Gauguin, Paul

(*b* Paris, June 7, 1848; *d* Atuona, Marquesas Islands, May 8, 1903).

Rodolphe Rapetti

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Paul Gauguin: *Ia Orana Maria (Hail Mary)*, oil on canvas, 44 3/4 x 34 1/2 in. (113.7 x 87.6 cm), 1891 (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Sam A. Lewisohn, 1951, Accession ID: 51.112.2); photo © The Metropolitan Museum of Art http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/110003534 *<http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/110003534>*

French painter, printmaker, sculptor and ceramicist. His style developed from Impressionism through a brief cloisonnist phase (in partnership with Emile Bernard) towards a highly personal brand of Symbolism, which sought within the tradition of Pierre Puvis de Chavannes to combine and contrast an idealized vision of primitive Polynesian culture with the sceptical pessimism of an educated European

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(see fig.). A selfconsciously outspoken personality and an aggressively asserted position as the leader of the Pont-Aven group made him a dominant figure in Parisian intellectual circles in the late 1880s. His use of non-naturalistic colour and formal distortion for expressive ends was widely influential on early 20th-century avant-garde artists.

1. Life and work.

(i) To 1882.

His father, Clovis Gauguin, worked on the *National*, a paper with liberal leanings. In 1846 he had married Aline Chazal, whose parents were the engraver André Chazal and Flora Tristan (1803–44), a French socialist writer close to Pierre Joseph Proudhon and George Sand. Flora Tristan's personality, so deeply involved with social struggle that she had acquired mythic status, her egocentricity and her ceaseless travelling prefigure many aspects of her grandson's character. She was the natural daughter of a Peruvian nobleman, Don Mariano Tristan Moscoso, and when Gauguin constructed his image of the 'untamed' artist he often referred to this exotic ancestry. When the revolution of 1848 brought Louis Napoleon to power, Clovis Gauguin, fearing a return to the imperial regime, decided to set off with his family for Lima, where he intended to found a newspaper, but during the crossing he died of a heart attack. Aline Gauguin continued the journey, in order to seek protection for herself and her two children with her uncle, Don Pio Tristan Moscoso.

Until 1855 Gauguin lived the life of a pampered child on his great-uncle's estate in Lima. Then he returned to France where an inheritance allowed his mother to settle first in Orléans, native city of the Gauguin family, and then in Paris. Gauguin pursued his studies but was an indifferent student and at the age of 17 joined a cargo ship sailing between Le Havre and Rio de Janeiro. In 1867 his mother died, leaving the financier Gustave Arosa as guardian of her children. A collector and photographer, friend of Nadar and Camille Pissarro, Arosa was to have a considerable influence on the young Gauguin. Like many collectors at the end of the 19th century, Arosa was attracted to the French painters of the 1830 generation, and he had put together a remarkable collection, including 16 works by Delacroix and numerous paintings by Corot, Courbet and the Barbizon school. It was in this context that Gauguin first became enthusiastic about painting, which he practised as an amateur with Marguerite Arosa, his guardian's daughter. In 1871 Arosa obtained a position for Gauguin as a stockbroker with a bank. The substantial income he earned in this new post removed any anxiety about money, and in 1873 he married Mette-Sophie Gad, a young Danish woman who bore him five children.

Painting began to occupy an increasingly important place in Gauguin's life, thanks to a series of different people. By 1872 he was regularly visiting Emile Schuffenecker, who like himself worked in a bank and was also a painter. The following year he met the Norwegian painter Frits Thaulow, his wife's brother-in-law. Gauguin visited the First Impressionist Exhibition (April–May 1874) and witnessed the stir it caused in the press and in public opinion. However, it was his meeting with Pissarro that proved the decisive catalyst for his artistic development: probably introduced by Arosa, he was in touch with Pissarro by June 1874 and worked with him at the Académie Colarossi in Paris. Several times during the course of his career Gauguin paid homage to Pissarro who was both a generous teacher and someone who made him appreciate the reality of the struggles faced by avant-garde artists. On his recommendation, Gauguin bought some Impressionist paintings, showing a preference for Cézanne

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(e.g. *The Castle of Médan*, *c*. 1880; Glasgow, Burrell Col.) and thus becoming one of his earliest admirers. Pissarro also drew him into the Impressionist circle. Gauguin, who had already exhibited a landscape at the official Salon in 1876, participated in their group exhibitions from 1880 onwards.

Gauguin's early works before about 1878 are in a muted Impressionist style, not yet free of a greyish tonality, which was sometimes reminiscent of the Barbizon school (e.g. *Glade*, 1874; Orléans, Mus. B.-A.) and sometimes of the urban landscapes of Stanislas Lépine (*The Seine by the Pont d'Iéna*, 1875; Paris, Mus. d'Orsay). His meeting with Pissarro encouraged him to adopt a more clearly stated luminosity and it liberated his use of colour in landscapes whose compositions were sometimes inspired by Cézanne (e.g. *The Gardeners of Vaugirard*, 1879; Northampton, MA, Smith. Coll. Mus. A.). Gauguin, Pissarro and Cézanne painted together in Pontoise in 1881. Gauguin's interiors and still-lifes on the other hand were more influenced by Degas, as can be seen in *Suzanne Sewing* (1880; Copenhagen, Ny Carlsberg Glyp.). When it was shown in 1881 at the sixth Impressionist exhibition, this work, a resolutely unidealized study of the female nude, aroused the enthusiasm of J.-K. Huysmans who wrote: 'among contemporary painters who have studied the nude, none has yet given such a vehement note to reality'.

