



Gauguin

Maker of Myth

National Gallery of Art / February 27 – June 5, 2011



PAUL GAUGUIN (1848, Paris–1903, Hiva-Oa, Marquesas Islands) spent a lifetime traveling to distant lands in search of a primitive paradise. Believing that the key to unleashing his creativity was to be found in faraway places not yet corrupted by civilization, he sojourned to ever more remote areas in Europe, the Caribbean, and Polynesia. “To do something new,” he said, “you have to go back to the origins, to humanity in its infancy.”¹ But on arriving at each destination he discovered that the reality he encountered was very different from the paradise he had imagined. He had envisioned each new place as a sacred world where people lived simply, freely, and without inhibitions, but he instead found complex societies with their own difficult realities. He turned to his art to capture this elusive paradise, depicting an idealized, mythic dreamworld.

Gauguin: Maker of Myth explores the ways the artist created myths over the course of his career. A self-proclaimed “teller of tales,” Gauguin knew the most potent myths were not wholesale fabrications but rather those that blended fact with fiction. He used this to his advantage, painting and sculpting works of art that make it difficult to discern where reality ended and where his imaginary world began.

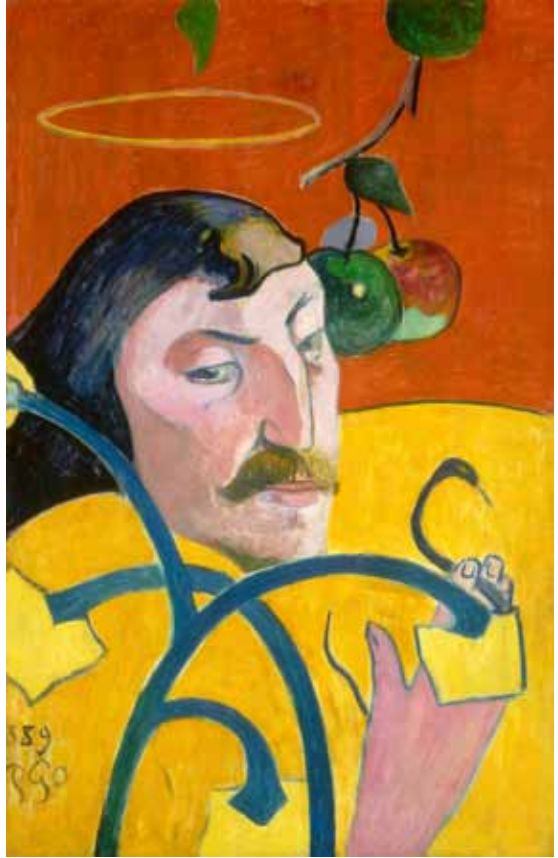
Personal Myths Often spun from a kernel of truth, the fantastic myths Gauguin created frequently concerned his personal identity. These biographical tales were a type of self-promotion, an attempt to establish his persona and artistic credibility. No personal myth was more central to the artist than his claim to be “savage,” which he understood as being uncorrupted by society and

FIG. 1

Christ in the Garden of Olives, 1889, oil on canvas, Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, Gift of Elizabeth C. Norton

FIG. 2

Self-Portrait, 1889, oil on wood, National Gallery of Art, Washington, Chester Dale Collection



thus capable of pure, untainted vision. As proof of his supposed primitivism, Gauguin often cited his family ties to Peru, where he spent his early childhood: “You know that I have Indian blood, Inca blood in me, and it’s reflected in everything I do. . . . I try to confront rotten civilization with something more natural, based on savagery.”² In truth Gauguin’s family ties were to the Spanish viceroy in Peru; there was no connection to the Inca, but this detail he slyly omitted.

By portraying himself as a savage, Gauguin also presented himself as an outsider—standing on the margins of civilization, struggling to be understood by the mainstream. He extended this theme in many self-portraits, where he depicted himself as an oppressed subject: a beleaguered artist, an impoverished peasant—and even, in one fantastically brutal ceramic sculpture, as a grotesque severed head. The theme reached full expression in 1889 when Gauguin painted himself as Christ in the Garden of Olives (fig. 1). Leaning heavily to one side, with head askew and eyes cast downward, he represented himself as “deserted by all of his disciples” with “surroundings . . . as sad as his soul.”³ The quiet desperation of the figure suggests the artist’s demoralized state. Having recently abandoned his comfortable life as a stockbroker and family man to pursue his art, Gauguin found himself in a self-imposed exile, penniless, an artist frustrated by the scanty sales of his work. He viewed himself as a martyr who sacrificed family and fortune for art.

