s. Inspired by their example, he took up the study of painting under Camille Pissarro. Pissarro and Edgar Degas arranged for him to show his early painting efforts in the fourth impressionist exhibition in 1879 (as well as the annual impressionist exhibitions held through 1882). In 1882, after a stock market crash and recession rendered him unemployed and broke, Gauguin decided to abandon the business world to pursue life as an artist full-time.

In 1886, Gauguin went to Pont-Aven in Brittany, a rugged land of fervently religious people far from the urban sophistication of Paris. There he forged a new style. He was at the center of a group of avant-garde artists who dedicated themselves to *synthétisme*, ordering and simplifying sensory data to its fundamentals. Gauguin's greatest innovation was his use of color, which he employed not for its ability to mimic nature but for its emotive qualities. He applied it in broad flat areas outlined with dark paint, which tended to flatten space and abstract form. This flattening of space and symbolic use of color would be important influences on early twentieth-century artists.

In Brittany, Gauguin had hoped to tap the expressive potential he believed rested in a more rural, even “primitive” culture. Over the next several years he traveled often between Paris and Brittany, spending time also in Panama and Martinique. In 1891 his rejection of European urban values led him to Tahiti, where he expected to find an unspoiled culture, exotic and sensual. Instead, he was confronted with a world already transformed by western missionaries and colonial rule. In large measure, Gauguin had to invent the world he sought, not only in paintings but with woodcarvings, graphics, and written works. As he struggled with ways to express the questions of life and death, knowledge and evil that preoccupied him, he interwove the images and mythology of island life with those of the west and other cultures. After a trip to France (1893 to 1895), Gauguin returned to spend his remaining years, marred by illness and depression, in the South Seas.



Paul Gauguin
French, 1848 – 1903
Breton Girls Dancing, Pont-Aven, 1888

Gauguin wrote to art dealer Theo van Gogh (brother of Vincent), “I am doing a *gavotte bretonne*: three little girls dancing in a hayfield. . . . The painting seems original to me, and I am quite pleased with the composition.” The subject itself was a familiar one; Breton dances, religious processions, and other peasant scenes by academic painters were shown with some frequency at the Salon. Parisian audiences would have recognized the girls’ triangular bonnets, broad collars, and wooden shoes immediately.

But Gauguin’s aim was not to present an anecdotal view of life in Brittany. The somnolent, ritualistic quality of the girls’ dance conveys ambiguity. His dancers loom overlarge in front of a stone wall, their size emphasized by small heaps of grain. Gauguin’s eye was also trained on concerns of color and form. The girls’ linked arms create a sinuous chain of zigzags that seems to fence them into a narrow space. This effect is enhanced by strong contrasts of color: the dark dresses and white collars, the brilliant poppies attached to their smocks, and the green of new hay.

The town of Pont-Aven and its church spire can be recognized in the background of this scene. In 1886, the year after he painted his *gavotte*, Gauguin found the place overcrowded with artists. Seeking a more isolated — and less expensive — environment, he and several colleagues took up residence in Le Pouldu, a small hamlet nine kilometers distant.

Oil on canvas, 73 x 92.7 cm (28 ¾ x 36 ½ in.)
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon 1983.1.19



Paul Gauguin
French, 1848 – 1903
Self-Portrait, 1889

Gauguin painted many self-portraits, but few are as enigmatic as this one. It was among the work that Gauguin and his student Meyer Isaac de Haan created to decorate the dining room of the inn where they were staying in Le Pouldu, near Pont-Aven. In the six weeks after their arrival in late 1889, they made dozens of ceramic works, woodcarvings, and sculptures, and covered the walls with paintings. This self-portrait, and one Gauguin did of de Haan, were painted on a pair of cupboard doors.

At the time, Gauguin’s likeness was described by friends as an “unkind character sketch” — a caricature. Today, it is the subject of intense analysis. Some see the artist casting himself in the role of Satan, others as Christ. What are we to make of the imagery — the apples that precipitate man’s fall from grace; the halo over Gauguin’s disembodied head; the snake that is both tempter of Eve and the embodiment of knowledge; the bold division into vivid yellow and red, evocative of both hellfire and the heat of creation? Perhaps it is most likely that Gauguin is revealing his conception of the artist as hero, and — almost to challenge his colleagues — of himself, particularly, as a kind of magus, a master who knows that he possesses the power of magic by virtue of talent and genius.

Oil on wood, 79.2 x 51.3 cm (31 ¾ x 20 ¾ in.)
Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.150



Paul Gauguin
French, 1848 – 1903
Haystacks in Brittany, 1890

This stylized view of fields and farm buildings near Le Pouldu is typical of the so-called *synthétiste* works that Gauguin painted in Brittany in 1890. Its forms are simplified, abstracted to their essence. In 1888, Gauguin had defined his goal as “ . . . synthesis of form and color derived from the observation of only the dominant element.”

The friezelike procession of cows and cowherd in the foreground coaxes our eye to move horizontally, and we find that the entire composition is arranged into bands, layered one on the other. Even the sky is stratified. Strong contrasts of dark and light — exploited especially in the black-and-white cows and the flowering crops — flatten forms, rendering them more decorative than descriptive. The vivid and unexpected oranges in the foreground do not mimic nature but cast it according to the artist’s imagination. Notice how the silhouette of the cow at right is outlined against the orange with dark blue. In many places similar outlines compartmentalize colors, in the manner of cloisonné enamels or stained glass. This was a style Gauguin had evolved with fellow artist Emile Bernard. It grew out of Bernard’s interest in medieval art and Gauguin’s own fascination with Japanese prints.

