

JEAN & ALFRED GOLDSTEIN EXHIBITION SERIES

# GAUGUIN

*Voyage to Paradise*

AT SELBY GARDENS

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The name Gauguin instantly conjures a paradisiacal image of Tahiti—lush vegetation, a brilliant palette of saturated reds and yellows infused with moody purples and fuchsias, often populated by block-like, dark-skinned figures in static poses. But Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) produced an enormous body of ground-breaking prints that were in constant dialogue with his better known paintings.

***Gauguin: Voyage to Paradise*** focuses on Gauguin's paradigm-shifting woodcuts and lithographs. Culled from far-flung collections including the Israel Museum, Smith College, Bates College, and local private collectors Keith and Linda Monda, these works on paper explore Gauguin's abiding search for a primitive Eden untouched by the ills of the modern metropolis, a goal shared for centuries by countless explorers, colonizers, and artists. Counter to commonly held perceptions, Gauguin's quest for a purer, more natural place began in the province of Brittany in his native France 15 years before he first sailed to Tahiti.

The Gardens' exhibition will chart Gauguin's elusive search through his prints of Brittany, Martinique, and Tahiti, highlighting the essential role of natural motifs in achieving the artist's vision of the exotic. The Museum of Botany & the Arts will also feature archival photographs of Tahiti by colonial photographer Charles Georges Spitz (1857-1894), historic maps of Tahiti produced by explorers, historical photos of the colonial pavilions of the Universal Exhibition of 1889 in Paris, and other ethnographic sources that shaped Gauguin's vision before he even set foot in Tahiti.

In the Tropical Conservatory, and throughout the Gardens, guests will encounter the colors of Gauguin's well-known palette represented by flowering plants and lush, tropical displays of palms, ferns and fruit trees. In 1891, Gauguin received funding from France's Ministry of Public Education and Fine Arts "to go to Tahiti to study and ultimately paint this country's costumes and landscapes." Gauguin developed a method for this. "In each locale I need a period of incubation, to learn each time the particular character of the plants, the trees—of the whole landscape."

His interest was in the landscape, the culture, and customs of the native peoples. In his fascination with the island inhabitants' use of the local flora to heal, he wrote about the Tahitian practice of using "the nuts and leaves of the *atura* tree and the pods and flowers of the *hotu* tree for medicinal purposes." The lush landscapes, thus serve as an ethnography, unlocking the customs of each culture, making them more than mere picturesque backdrops.

Our understanding of Gauguin is heavily inflected by the mythic persona he constructed for himself—a blend of self-described savage, Christian martyr, and outsider—which draws heavily on his storied biography and writings. Born in Paris, Paul Gauguin was one-eighth Peruvian and lived a luxurious life with his Spanish-Peruvian family in Lima for years as a child, then as a well-heeled French schoolboy, before becoming a merchant seaman and serving in the navy. Reclaiming bourgeois life as a stockbroker in Paris, he married and had five children with the Danish Mette Gad, with whom he eventually separated to claim his freedom as a full-time artist.

Gauguin embraced woodcuts because they enabled simple and direct expression, spearheading the revival of the medium in early 20th century Expressionist works by artists such as Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Emil Nolde. Characterized by stylized forms that were intended to represent peoples and cultures as more “natural” than their cosmopolitan European counterparts, their look—willfully vague, prone to darkness, unfinished, replete with the markings of his woodcutting tools—evinces Gauguin’s reputed desire to “go native.” The vanguard qualities of his imagery—exaggeratedly simplified, flat forms, either vibrant color or stark oppositions between light and dark—are renowned. However, the artist’s imposition of Western stereotypes on his subjects—the naive and pure lifestyle of rural inhabitants and the greater carnal freedom and “natural” inclination toward idleness in exotic island cultures, has come in for criticism.

Highlights in the museum include *Manao Tupapau* (She Thinks of the Ghost and the Ghost Thinks of Her) and *Nave Nave Fenua* (The Land of Delights), 1894-95, remarkable for their evocation of tropical vegetation but also for the ways they suggest cultural difference. Both depict Teha’amana, the artist’s model during his first two years in Tahiti. With its compelling contrast between the dark, fetal figure and the glowing bark cloth sheet on which she lies, *Manao Tupapau*, in the artist’s account, depicts the nighttime terror occasioned by the spirit of death. The phosphorescent flowers in the background and the diminutive specter itself dramatize the figure’s vulnerability as *Nave Nave Fenua* does. In the artist’s Tahitian version of Eve in the Garden of Eden, Gauguin substitutes a twig or grass stem, perhaps to pollinate the nearby flower, for the proverbial apple and a winged lizard, regarded in Polynesia as fearful spirits of ancestors or divinities, for the serpent.

A short list of Gauguin’s natural motifs in his Tahitian works includes banana, coco palm, breadfruit, ironwood and mango trees, and possibly peacock plants, caperbushes, pandanus leaves as well as vanilla orchid, hibiscus, and hutu flowers. Inasmuch as he prefers suggestiveness to botanical accuracy, identification can be challenging, perhaps even beside the point. As the artist explains:

A flower does not consist only of what we see, the obvious and immediate. The artist who wishes to understand her reality must then re-create its essence. In other words, he must follow her as she grows, from a seed until fully bloomed. Only he has the right to deform the visible features of objects in order to express his vision.

(Charles Morice in Chapter 1 of  
*Paul Gauguin, Noa Noa*)

In other words, Gauguin’s creative process favors the imagination over the seen.

Interpretations of Gauguin vary widely: Scholars reproach him for being a sexual imperialist—giving form to male erotic fantasies and imperialist narratives, which, in turn, crystallized such scenarios in the Western imagination. Other scholars vaunt Gauguin’s hybridity, citing his position as a European man open to indigenous practices—religious and linguistic—and thus able to blur traditional oppositions between East and West. Still others signal his frequent blending of Southeast Asian cultures, such as Cambodia and Indonesia, as a sign of Western myopia. Undisputed, however, is his position as a modern artist, allied with the Symbolists, who depended on the art world of Paris for his livelihood and reputation.

Gauguin’s art and life were mired in the myth of an untouched paradise. If wanderlust was his passport, it could not secure his dream. The fantasy—at once seductive and, in the context of cultural difference, disturbing—was unrealizable.

**Gauguin: Voyage to Paradise** will be on view at the Selby Gardens from February 10-June 30, 2019. A keynote lecture by the Curator will take place February 12.

#### Sources:

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