Although his portrayal as a savage outsider was central to his self-mythology, Gauguin did not fully deny his status as a modern man. “You must remember,” he wrote to his wife, “that I have a dual nature, [that of] the Indian and [that of] the sensitive man.”⁴ In a masterful self-portrait from 1889, Gauguin portrayed himself as an artist deeply divided (fig. 2). The upper canvas depicts the artist as a saint, a halo hovering above him as he averts his eyes from the tempting apples. But in the lower half, Gauguin appears as the tempter, holding the biblical snake between his fingers. The bold background complicates the divide, with a menacing red above and a heavenly golden yellow below. Gauguin portrays himself as a fundamentally contradictory man—saint and sinner, tempted and tempter, angel and Lucifer, civilized and savage.

Breton Myths Gauguin completed these ambitious early works in Brittany, where he went in search of an alternative to metropolitan Paris. Located on the northwest coast of France, Brittany possessed a heavy Celtic influence, agrarian lifestyle, lively artistic community, and—not insignificantly—lower cost of living, all of which Gauguin found agreeable. As he wrote to a friend, “I love Brittany; I find the wild and the primitive here. When my clogs resonate on this granite ground I hear the muffled and powerful thud that I’m looking for in painting.”⁵

In Brittany, Gauguin’s work experienced a transformation from his early impressionist style, which had been modeled on that of his friends Camille Pissarro and Edgar Degas. The soft palette and broken brushstrokes gave way to simplified shapes and broad application of flat, bold colors, often with dark outlines to create an overall effect reminiscent of stained glass, Japanese prints, and cloisonné enamels. Gauguin pushed toward a more abstract art. “Don’t copy nature too closely,” he warned. “Art is an abstraction; as you dream amid nature, extrapolate art from it . . .”⁶

Gauguin frequently employed this new style to express what he perceived as the spirituality of Brittany. Christian themes—especially those of struggle, persecution, and redemption—were particularly important. In *The Yellow Christ*, inspired by a wood crucifix seen in a nearby Breton church, Gauguin brought the Christ figure into the landscape (fig. 3). He radicalized his palette, coloring the church crucifix an acid yellow and placing it in a prismatic landscape with flaming orange trees and purple hills. Even bolder is his *Vision of the Sermon (Jacob Wrestling with the Angel)* (fig. 4). Here the struggling angel is pushed to the background against a fiery red, witnessed by devout Breton women bystanders who populate more than half the canvas. Describing the painting in a letter to Vincent van Gogh, Gauguin explained the canvas as drawing together real and mythic worlds: “The whole thing very severe. The cow under the tree is very small in comparison with reality and rearing up. For me in this picture the landscape and the struggle exist only in the imagination of the people praying owing to the sermon which is why there is contrast between the life-size people and the struggle in its non-natural disproportionate landscape.”⁷

FIG. 3

The Yellow Christ,
1889, oil on canvas,
Albright-Knox Art
Gallery, Buffalo,
General Purchase
Funds, 1946.
Photo: Albright-
Knox Art Gallery/Art
Resource, NY

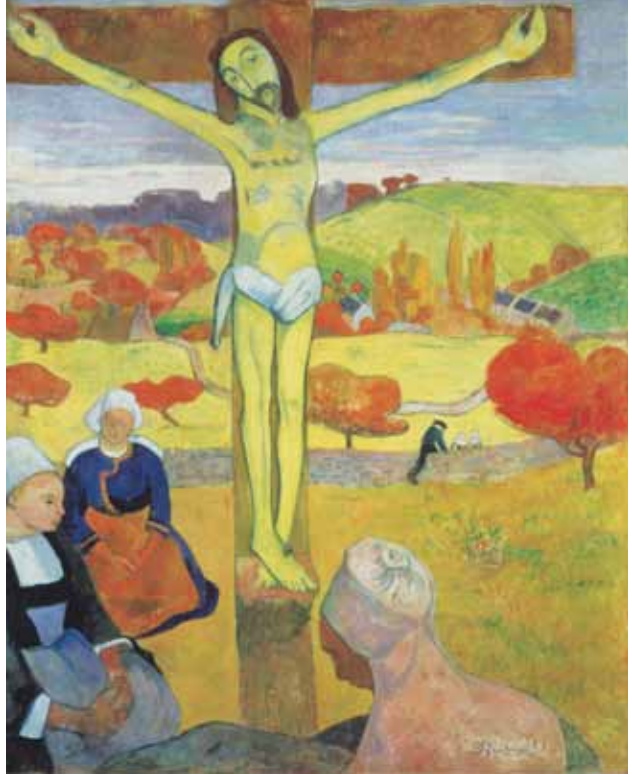


FIG. 4

Vision of the Sermon
(*Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*), 1888, oil
on canvas, National
Gallery of Scotland,
Edinburgh