(ii) 1883–7.

Following the stock-market crash of 1882, Gauguin lost his bank job. Having no income, he envisaged supporting himself by his painting and took his family from Paris to Rouen and then to Copenhagen, where he worked as a salesman for a canvas manufacturer. He spent a miserable year in Denmark in 1885: neither his parents-in-law, who took the couple in, nor the Danish public appreciated Impressionist painting. Gauguin organized an exhibition of his work, which the Danish Academy forced to close after five days. He returned to Paris a bitter man in June 1885, accompanied by his son Clovis. He was leading a wretched life at that time despite financial support from Schuffenecker. Nonetheless, he continued to paint and in 1886 made the acquaintance of the ceramicist Ernest Chaplet, with whom he then collaborated, for example, on producing a glazed stoneware vase decorated with Breton girls (1886–7; Brussels, Mus. Hôtel Bellevue, see Bodelsen, fig.). In these pots Gauguin worked the clay by hand as a sculptor, not on a wheel, and for the usual thrown forms he substituted a strange and personal vocabulary, partly inspired by Pre-Columbian art.

Almost penniless, Gauguin took the advice of the Breton painter Felix Jobbé-Duval to seek a less stressful life in the Breton village of Pont-Aven. He went to live there in mid-July 1886, basing himself at the Pension Gloanec. Gauguin's first stay in Brittany, which lasted five months, did not bring about any radical change in his art: he was still painting in the Impressionist technique of divided tones. However, there was distinct progress in his mastery of form at this time: there was a more conscious stylization of figures and landscape elements, and his compositions became both better ordered and more daring (e.g. Washerwomen at Pont-Aven, 1886; Paris, Mus. d'Orsay). According to evidence collected by Charles Chassé, Gauguin frequently talked about synthesis during his first stay in Brittany. He was perhaps developing in conversation the 'synthetic notes' he had written shortly before in Rouen or Copenhagen. At this time the method Gauguin was advocating consisted of making sketches, copies and studies from many different sources and reassembling them in the finished work, a process utterly opposed to the Impressionist *plein-air* painting that had originally inspired him. He was also aiming to produce work in which the colour of Impressionism was allied to the harmony of Puvis de Chavannes. This is what he sought to achieve in a series of pictures produced in Martinique on a visit

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in 1887 with the painter Charles Laval (1862–94). In *Tropical Vegetation* (1887; Edinburgh, N.G.), the composition, formed by large patches of brilliant colour whose chalky texture is reminiscent of mural paintings, is enlivened by vibrant parallel brushstrokes recalling Cézanne. After returning from Martinique in 1887 Gauguin made a series of vases and jugs decorated with human headsm the style of which is influenced by Peruvian case portraits.

Paul Gauguin: *Washerwomen at Pont-Aven*, oil on canvas, 710×900 mm, 1886 (Paris, Musée d’Orsay); photo credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY

(iii) 1888: Pont-Aven and Emile Bernard.

During his second stay in Pont-Aven, Gauguin reached full stylistic maturity. He returned to the Pension Gloanec in February 1888, and in August he was again in touch with Emile Bernard; Gauguin was then 40, Bernard 20. The two artists had first met two years earlier but had not worked together then, nor even exchanged ideas. However, on this occasion, Gauguin, influenced by Bernard’s aesthetics, made the most decisive stylistic change of his career.

After 1887 Emile Bernard had distanced himself from the Seurat-inspired Neo-Impressionism he had previously been practising, so that with Louis Anquetin he could elaborate a new way of constructing pictorial space, Cloisonnism, which consisted of covering the picture surface with large patches of flat colour, bounded by a clearly marked line, similar to the leading of stained glass (e.g. Bernard’s *The*

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Rag-pickers: Iron Bridges at Asnières, 1887; New York, MOMA). It is probable that Gauguin was already familiar with these experiments, having returned to Paris from Martinique in November 1887 and having seen the exhibition at a restaurant in the Avenue de Clichy organized by Vincent van Gogh, which included cloisonnist paintings by Bernard and Anquetin. However, the works Gauguin executed in Pont-Aven before Bernard arrived, even if they reflect the growing influence of Japanese prints, were not properly speaking cloisonnist (e.g. *Young Boys Wrestling*, 1888; priv. col., see Rewald, p. 173). It was in August 1888 that, impressed by Bernard's painting *Breton Women in the Meadow* (Paris, Mus. d'Orsay), Gauguin reworked its stylistic features into a picture that marks both his adherence to Cloisonnism and his development beyond it into Symbolism: the Vision after the Sermon: Jacob Wrestling with the Angel (1888; Edinburgh, N.G.). In his *Souvenirs inédits* (1943), Bernard stated:

> Gauguin had simply put into practice not the colour theory I had told him about, but the essential style of my *Breton Women in the Meadow*, having first laid in a completely red ground in place of my yellowish-green one. In the foreground, he put my large figures with the monumental headdresses worn by châtelaines.

