



Art Centre Basel  
Sternengasse 6  
Postfach  
4010 Basel / Switzerland

Phone: +41 61 272 5393  
Fax: +41 61 272 5434  
Email: [info@artcentrebasel.com](mailto:info@artcentrebasel.com)

The Chronicle - Washington State University, Spring 2012

---

## Revolutionary exhibit

# Professor key consultant on Gauguin show

*By Hope Belli Tinney, WSU News*

Artist Paul Gauguin was inspired by art and images from around the world. But, ultimately, it was Polynesia and Polynesian art that spurred him to create the masterpieces that helped shape modern art and continue to astound viewers more than 100 years after his death.

Thanks in large measure to the work of WSU professor Carol Ivory, a new exhibit at the Seattle Art Museum treats Polynesia not as background to an exhibit about Gauguin, but as the main attraction.

In the process, says Elizabeth C. Childs, a Gauguin expert from Washington University in St. Louis, the exhibit becomes revolutionary.

## A more complete story

According to Childs, organizing an exhibit of Gauguin's work has always been challenging because his canvases are so valuable that collectors and museums are loath to loan them, particularly for an international show. So much focus is on Gauguin that indigenous Polynesian art works are, if not an afterthought, then a sidebar. They typically are brought in as examples of source material for the great master, and not as master works in their own right.

"What is revolutionary here is that we have, for once, a more complete story told of the complicated cultural exchanges that went on in Gauguin's career in Polynesia, (along with) a nuanced, historical, and carefully selected and presented version of the Polynesian side of the story," Childs said.

### Exhibit continues through April 29

*Gauguin & Polynesia: An Elusive Paradise*, produced by Art Centre Basel—which hired Ivory as its Polynesian consultant—opened in February at the SAM and runs through April 29. It is the first major Gauguin exhibit in the Pacific Northwest and the first anywhere to give equal weight to the Polynesian art and culture that inspired him. "It's hard to understand how you can talk about Gauguin without talking about Polynesia," Ivory said. But, in most exhibits, that's what happens.

In this exhibit, 60 works by Gauguin—sculpture, drawing, and, of course, lush, vibrant paintings—share exhibit space with 60 sculptures by 18th- and 19th-century Polynesian artists, mostly Tahitian, Marquesan, and Maori carvers whose work would have been familiar to Gauguin.

Obviously, Ivory said, most people visiting the exhibit go because of Gauguin, considered one of the most important artists of the 19th and early 20th centuries. But her mission was to astonish viewers with the beauty and power of Polynesian art.

Consider that mission accomplished.



Oval bowl on small feet (kumete), ca. 1865; wood, haliotis shell; New Zealand.

### Exotic and awe-inspiring

"By far the greatest gift of this show are the 60 Polynesian works on view," writes Rosemary Ponnekanti of the *News Tribune* in Tacoma. "In the World's Fair gallery alone, you are shown exactly the kind of exotic art Gauguin repurposed his life around. . . ."

Mike Dunham, a writer for the *Anchorage Daily News*, visited the exhibit and came away stunned by the work of the aboriginal carvers, especially the Maori artists whose works still carry their names.

He quotes a review in the *Seattle Times* that calls Gauguin's work "dazzling" and another review in *The Stranger* that says Gauguin "inspires learning."

"All true," Dunham writes. "But the art of Te Rahu and Tamatea inspire awe."

### Some of the best Polynesian art

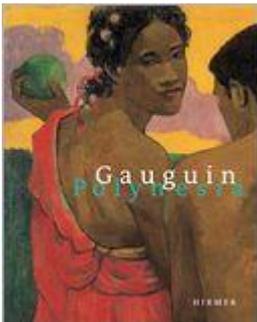
This exhibit was 12 long years in the making, Ivory said. But if it took the prestige and popularity of Gauguin to bring renewed attention to the beauty of Polynesian art, so be it.

"To see review after review that talks about the power of the Polynesian pieces makes all those bumps in the road worthwhile," she said.