Tropical Myths Between visits to Brittany, Gauguin journeyed to Martinique—a trip in which he set sail from France in 1887 full of romantic desire to “live as a savage.”⁸ Although illness forced an early return, the trip proved formative, allowing Gauguin his first opportunity to paint in a tropical environment and fueling his interest in cultures deeply rooted in ancient traditions. Back in Paris, the elaborate pavilions on display at the 1889 World’s Fair, many showcasing the French colonies, further stirred up Gauguin’s interest in faraway lands. Presentations of Tonkin (Vietnam), Madagascar, Java, Cambodia, and, of course, Tahiti transfixed the artist. Travel literature and journals, with their vivid and romanticized accounts, added to Gauguin’s excitement. Many characterized Tahiti as an exotic island paradise; the French explorer Louis-Antoine de Bougainville had described it as nothing short of “the happiest society that exists on the globe.”⁹

Although Gauguin may have had some awareness of the ways colonialism and modernity were changing Tahiti, the idealized vision of an untainted land and freedom from the constraints of modern society nevertheless prompted him to secure funding to travel there in 1891. He justified to his wife his need to go: “There in Tahiti, in the silence of beautiful tropical night, I shall be able to listen to the sweet murmuring music of my heart’s movements in loving harmony with the beings around me. Free at last with no money troubles and able to love, sing, and die.”¹⁰ Gauguin believed that his tropical Arcadia would not only free him from his ever-looming financial burdens, but would also,

FIG. 5
Te Faaturuma
(The Brooding
Woman), 1892, oil on
canvas, Worcester
Art Museum

FIG. 6
Parau na te Varua ino
(Words of the Devil),
1892, oil on canvas,
National Gallery of
Art, Washington,
Gift of the W. Averell
Harriman Foundation
in memory of
Marie N. Harriman



more importantly, liberate his creativity. In Tahiti, he believed, he would find an artistic way forward by taking a step back to see “humanity in its infancy.”

When Gauguin first set foot in Papeete in 1891, he found himself far from France, but even further from the paradise he had imagined. Tahiti was by then a French colony and was facing the ill effects of that status: the population had been decimated by diseases and alcohol brought by Europeans; Polynesian religious rituals were forbidden and rapidly headed toward extinction; and Gauguin witnessed the funeral of the last Tahitian king, Pomare V. “Tahiti is becoming completely French,” he lamented. “Little by little, all the ancient ways of doing things will disappear. Our missionaries have already brought a great deal of hypocrisy and they are sweeping away part of the poetry.”¹¹ Many of Gauguin’s Tahitian works hint at the cultural loss. He painted melancholic Tahitian women, perhaps contemplating the vanishing of their traditional culture—a culture that Gauguin mourned but never knew, or mourned *because* he never knew (fig. 5). Images of a fallen Eve, her Garden of Eden transformed by Gauguin into a tropical forest, similarly evoke a paradise lost (fig. 6).

Realizing that the Tahiti he had envisioned did not exist, Gauguin sought to create the wild paradise in his art. Images of beautiful women, luscious fruits, and richly hued landscapes depict the fertile, untainted land he had imagined (fig. 7). Other paintings portray a more mysterious world, filled with beauty, but also haunted by dangerous spirits and uncertainty.

FIG. 7
Two Tahitian Women, 1899, oil on canvas, Lent by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of William Church Osborn, 1949

FIG. 8
Manao tupapau (The Spirit of the Dead Keeps Watch), 1892, oil on burlap mounted on canvas, Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, A. Conger Goodyear Collection, 1965. Photo: Albright-Knox Art Gallery/ Art Resource, NY





Manao tupapau (*The Spirit of the Dead Keeps Watch*) depicts the young Tehamana, Gauguin's scandalously young mistress with whom he lived during his first stay in Tahiti (fig. 8). Her dark, fearful eyes contrast with the glowing, magical purples and pinks that surround her. Behind the bed is the *tupapau*, the Tahitian spirit of the dead. The work's title, Gauguin noted, has a double meaning: "either she thinks of the ghost or the ghost thinks of her."¹² Such ambiguities are common in Gauguin's titles. Often written in Tahitian, or a broken Tahitian reflecting the artist's rudimentary knowledge of the language, they are both exotic and enigmatic. Many add to the uncertainty by posing questions: *E haere oe i hia* (*Where Are You Going?*), *Aha oe feii?* (*What! Are You Jealous?*), *No te aha oe riri* (*Why Are You Angry?*) (fig. 9).