Paul Gauguin: *Vision after the Sermon: Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*, oil on canvas, 722×910 mm, 1888 (Edinburgh, National Gallery of Scotland); Photo credit: Art Resource, NY

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Even if it is true that Gauguin borrowed from Bernard the general arrangement of his composition, as well as the monochrome ground, his motive for using these elements was quite different. While Bernard was mainly concerned with a formal stylistic experiment—to present a complex decorative arrangement— Gauguin was bent on depicting the image a sermon creates in the minds of those who hear it. The originality of the Vision after the Sermon lies in the fact that the imaginary scene of Jacob wrestling with the angel is located on the same plane as the real people, while at the same time it is separated by the trunk of an apple tree, which bisects the composition diagonally. The colour, more muted than in Bernard's work, is marvellously attuned to the spirit of the scene. Gauguin wrote about it to van Gogh: 'I believe I have achieved in these figures a great rustic and superstitious simplicity.' The painting has inspired numerous interpretations. The 'seers' at prayer have been contrasted with the excluded 'non–seers' set aside on the upper left. The physical resemblance between the preacher and Gauguin has led critics to see the work as an image of how the mystery of art may be revealed by an inspired painter. It was on this picture that in 1891 the critic Georges-Albert Aurier based his famous definition of pictorial symbolism: *Le Symbolisme en peinture: Paul Gauguin*. Pissarro saw the Vision after the Sermon as marking Gauguin's definitive break with Impressionism. He wrote to his son Lucien: 'I criticize him for not applying his synthesis to our modern philosophy, which is absolutely social, anti-authoritarian and anti-mystical.' (20 April 1891).

In late September 1888 Gauguin met Paul Sérusier in Pont-Aven and the following month instructed him how to paint landscape in the new technique of simplified forms and flat colour patches. The result was *The Talisman* (Paris, Mus. d'Orsay), which Sérusier took back to Paris, where it had a decisive impact on his contemporaries at the Académie Julian, notably Pierre Bonnard, Maurice Denis, Edouard Vuillard and Paul Ranson, who were to form the Nabis. Not only did the Nabis copy Gauguin's way of organizing the picture surface and subjective palette, but his quasi-mythical personality was of exemplary value in their eyes.

(iv) 1888: Arles and van Gogh.

While he was at Pont-Aven, Gauguin received insistent requests from Vincent van Gogh and his brother Theo to join Vincent in Arles, where he had recently gone to live. In exchange for coming to the aid of his brother, whose mental health was already failing, Theo undertook to help Gauguin financially by buying his work. For van Gogh, also in search of exoticism, Arles represented an imaginary Japan. He hoped to set up a studio there that would attract numerous other artists. Gauguin, whom he had admired ever since their first meeting in Paris in 1887, would have been its leader.

Giving in to these appeals, Gauguin reached Arles in October 1888. For two months, the two artists lived under the same roof, endlessly discussing artistic theories and working together, out of doors and in the studio. Even in the first letters he wrote to Bernard at the beginning of his stay, Gauguin seemed already to have decided to distance himself from van Gogh, whose fiery but introverted personality hardly seemed destined to accord with his. Their tastes also differed profoundly, Gauguin wrote: 'Vincent can see Daumiers to do here, while I on the other hand, see coloured Puvis to do, mixed with Japan.' This brief partnership of two exceptional artists is one of the most famous episodes in the history of art: van Gogh's mental health rapidly deteriorated, and he was pushed to the limit of his endurance by discussions in which he and Gauguin never stopped contradicting each other, and by the impossibility of realizing his dream of a 'studio in the south'; during the night of 23 December, he cut

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off his left ear, having first threatened his companion with a razor-blade. This was the grotesque and tragic end of an association on which van Gogh had set all his hopes. Three days later Gauguin returned to Paris.

Did Gauguin’s stay in Arles, as he complacently noted in *Avant et après*, only benefit van Gogh? In contrast to Gauguin’s relationship with Bernard some months earlier, the reciprocal influence of Gauguin and van Gogh, clearly evident in work by them both, did not produce any definitive stylistic upheaval. If it is true that the surface treatment of a painting such as *Human Misery* (1888; Copenhagen, Ordrupgaardsaml.) shows the heavy impasto of van Gogh, Gauguin’s Arles series, with its supple animated forms, is really an epiphenomenon in his work.

(v) 1889–91: Pont-Aven, Le Pouldu, Paris.

The two years preceding Gauguin’s departure for Tahiti (1891) were marked by frequent trips between Brittany, where he sought to discover new landscapes at the Avens and Le Pouldu, and Paris, where he entered Symbolist literary circles. In January 1889 he stayed with Schuffenecker before returning to Pont-Aven in April. At this time he also made some portrait jugs, including one of himself (1 Feb 1889; Copenhagen, Kstindustmus.). He was invited to exhibit with Les XX in Brussels, but when his 12 submissions were not received as enthusiastically as he had anticipated, he decided not to go to Belgium. At the end of May he was again in Paris, drawn there by the opening of the Exposition Universelle and preparations for the Impressionist and Synthetist painters’ exhibition. When the jury of the Exposition Universelle refused to hang the work of Gauguin and his friends, Schuffenecker organized a group exhibition at the Café Volpini on the Champ de Mars, not far from the official art pavilion. Gauguin, Bernard, Laval, Anquetin and Georges-Daniel de Monfreid all took part. Gauguin intervened with Schuffenecker to exclude the Neo-Impressionists (Georges Seurat, Paul Signac, Henri-Edmond Cross and Pissarro), which indicates a new-found awareness of his stylistic identity and his role as the leader of a school, which he insisted on playing from then on. Despite the unquestioned novelty of the works shown, which should at least have ensured a *succès de scandale*, the exhibition was a failure. The national press remained silent and only a few literary friends, such as Félix Fénéon, gave it brief coverage.