Pam McCluskey, co-curator of the exhibit with Chiyo Ishikawa, said the reaction from SAM audiences has been exactly what she hoped for: "The selection of Polynesian art that Carol came up with is some of the best that exists."

The pieces are similar to what Gauguin might have seen in his travels, McCluskey said. But by presenting them together, in one exhibit, viewers can see how, over time, Polynesian artists reinterpret various themes and motifs in response to different influences and changes in the culture.

"Gauguin would have killed to see this exhibit," McCluskey said, and laughed.



Catalog cover

### One of year's best art books

Gauguin was one of the first artists to consciously look outside himself and his native culture for inspiration, McCluskey said. Everywhere he went, he made sketches in his notebook or gathered photographs of images that resonated for one reason or another.

His imaginative capacity is explored more fully in *Gauguin Polynesia*, the 400-page catalog (meaning full-color art book) created especially for the exhibit. It includes 12 essays by leading experts on Gauguin and Polynesian art, culture, and history, including two by Ivory.

One of Ivory's essays focuses on the art and culture of 18th- and 19th-century Polynesia. The other focuses on art from the Marquesas Islands, where Gauguin lived the last two years of his life and died in 1903 at the age of 53, his body ravaged by syphilis, morphine, and alcohol abuse.

Published by the University of Chicago Press and edited by Suzanne Greub, *Gauguin Polynesia* was named by the London Evening Standard one of the 10 best art books of 2011.

### **Inspired to do the show well**

But Ivory's involvement with the exhibit runs far deeper than contributing to the catalog. More than a dozen years ago, she began talking about such an exhibit with Jehanne Teilhet-Fisk, a professor at Florida State University and an expert on Gauguin.

When Teilhet-Fisk became ill and eventually died of brain cancer in 2002, Ivory continued on with Childs, the Gauguin expert at Washington University, and then, eventually, with others.

Through all the ups and downs, Ivory persevered. In the end, the project was a collaboration between Art Centre Basel, the Seattle Art Museum, and the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek museum in Copenhagen, which are the only venues of the tour. (Gauguin's estranged wife lived in Copenhagen, and several of his works are at the Glyptotek museum.)

"I was always the Polynesian expert on this," Ivory said. "I kept coming back to the project because I wanted to protect Polynesia and make sure it was done right."

### **Polynesia seemed her natural choice**

Like Gauguin, Ivory's first taste of Polynesia was Papeete in Tahiti. She was on the first leg of a post-college trip around the world, and she was immediately captivated.

"It felt right," she said. "It felt like home."

Ten years later, when she returned to college to earn a doctoral degree in art history at the University of Washington, her thoughts returned to the South Pacific. Eschewing more conventional choices, she decided to focus on Polynesian art and the art of the Marquesas Islands in particular. It had been overlooked, she said, and there was plenty to discover.

No doubt, Gauguin would have cheered her choice.

"It turned out to be a fabulous choice," she said recently from her WSU office in fine arts. "The people have been wonderful to work with."

### **Keeping contemporary arts alive**

In *Gauguin & Polynesia*, the exhibit makes it clear the artist did not find a paradise. Colonialism had destroyed much of traditional culture, and French bureaucracy and missionary zeal had overtaken much of the exotic.

Focusing on what Gauguin hoped to find and didn't miss the point, Childs said. She hopes the exhibit helps people understand the richness of what was there—and continues to be there.

It's a hope she shares with Ivory. "Carol is devoted to keeping alive the voice of the contemporary Polynesian artist," Childs said.

### **Paris exhibit next**

The exhibit at the SAM is the third museum exhibit about the Marquesas that Ivory has helped curate or consulted on. The other two were at the Mission Houses Museum in Honolulu in 2003 and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2005. Her next exhibit will be at the Musée du quai Branly in Paris in 2015.

She'll be the sole curator for that show, she said, and she's looking forward to shining the spotlight squarely on Marquesan artists, both past and present.