Sacred Myths Gauguin traveled to Tahiti anticipating an encounter with ancient Polynesian religious traditions. Upon arrival, however, he quickly recognized that traditional beliefs had been overwhelmed by Christian missionary teachings. To fill the void, Gauguin created his own sacred paintings and objects based on his understanding of ancient Tahitian myths and gods. He claimed to have learned about the lost pantheon of divinities from his mistress—though in fact, his information (not always accurate) derived mostly from an 1837 account of Tahiti by the Belgian Jacques-Antoine Moerenhout. Through Moerenhout, for instance, Gauguin learned of Hina, goddess of the moon, and Fatu, god of the earth. Both figures frequently appear in his art, such as the tiki-like devotional carving—a replacement for the Tahitian idols that he never discovered (fig. 10).

Gauguin searched for commonalities with other faiths and cultures, hoping to find underlying spiritual connections that he understood as the essence of humanity. He often merged references to ancient Tahitian religion with Christian themes initially explored in his Breton period works. In *Merahi Metua no Tehamana* (*Tehamana Has Many Parents*) (fig. 11), for example, Christian

FIG. 9

No te aha oe riri
(*Why Are You*
Angry?), 1896, oil
on canvas, The Art
Institute of Chicago,
Mr. and Mrs. Martin A.
Ryerson Collection

FIG. 10

Hina and Fatu,
c. 1892, carved
tamanu wood,
Art Gallery of
Ontario, Toronto, Gift
from the Volunteer
Committee Fund,
1980

FIG. 11

Merahi Metua
no Tehamana
(*Tehamana Has Many*
Parents), 1893, oil
on canvas, The Art
Institute of Chicago,
Gift of Mr. and
Mrs. Charles Deering
McCormick



ideals (suggested by the modest dress urged by missionaries) and Polynesian religious beliefs are shown alongside allusions to Hinduism (the pose of the Polynesian goddess Hina, to the left, hints at ancient Indian imagery) and glyphs reminiscent of those on Easter Island tablets. The title, which refers to the Tahitian practice of sharing children among real and foster parents, suggests another of the many traditions brought together in the canvas.

In 1901, Gauguin again felt the pull of an unseen land. Leaving Tahiti, where he had lived since 1891 (with a two-year return to France from 1893 to 1895), he moved to the remote village of Atuona in the distant Marquesas Islands. Although declining health and finances left the artist in a fragile state, this final promise of paradise reinvigorated his painting. *Barbaric Tales*, painted the year before his death, depicts two women seated in a lush tropical setting, one assuming a traditional pose of the Buddha (cover). Behind them crouches a sinister figure, a portrait of the Dutch artist Meijer de Haan, whom Gauguin had befriended in his Brittany days. The women, at peace with their surroundings, seem oblivious to the lurking man; all the figures stare out enigmatically from the painting. The “barbaric tales” of this late work are obscure, because Gauguin, as in so much of his art, is less interested in conveying a clear story than in creating a deep sense of mystery, of myth.