Disappointed by this new setback, Gauguin again set off for Brittany at the beginning of the summer, accompanied by Paul Sérusier. Pont-Aven, increasingly invaded by painters, disgusted him, and he took refuge for the winter in Le Pouldu. During this period, the Dutch painter Jacob Meyer de Haan worked with him. Gauguin’s hatred for anything over-sophisticated, and his search for ever wider horizons, were the signs not just of an inherent instability but also of a frequently expressed desire to safeguard the primitive nature of his art. By December 1889 he was dreaming of leaving for Tonkin and then Madagascar: ‘The West is now in a state of decay’, he wrote to Bernard.

In 1889–90, even while he was experiencing a succession of failures, Gauguin was gradually gaining considerable notoriety among avant-garde intellectuals who found in his painting an echo of their own preoccupations. During his spells in Paris, he visited Stéphane Mallarmé and his ‘Tuesday’ group in the Rue de Rome and befriended Aurier, Charles Morice and Jean Moréas. The *Loss of Virginity* (1890–91; Norfolk, VA, Chrysler Mus.), probably painted in Paris just before he left for Tahiti, represents the culmination of an esoteric tendency that characterizes this period. The synthetist stylization is pushed to extremes: for the first time, the landscape is strictly ordered by emphasis on the horizontal to which even a cloud, portrayed as a long pale wisp, must submit. The shape of the cloud is echoed in the

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foreground by the barely pubescent body of a young girl with her limbs held rigid after a clumsy attempt at defloration. Against her breast she clutches a fox, ‘the Indian symbol of perversity’ according to Gauguin. As in the *Vision after the Sermon*, the artist artificially juxtaposes two distinct planes in one continuous space. The symbolic foreground appears as the unconscious echo of a real event shown in the distance: a Breton wedding advancing through the countryside. Religious feeling, explicit even in the title of *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*, is expressed here by a network of more complex symbols, revealing a pagan vision of stages of existence characterized by anxiety and mystery. This search for the primeval emotion of mankind in ritual links Gauguin with Symbolist artists who were rediscovering legend and myth at this time.

(vi) 1891–3: First visit to Tahiti.

While in Le Pouldu during the autumn of 1890, Gauguin made the decision to set off for Tahiti and put all his energy into carrying out this plan. On his return to Paris at the beginning of 1891, Gauguin organized an auction of his paintings in order to raise sufficient funds for his departure. A major event in the world of art and literature, this sale, for which Octave Mirbeau wrote the catalogue introduction, was a success. A benefit evening at the Théâtre des Arts was also organized for him, as well as a farewell banquet presided over by Mallarmé. At that point, Gauguin could legitimately have claimed fame and hoped that his return (for his letters show that he did not intend to remain in Tahiti indefinitely) would be the triumph he had so long awaited.

In June 1891 he arrived in Papeete in French Polynesia, after a two-month voyage. On being confronted with the reality, his illusions rapidly dissolved: the revelation he had expected from contact with an imaginary Eden never came, and the numerous expatriates who inhabited Tahiti created a parody of Europe. His constant moving from place to place was evidence of his dissatisfaction. By the summer he was at Mataiea, having spent several months at Pacca. During the first few months of his stay, he amassed what he thought of simply as studies. He wrote to Sérusier in November 1891: ‘Not a single painting yet, but masses of research which may prove fruitful; any number of documents which will be useful for a long time, I hope, back in France.’ It was not until June 1892 that his letters indicated real confidence in his work. Such paintings as *Vahiné no te tiare* (‘Woman with a flower’) (1891; Copenhagen, Ny Carlsberg Glyp.) were still reminiscent of Cézanne, but by 1891 Gauguin was already producing several works showing a new boldness, such as Women of Tahiti (Paris, Mus. d’Orsay) in which the abbreviated forms can be read as a jigsaw of coloured patches, and traditional modelling was reduced to a strict minimum.

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Paul Gauguin: *Women of Tahiti*, oil on canvas, 690×915 mm, 1891 (Paris, Musée d’Orsay); photo credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY

In Tahiti Gauguin made considerable progress with his sculpture and woodcuts. He borrowed unashamedly, often copying poses from photographs of other works. In Tahiti this process became quasi-systematic. It is apparent in his small-scale wooden sculptures in which the artist blended Oceanic sculpture and iconography often borrowed from Asiatic art. Thus Idol with Pearl (1894; Paris, Mus. d’Orsay), which shelters in a gilded niche a sort of Buddha inspired by the reliefs at Borobudur, shows on its other face two Oceanic *Ti’i* figures (anthropomorphic wooden images), very much like those Gauguin would have seen around him. This assimilation of two cultures shows that Gauguin was in search not of local colour but of a primitive religious spirit, which he believed inseparable from a certain crudity of workmanship. This roughness is also found in his woodcuts (e.g. *Manao tupapau* (‘Watched Over by the Spirit of the Dead’), *c*. 1891–3; Paris, Mus. A. Afr. & Océan.), which appeared in large numbers between 1891 and 1893, most of them on themes already treated in his paintings. Gauguin was eager to submit his increasingly ‘untamed’ style to European judgement. In June 1892, sick and destitute, he asked to be repatriated to France, but he did not leave Tahiti until June of the following year.

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Paul Gauguin: *Idol with Pearl*, wood, 237×126×114 mm, 1894 (Paris, Musée d’Orsay); photo credit: Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Art Resource, NY

(vii) 1893–5: Return to France.