Oil on canvas, 74.3 x 93.6 cm (29 ¼ x 36 ⅞ in.)
Gift of the W. Averell Harriman Foundation in memory of Marie N. Harriman 1972.9.11



Paul Gauguin

French, 1848 – 1903

Parau na te Varua ino (Words of the Devil), 1892

It is unlikely that anyone who saw this painting when it was exhibited in Paris in 1893 would have understood the Tahitian legend Gauguin inscribed on it. Its symbolism remains complex. The masked kneeling figure is the *varua ino* of the title, a malevolent spirit who materializes as strange and frightening humanoid forms. The standing woman, on the other hand, is associated through her gestures evoking modesty and shame with western images of Eve after the fall. When Gauguin traveled to Polynesia, he took with him a collection of photographs — of Renaissance paintings, the Parthenon, the Buddhist temple of Borobudur — and often incorporated these images in his Tahitian painting.

Yet this is not simply a western theme in Polynesian guise. Among the women of Tahiti, Gauguin discovered profound spiritual forces at work. In this Polynesian Eve, he envisioned a channel through which spiritual energy entered the everyday world. Probably she represented knowledge of good and evil, of life and human morality — part of Gauguin’s long fascination with life and death. At the upper right, under the curiously serpentine red and green face, Gauguin inserts himself into the scene with the depiction of a sketchy hand, an emblem he used also in self-portraits (see *Self-Portrait*, 1889).

Oil on canvas, 91.7 x 68.5 cm (36 1/8 x 26 15/16 in.)
Gift of the W. Averell Harriman Foundation in memory of Marie N. Harriman 1972.9.12



Paul Gauguin

French, 1848 – 1903

Fatata te Miti (By the Sea), 1892

Like *Parau na te Varua ino*, *Fatata te Miti* was painted during Gauguin’s first trip to Tahiti. Its setting, in fact, is quite similar. The two paintings share brilliant pink sands and vividly colored accents, the brilliant fringed blossoms of the phosphorescing *hutu*, and on the left the same unusually shaped tree. These similarities point to Gauguin’s use of “documents,” the term he used for sketches and working drawings that he would incorporate into many paintings and prints.

Their similarities invite us to compare the two works, and in other respects we find they are quite different. Where *Parau na te Varua ino* is densely symbolic, this painting is a more straightforward depiction of life on the island. One woman removes her pareo to join a companion already plunging into the sea for a swim. Nearby a man fishes with a spear. The intense, tropical colors — hot oranges and cool blues — convey sensual delight. This is the effortless and uninhibited paradise that Gauguin had hoped to find in the South Seas. Little remained of this life, however, by the time Gauguin reached Tahiti. Polynesian culture had been transformed by western missionaries and colonialism, and the ancient religion replaced by Christianity. Gauguin wrote and illustrated a manuscript about Polynesian mythology, but most of what he knew about the island gods came from previously published sources.

Oil on canvas, 67.9 x 91.5 cm (26 3/4 x 36 in.)
Chester Dale Collection 1963.10.149



Paul Gauguin

French, 1848 – 1903

The Bathers, 1897

Like *Te Pape Nave Nave* (next entry), this work was painted after Gauguin’s return to Tahiti from Paris. Notice how the colors of these later pictures are nuanced, more blended than the flatter, more intense hues found in the two earlier ones. He has still outlined many of his shapes, yet they nonetheless appear softer, and the large areas of colors are neither so bold nor so distinct. Here, especially, the coarse texture and heavy weave of the canvas add a tapestrylike effect. Whereas the earlier works from Tahiti are vivid and direct, those painted during this second trip have a more dreamlike appearance and spiritual intensity. The figures are more monumental, with an aura of timelessness and dignity. And their color is more expressive.

Gauguin had always been preoccupied with the role of color, calling it a “profound and mysterious language, a language of the dream.” He described its effects as akin to music and its relationships to musical harmonies. The gentle tones here — the soft mat of pinks that carpets the foreground, the swirls of lavender water — seem to be scented with the sweet perfumes of paradise. This is one of the most sumptuous of all Gauguin’s paintings. *The Bathers* probably once belonged to Edgar Degas, who owned several works by Gauguin.

Oil on canvas, 60.4 x 93.4 cm (23 3/4 x 36 3/4 in.)
Gift of Sam A. Lewisohn 1951.5.1



Paul Gauguin

French, 1848 – 1903

Te Pape Nave Nave (Delectable Waters), 1898

In 1898, Gauguin sent a group of works from Tahiti for exhibition in Paris. The centerpiece was a painting more than twelve-feet long on hemp sacking material with the French inscription, “Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?” (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston). Intended to be seen with it were eight smaller works based on motifs excerpted from *Where are we going?* These were not preparatory studies but variations painted after the larger work was completed. They represented a kind of rethinking or perhaps summing up by the artist. This painting is one of these smaller works.

One figure that recurs from the larger work is the blue goddess. She is the deity Hina, prominent in an ancient Polynesian creation myth, whom Gauguin represented in sculpture and painting repeatedly. Gauguin’s interpretation of her appearance is based upon a variety of sources from Hindu and South Asian art and culture. Gauguin described Hina as an emblem of the “hereafter,” alluding to both the cycles of life represented in the work (by the infant and old woman) and his stated intention that the grouping of work would be his final artistic statement. Experiencing numerous maladies, financial problems, and depression, he intended to commit suicide when the work was finished (he died several years later at age 54 from a variety of diseases he had contracted). Despite these seemingly explicit biographical interpretations, this painting and related canvases, like much of Gauguin’s work, retain a sense of mystery. “Known symbols would congeal the canvas into a melancholy reality,” he wrote, “and the problem indicated would no longer be a poem.”

Oil on canvas, 74 x 95.3 cm (29 1/8 x 37 1/2 in.)
Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon 1973.68.2