Notes

- 1 Eugène Tardieu, “Interview with Paul Gauguin,” *L’Echo de Paris*, 1895. Cited in *Oviri, Écrits d’un sauvage*, ed. Daniel Guérin (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1974), 140.
- 2 In a letter to Theo van Gogh, November 20 or 21, 1889. Quoted in Belinda Thomson, *Gauguin by Himself* (London: Little, Brown and Company, 1993), 111.
- 3 J. Juret, “Paul Gauguin devant ses tableaux,” *L’Echo de Paris*, 23:2, 1891. Quoted in Władysława Jaworska, “‘Christ in the Garden of Olive-Trees,’ by Gauguin. The Sacred or the Profane?,” *Artibus et Historiae* 19, no. 37 (1998): 84.
- 4 In a letter to Mette Gauguin, February 1889. Quoted in *Oviri, Écrits d’un sauvage*, 39.
- 5 In a letter to Émile Schuffenecker, late February or early March 1888. Quoted in Victor Merlhès, *Correspondance de Paul Gauguin* (Paris: Fondation Singer-Polignac, 1984), 172.
- 6 In a letter to Émile Schuffenecker, August 14, 1888. Quoted in *Oviri, Écrits d’un sauvage*, 40.
- 7 In a letter to Vincent van Gogh, c. September 25–27, 1888. Quoted in Belinda Thomson, *Gauguin’s Vision* (Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 2005), 53.
- 8 In a letter to Mette Gauguin, c. May 1, 1887. Quoted in Merlhès, 151.
- 9 Quoted in Kirk Varnedoe, “Gauguin,” in *“Primitivism” in Twentieth-Century Art*, vol. 1, ed. William Rubin (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 188.
- 10 In a letter to Mette Gauguin, 1890 or 1891. Quoted in Paul Gauguin, *Letters to His Wife and Friends*, ed. Maurice Malingue, trans. Henry J. Stenning (1949; reprint, Boston: MFA Publications, 2003), 137.
- 11 In a letter to Mette Gauguin, July 1891. Quoted in *Oviri, Écrits d’un sauvage*, 75.
- 12 Written in 1893 in Gauguin’s notebook *Cahier pour Aline*. Paul Gauguin, *Cahier pour Aline* (Paris: Éditions du Sonneur, 2009), 34.

This brochure was written by Lynn Kellmanson Matheny and produced by the department of exhibition programs and the publishing office at the National Gallery of Art.

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COVER *Contes barbares (Barbaric Tales)* (detail), 1902, oil on canvas, Museum Folkwang, Essen

Lectures

February 27

2:00, East Building Auditorium
*Introduction to the Exhibition —
Gauguin: Maker of Myth*
Mary Morton, curator and head of
the department of French paintings,
National Gallery of Art, and Belinda
Thomson, guest curator

May 9

12:10 and 1:10, East Building
Small Auditorium
Gauguin's Myths
Mary Morton, curator and head of
the department of French paintings,
National Gallery of Art

May 15

2:00, East Building Auditorium
*Calling the Earth to Witness:
Paul Gauguin in the Marquesas*
June Hargrove, professor of
nineteenth-century European
painting and sculpture, University
of Maryland, College Park

June 4

12:00, East Building Auditorium
*Gauguin's Selves: Visual Identities
in the Age of Freud*
Richard Brettell, Margaret McDermott
Distinguished Chair of Art and Aesthetics,
Interdisciplinary Program in Arts
and Humanities, University of Texas
at Dallas

Audio Tour

Narrated by Gallery director Earl A.
Powell III, this tour includes commentary
by Mary Morton, curator of French paintings,
National Gallery of Art, Washington; Belinda
Thomson, guest curator, independent art
historian, and honorary fellow at the
University of Edinburgh; and Nicholas
Thomas, director, Museum of Anthropology
and Archaeology, Cambridge.

Rental at the entrance of the exhibition: \$5

Concerts

March 2

12:10 pm, East Building Auditorium
Wilhem Latchoumia, pianist

March 20

6:30 pm, West Garden Court
François Chaplin, pianist

Exhibition Film

Narrated by Willem Dafoe and with Alfred
Molina as the voice of Gauguin, this thirty-
minute film explores Gauguin's struggle
to forge a new way of painting by creating
myths—about both himself and the sub-
jects he painted in Brittany, Martinique,
and Polynesia. Produced by the Gallery.

East Building Auditorium
with minor exceptions
Tuesday, Friday, and Sunday, 11:30 am

East Building Small Auditorium
with minor exceptions
Daily, 12:00 – closing

Made possible by the HRH Foundation

On the Web

www.nga.gov/gauguin

Catalogue

Gauguin: Maker of Myth, edited by
Belinda Thomson. Full color, 256 pages.
Hardcover \$55, softcover \$35. Available
at the Gallery Shops or online at
shop.nga.gov.

General Information

Admission to the National Gallery of Art
and all of its programs is free of charge,
unless otherwise noted.

Hours:
Monday – Saturday, 10:00 am – 5:00 pm
Sunday, 11:00 am – 6:00 pm

Gallery website: www.nga.gov

The exhibition has been organized by Tate Modern, London, in association
with the National Gallery of Art, Washington.

Bank of America is proud to be the global sponsor.

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and the Humanities.