As soon as he arrived in Paris, Gauguin became intensely active. He inherited some money, which gave him enough to live on. At Degas’s instigation, Paul Durand-Ruel suggested giving a one-man exhibition of his work from Tahiti, for which Gauguin made feverish preparations until November. He saw himself as permanently on show and affected an ostentatious exoticism verging on the theatrical. His studio became an Oceanic junk-shop, and he took as his mistress a Parisian mulatto, nicknamed Anna the Javanese. During this period Gaugauin once again turned to pottery; the finest product of this period is *Oriri* (Paris, Mus. Orsay). In all, some 60 pieces of Gauguin’s pottery are known to survive.

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Paul Gauguin: *A Farm in Brittany*, oil on canvas, 28 1/2 x 35 5/8 in. (72.4 x 90.5 cm), *c*. 1894 (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Margaret Seligman Lewisohn, in memory of her husband, Sam A. Lewisohn, 1954, Accession ID: 54.143.2); photo © The Metropolitan Museum of Art http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/110000890 *<http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/110000890>*

Because the manner in which he drew attention to his artistic beliefs, however genuine, was crude, Gauguin was often dismissed as a charlatan. Attempts to explain and justify his attitude only met with incomprehension. In Tahiti he had written a text that became *Noa-Noa*, in which he related his discovery of the island and its religious traditions. With the help of Charles Morice, who interspersed the text with his own poems, Gauguin put the work into shape, with the intention of having it published, believing it would help people to understand his painting. (It first appeared in the *Revue blanche* in October 1897.) Despite these justifications of his work, his exhibition at Galerie Durand-Ruel in Paris was received with no more than a certain respect. Preoccupied with promoting his work, Gauguin painted little. He produced a few paintings on Tahitian subjects, such as *Mahana no atua* ('Day of God') (1894; Chicago, IL, A. Inst.). At Pont-Aven, from May 1894, his colour acquired a new acidity (e.g. *David's Mill at Pont-Aven*, 1894; Paris, Mus. d'Orsay and A Farm in Brittany, 1894; New York, Met.) and he painted some snow scenes (e.g. *Breton Village in the Snow*, 1894; Paris, Mus. d'Orsay).

It seems that during this period Gauguin set out to compromise the success he could have achieved if he had only been more patient. In Brittany he brought an unsuccessful lawsuit against the innkeeper Marie Henry in order to recover some pictures he had left with her. He had a brawl with some sailors and was forced to stay in hospital with a broken leg. During this time, Anna the Javanese ransacked his Paris studio. Discouraged by the failure of his exhibition and continued humiliation, he decided in September 1894 to leave France permanently. In February 1895 he organized another auction, which

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he hoped would raise enough money to finance his departure. The catalogue introduction comprises a text by August Strindberg, frankly unfavourable to Gauguin, and the latter's reply, in which once again he extols his 'untamed' aesthetic. Of forty-seven pictures shown, only nine were sold: the failure was self-evident.

(viii) 1895–1901: Papeete.

If his letters are to be believed, Gauguin's second departure for Oceania was undertaken in a different frame of mind from his first. It was not just a farewell to 'the European way of life' in the hope of seeing his family again one day, but also to his artistic career. Above all it was peace of mind that he sought in exile: 'I would be able to end my days free and at peace with no thought for tomorrow and without having to battle endlessly against idiots. Farewell painting, except as a distraction.' On his arrival in Papeete in September 1895 he did not find the restfulness he had counted on: his poor health forced him to stay in hospital and his savings ran out. Nonetheless it was a period of intense creativity, during which he painted and sculpted a great deal and seemed to go further in his metaphysical questioning (see fig.), obsessed by the thought of death: he wrote *L'Esprit moderne et le catholicisme*. Periods of great energy alternated with inactivity for the rest of his life. In April 1897 he learnt of the death of his daughter Aline, to whom he was deeply attached. It seems it was this event that made him decide to commit suicide. He embarked on a picture that represents his last will and testament: *Where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we going?* (1897; Boston, MA, Mus. F.A.). Painted on hessian sacking, this vast picture, hastily finished in many places, represents in his work a new surface ruggedness, which with its more spontaneous handling influenced his future output. Gauguin reused a number of individual figures and groups from his earlier pictures, transforming *Where do we come from?* into a kind of résumé of his work. The figures in the foreground, symbolizing the successive ages of an Edenic existence, are counterbalanced by three figures in the background wearing dark clothes, images of the anguish inherent in religion or knowledge. Gauguin juxtaposed the two sides of his personality, one carelessly turned towards sensuality, and the other towards a profound existential anxiety. Thus this work constitutes the concluding synthesis of his Tahitian pictures on religious themes, such as *Te tamari no atua* ('Birth of Christ, Son of God') (1896; Munich, Neue Pin.), a series that culminates in the scepticism embodied in the questions of the title.

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Paul Gauguin: *Nave Nave Mahana* (‘Delightful Days’), oil on canvas, 1896 (Lyon, Musée des Beaux-Arts); photo credit: Scala/Art Resource, NY

Gauguin tried unsuccessfully to kill himself by taking arsenic. Physically and morally shaken, he took an office job in Papeete, which allowed him to earn a living for a while. He seemed to become detached from his own work. When Maurice Denis wrote to him asking if he would participate in an exhibition of the Nabis in Paris, he replied in June 1899 ‘I no longer paint except on Sundays and holidays’. No painting by him dated 1900 is known. On the other hand, he expended a great deal of energy bickering with the island’s administrative authorities, and he worked on a satirical paper in Papeete, *Les Guêpes*, before founding his own publication *Le Sourire: Journal méchant*, which he edited and illustrated with woodcuts.

(ix) 1901–3: The Marquesas.

Gauguin’s career can be summarized as the pursuit of an ideal constantly belied by reality. Unsatisfied, he felt the need of new discoveries. He left Tahiti for the island of Hiva Oa in the Marquesas at the end of 1901, seeking a primitive world, unspoilt by any contamination from Europe. The impact of this other world, wilder because, as it seemed, less overrun by colonization, prompted a period of enthusiasm that despite his deteriorating health drove him to produce his last series of works. His financial worries were eased by de Monfreid (his most assiduous correspondent in the final years), the Paris dealer Ambroise Vollard, and the collector Gustave Fayet.

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Gauguin was once more attracted to sculpture. Of particular interest are the roughly carved wooden reliefs with which he decorated the doorway of his new hut, the *Maison du jouir* (1901; Paris, Mus. d’Orsay). His painting evolved towards a greater sobriety and a linear treatment of form that gives his late work an austere appearance. In Savage Tales (1902; Essen, Mus. Flkwang), the thinly applied paint barely conceals the canvas, and in many places the weave shows through. Gauguin superimposed formal ideas already present in earlier works by bringing together two Tahitian nudes and a sinister image of his distant friend Meyer de Haan, half-faun, half-cloven-hoofed-devil, but concentrated the composition, re-linking the separated figures by his use of a decorative ground. He also explored a theme treated during his first visit to Tahiti and central to his art: the contrast between savage innocence and civilized knowledge. Although this group of late works is evidence of a stylistic renewal, Gauguin died no longer expecting his work to be recognized or appreciated, though retaining a keen awareness of the liberating role that his painting would play for the next generation.

Gauguin’s son Jean (1881–1961) became a modeller and designer at the Bing & Grøndahl porcelain factory.

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Paul Gauguin: *Savage Tales*, oil on canvas, 1300×890 mm, 1902 (Essen, Museum Folkwang); photo credit: Erich Lessing/Art Resource, NY

2. Working methods and technique.

Starting with relatively banal Impressionist techniques, Gauguin evolved towards an increasingly personal treatment of form and colour, and he adapted his technique to new requirements. According to Henri Delavallée (*fl* 1892–6), a painter who knew Gauguin when he first stayed at Pont-Aven, Gauguin was endeavouring, under the influence of Pissarro, to use Divisionism: ‘I only paint with sable brushes…; that way the colour stays thicker: when you use ordinary brushes, two adjacent colours get mixed up; with sables you get juxtaposed colours’, he said. In this way he obtained iridescent brushstrokes, which side by side give the stripy effect mentioned by Delavallée. In *Still-life with Ham* (1889; Washington, DC, Phillips Col.), Gauguin organized the whole surface into broad vertical hatching, creating a top paint layer that was homogeneous and fairly thick. From 1892 the vertical stripes became more and more discreet. Then the artist, who was increasingly composing his works with patches of colour bounded by blue outlines, tended to use thinner paint and showed sensitivity to the matt effects obtained by large areas of colour on a canvas whose weave sometimes remained visible (e.g. *Nave nave mahana* (‘Days of Delight’), 1896; Lyon, Mus. B.-A.). This tendency increased with time, and in the works from his second visit to Tahiti Gauguin conceived painting in terms of colour alone, to which effects of texture became subordinate; thin impasto, extreme sobriety of unvarnished surface, all bore similarities to the art of mural painting.

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Paul Gauguin: *Tahitian Faces (Frontal View and Profiles)*, charcoal on laid paper, 16 1/8 x 12 1/4 in. (41 x 31.1 cm), ca. 1899 (New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, The Annenberg Foundation Gift, 1996, Accession ID:1996.418); photo © The Metropolitan Museum of Art http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/90004202 *<http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/90004202>*

Gauguin’s attitude to his subject soon set him apart from the Impressionists. Even though he may have completed a canvas out of doors, his starting-point still remained the study produced in his studio from preliminary drawings (see fig.), a process attested to by his reuse of identical figures in different works. Even in the elaboration of his work, Gauguin remained entirely traditional. An unfinished oil painting on paper, *Tahitian Women Resting* (1894; London, Tate), makes clear how he drew his composition in charcoal very precisely, outlining his figures quite clearly before starting to paint.

In the field of engraving and sculpture, it is important to stress Gauguin’s fondness for the most primitive techniques, which correlates with the deliberate ‘savagery’ of his art. He favoured processes in which the artist’s hand was clearly visible in the finished work: thus wood was his favourite material for sculpture, and woodcut his preferred graphic medium. Even in 1880, when his work was still academic, he was already attracted by this material (e.g. the *Birth of Venus*, wood, *c*. 1880; Geneva, Petit Pal.). However, it was most probably modelling in clay that had the greatest effect on his conception of sculpted form. In the pots he made after 1886 with Chaplet, Gauguin worked the clay as a sculptor, and for the usual thrown forms he substituted a strange and personal vocabulary, partly

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inspired by Pre-Columbian art. Gauguin’s early ceramics seem to have led him to adopt a clearer stylization of form in his paintings. The sculptures and woodcuts made in Tahiti owe their primitive roughness to the extreme economy of means employed. In his woodcuts, Gauguin created effects of astonishing novelty from oppositions of black and white and the use of the woodgrain (e.g. *Be in Love and You Will Be Happy*, *c*. 1893–5).

3. Reputation and influence.

Although Gauguin is seen as a Symbolist, his place in the art of his own time as assessed by the critics and art historians of the first half of the 20th century is not without a certain ambiguity. He had turned his back on Impressionism by 1888, yet he remained historically linked to the movement and for this reason figured in various works and exhibitions devoted to it. Moreover, Gauguin’s artistic descendants at the beginning of the 20th century did not take up the Symbolist aspect of his work. At the same time, modernist critics, and Fénéon in particular, considered Symbolism residual to Gauguin’s strictly pictorial preoccupations, and they attempted to isolate him from his period and the circle with which he was involved.

Gauguin’s attitude towards his own work was clear: for him, the relationship between a subject and how it was treated pictorially was of crucial importance. He used colour as an emotional and symbolic language, but at the same time a fascination with the supernatural and with metaphysical inquiry were constant features of his thought. Studies have underlined the influence of theosophy on his work: occultism was widespread among the intellectuals with whom he was friendly. Although his independent nature distanced him from established groups such as the Rosicrucians, Gauguin was familiar with the esoteric writing of Joséphin Peladan, Eliphas Lévi and Edouard Schuré. Because of this, his creative approach cannot be dissociated from the symbolic system on which it relied. For example, he was fascinated by the Buddha figure, which appears in numerous of his paintings and sculpture (e.g. *Savage Tales*). However, his recourse to the model of Asiatic art should be seen not as a simple formal borrowing but as an attempt to give his work a wider spiritual resonance from its earliest conception. In short, if Gauguin belonged to the Symbolist movement by virtue of his focus of interest and even his approach, it should be emphasized that his Symbolism was never the simple transposition of a given idea into paint.

Gauguin held an extraordinary fascination for the Parisian avant-garde and especially for the Nabis, who considered him their spiritual father. Gauguin influenced other leading early 20th-century artists, apart from those who were in direct contact with him. The stylistic changes that determine the maturity of Munch at the time of his stay in Paris in 1889 were probably a result of the discovery of paintings by Gauguin. Likewise the young Picasso owed his change of direction at the end of 1901, which led to his ‘blue period’, to the influence of the paintings by Gauguin seen at the house of his friend Paco Durio, or at Vollard’s. Between 1904 and 1910, Matisse was the artist who came closest, as much in form as in spirit, to Gauguin’s aesthetic. A work such as Matisse’s *Luxury* (1907; Paris, Pompidou) illustrates the stylistic ties that bound the Fauves (André Derain, Maurice Vlaminck, Albert Marquet and Matisse) to Gauguin, from whose work they, like the German Expressionists (Alexei Jalenski, Ernst Kirchner, Otto Müller, Max Pechstein), retained an expressive use of colour and linear distortion (*see* Fauvism). The Gauguin retrospective at the Salon d’Automne of 1906 in Paris brought home to a wide circle of avant-garde artists the full extent of his genius.

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Gauguin was naturally not the only source of inspiration for the revolutionary developments in Western art at the beginning of the 20th century; he shared this role with Cézanne and van Gogh. Nevertheless, while it is difficult to establish the relative importance of their influence, it must be said that Gauguin's work provided inspiration for the widest variety of artists.

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Antilles, Lesser, §IV: Painting, graphic arts and sculpture

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France, §XIV, 5: Museum policy from the July Monarchy to the early years of the Third Republic

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Gauguin, Paul: Te Pape Nave Nave (Delectable Waters), 1898, National Gallery of Art (Washington, DC) *<http://www.nga.gov/collection/gallery/gg82/gg82-53846.0.html>*

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Gauguin, Paul: Where do We Come from? What are We? Where are we Going?, 1897-8, Museum of Fine Arts (Boston, MA) *<http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/where-do-we-come-from-what-are-we-where-are-we-going-32558>*

Gauguin, Paul: Self-portrait, 1896, Museu de Arte de So Paulo (So Paulo) *<http://masp.uol.com.br/colecao/detalhesObra.php?cob=89>*

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Gauguin, Paul: Two Tahitian Women, 1899, Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York) *<http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/110000888>*

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Gauguin, Paul: Still Life with Teapot and Fruit, 1896, Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York) <http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/110002455>

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Gauguin, Paul: Pre Paillard, c. 1902, National Gallery of Art (Washington, DC) <http://www.nga.gov/cgi-bin/pinfo?Object=46430+0+none>

Gauguin, Paul: 58 works, Muse d'Orsay (Paris) <http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/index-of-works/resultat-collection.html?no_cache=1&S=0&zsz=1&zs_r_2_z=3&zs_r_2_w=Gauguin%2C%20Paul&zs_ah=oeuvre&zs_rf=mos_a&zs_mf=20&zs_sf=0&zs_send_x=1&zs_liste_only=1>

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Gauguin, Paul: The Call, 1902, Cleveland Museum of Art (Cleveland, OH) <http://www.clevelandart.org/art/1943.392>

Gauguin, Paul: Self-Portrait, 1885, Kimbell Art Museum (Fort Worth, TX) <https://www.kimbellart.org/collection-object/self-portrait>

Gauguin, Paul: Glass Cabinet, 1881, Museum fr Kunste und Gewerbe (Hamburg) <http://www.mkg-hamburg.de/mkg.php/en/sammlungen/jugendstil/~P3/>

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Gauguin, Paul: Vase of Flowers in a Window, Muse des Beaux-Arts (Rennes) <http://www.mbar.org/collections/catalogue/19-20/132-133.htm>

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Gauguin, Paul: Still Life with Peonies, 1884, National Gallery of Art (Washington, DC) <http://www.nga.gov/cgi-bin/pinfo?Object=92167+0+none>

Gauguin, Paul: The Dam at Osny (Osny, La Vanne), 1883, Rhode Island School of Design (Providence, RI) <http://risdmuseum.org/art_design/objects/975_busagny_farm_osny>

Gauguin, Paul: Winter Day, 1886, Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art, University of Oklahoma (Norman, OK) <http://www.ou.edu/fjjma/collections/european/gaugin_copenhagen.html>

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Gauguin, Paul: The Field of Derout-Lollichon, 1886, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Los Angeles, CA) <http://collections.lacma.org/node/253530>

Gauguin, Paul: Breton Girls Dancing, Pont-Aven, 1888, National Gallery of Art (Washington, DC) <http://www.nga.gov/cgi-bin/pinfo?Object=61103+0+none>

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Gauguin, Paul: L'Arlsiennes (Mistral), 1888, Art Institute of Chicago (Chicago, IL) <http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/19339>

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Gauguin, Paul: Haystacks in Brittany, 1890, National Gallery of Art (Washington, DC) *<http://www.nga.gov/collection/gallery/gg82/gg82-52845.0.html>*

Gauguin, Paul: Landscape at Le Pouldu, 1890, National Gallery of Art (Washington, DC) *<http://www.nga.gov/collection/gallery/gg82/gg82-61104.0.html>*

Gauguin, Paul: Self-Portrait Dedicated to Carrire, 1888-9, National Gallery of Art (Washington, DC) *<http://www.nga.gov/cgi-bin/pinfo?Object=65241+0+none>*

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Gauguin, Paul: Two Breton Girls by the Sea, 1889, National Museum of Western Art (Tokyo) *<http://collection.nmwa.go.jp/en/P.1959-0106.html>*

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Gauguin, Paul: In the Waves (Dans les Vagues), 1889, Cleveland Museum of Art (Cleveland, OH) *<http://www.clevelandart.org/art/1978.63>*

Gauguin, Paul: The Gate, 1889, Kunsthaus (Zurich) *<http://www.kunsthaus.ch/en/the-collection/painting-and-sculptures/impressionism-and-post-impressionism/paul-gauguin/zoom/?redirect_url=title%3Ddepa>*

Gauguin, Paul: The Red Cow, 1889, Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Los Angeles, CA) *<http://collections.lacma.org/node/229569>*

Gauguin, Paul: Woman with Fruit; Where are you going? (Eu haere ia oe), 1893, Hermitage Museum (St Petersburg) *<http://www.hermitagemuseum.org/html_En/03/hm3_3_1_8j.html>*

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Gauguin, Paul: Parau na te Varua ino (Words of the Devil), 1892, National Gallery of Art (Washington, DC) *<http://www.nga.gov/collection/gallery/gg82/gg82-52846.0.html>*

Gauguin, Paul: Fatata te Miti (By the Sea), 1892, National Gallery of Art (Washington, DC) *<http://www.nga.gov/collection/gallery/gg82/gg82-46341.0.html>*

Gauguin, Paul: Faaturuma (Melancholic), 1891, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art (Kansas City, MO) *<http://www.nelson-atkins.org/art/CollectionDatabase.cfm?id=18445&theme=euro>*

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Gauguin, Paul: The Fire Dance, 1891, Israel Museum (Jerusalem) *<http://www.imj.org.il/eng/art/modern/index.html>*

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Gauguin, Paul: Tahitians, c. 1891-3, Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York) *<http://www.metmuseum.org/Collections/search-the-collections/90004202>*

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Gauguin, Paul: Under the Pandanus, 1891, Dallas Museum of Art (Dallas, TX) *<https://www.dma.org/collection/artwork/paul-gauguin/under-pandanus-i-raro-te-oviri>*

Gauguin, Paul: Tahitian Landscape, 1891, Minneapolis Institute of Arts (Minneapolis, MN) *<http://collections.artsmia.org/art/10435>*

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Gauguin, Paul: Haere Mai, 1891, Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum (New York) *<http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/artist_work_md_50_1.html>*

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Gauguin, Paul: The Large Tree, 1891, Cleveland Museum of Art (Cleveland, OH) *<http://www.clevelandart.org/art/1975.263>*

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Gauguin, Paul: Manao Tupapau (The Spirits of the Dead Watching), 1893-4, Museum of Fine Arts (Boston, MA) *<http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/manao-tupapau-the-spirit-of-the-dead-watching-5001>*

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Gauguin, Paul: Noa-Noa (Fragrant Scent), 1893-4, Minneapolis Institute of Arts (Minneapolis, MN) *<http://collections.artsmia.org/art/7853>*

Gauguin, Paul: Watched by the Spirits of the Dead, 1893-4, Minneapolis Institute of Arts (Minneapolis, MN) *<http://collections.artsmia.org/art/7284>*

Gauguin, Paul: Young Christian Girl, 1894, Clark Art Institute (Williamstown, MA) *<http://www.clarkart.edu/museum/collections/impressionist/content.cfm?ID=33&marker=4&start=4>*

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Gauguin, Paul: Day of the God (Mahana no Atua), 1894, Art Institute of Chicago (Chicago, IL) *<http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/27943>*

Gauguin, Paul: Nave Nave Fenua, c. 1894-1900, National Gallery of Art (Washington, DC) *<http://www.nga.gov/cgi-bin/pinfo?Object=34041+0+none>*

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