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The exhibit Gauguin would have killed to see

Art specialist Richard Brettell explains the significance of SAM's new Gauguin exhibit, *Gauguin and Polynesia: An Elusive Paradise*.

By Daniel Jack Chasan

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"**Gauguin would have killed to see this exhibition,**" exclaimed Richard Brettell, an authority on 19th- and early 20th-century French painting, during the opening week of the Seattle Art Museum's splashy new Gauguin show, *Gauguin and Polynesia: An Elusive Paradise*.

Brettell, who holds the Margaret M. McDermott Distinguished Chair in Art and Aesthetic Studies at the University of Texas, Dallas, explained that the art from Tahiti and the Marquesas Islands that is juxtaposed against Gauguin's paintings at SAM had already been carted off by perspicacious Europeans by the time Gauguin arrived there.

A lot had changed since Louis-Antoine, Comte de Bougainville claimed Tahiti for France in 1767. Missionaries had already burned heaps of wooden sculpture. Traditional hierarchies had been replaced by French colonial government. Women were already wearing the drab missionary dresses in which Gauguin painted many of his early subjects, including his 13-year-old mistress.

"When he arrived in Tahiti and when he arrived in the Marquesas, there was *nothing*," Brettell said. "Everything was in his view lost . . . he had to kind of fabricate a world that he knew had been fabulous." If the painter had been able to see all this art produced by the old culture, Brettell explained, "it would have changed his life."

The bare shoulders and bright colors of Gauguin's "Reclining Tahitian Women," the naked bodies of "The Bathers," the glowing, simplified tropical landscapes, even Gauguin's more detailed earlier images of Tahiti and Brittany seem a long way from, say, Albert Bierstadt's dramatic if fanciful painting of Puget Sound or his idyllic view of Yosemite. Still this exhibition has important parallels to *Beauty and Bounty*, last summer's SAM show of 19th- and early-20th-century American landscape painting and photography.

In both cases, the artist set out to capture an earthly paradise that they knew — or soon learned — was going, going, gone. In America, that sense of loss — or impending loss — and some of those 19th-century images helped inspire the creation of early national parks and the setting aside of what eventually became the national forests.

In Gauguin's case, it inspired the downcast, guarded looks of the women in his earlier Tahitian paintings, and the later fantasies of naked innocence. (Brettell agreed that there was "absolutely" a parallel to the experience of North American artists in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Personally, he said, "I went through thinking of Emily Carr," the British Columbian artist who painted First Nations people and art, as well as Canadian landscapes, in the early 20th century.)

Brettell has seen the Gauguin exhibition both here and in Copenhagen — its only two stops. Here, he says, the Polynesian artifacts are "much more beautiful and much more revelatory" than they were at Copenhagen's Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek. There, they were "shown like ethnographic objects, rather than like works of art." In Seattle, "both parts [of the exhibition, the arts of Polynesia and of Gauguin] are shown with equal respect."

The Polynesian sculpture and other art objects give a sense of the culture whose remnants Gauguin found, and amplify our impression of the somewhat simplistic world he painted. The Polynesian objects go well beyond the dense, rooted forms of the better-known tiki figures, which are also represented here. There are lovely, simple polished wood bowls. There are head ornaments made from contrasting black and white shells. There is a long, elaborately carved Marquesas war club that preceded the European colonial presence Gauguin found, and a shorter version, carved later, for the tourist trade.

Some of the more refined pieces provide an ironic contrast to the "primitive" quality Gauguin chose for the woodcuts that headed the chapters for his (somewhat fictionalized) memoir, *Noa Noa*. This stuff isn't primitive.

Gauguin clearly took a romantic sensibility to the islands. Though the "Romantic period" in European art may have ended earlier in the 19th century, Brettell argued that that doesn't matter. "One of the polluting ideas of modern art," he said, "is that there are these sequential movements that follow one after another." Gauguin's style was romantic, even though his timing might not have fit neatly into the official romantic era.

"He loved [the great French Romantic painter Eugene] Delacroix," who found his own exotic subjects in Morocco, Brettell said. In fact, "Manet and Delacroix were the two painters of an earlier generation whom he loved."

Still, just as the Polynesian objects on display at SAM prove it would be a mistake to characterize the art or its culture as "simple," so Gauguin's paintings prove that he wasn't just a late-19th-century European romantic out in the islands to chase 13-year-old girls. Those who would try to make Gauguin simple are missing the point.

"The exhibition makes clear that there isn't 'Gauguin 101,'" Brettell protested.

In "Tehamana has Many Parents" or "The Ancestors of Tehamana," a young woman — Gauguin's adolescent mistress — sits in a striped missionary dress looking sideways against a background of simplified deities and a frieze of undecipherable written characters.

"He painted the misunderstandings of one people for another," Brettell explained. "That's why the paintings are filled with mystery." He believes Gauguin may have been the first artist to title his paintings with questions — one was famously called "Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?"

"The idea that there wasn't an answer was part of the message," he said.

There was also a political message to his work. One of the best-read modern artists, Brettell calls him "a committed and completely political anarchist," who went to Polynesia seeking not just visual beauty or the simple life but a world without parliaments or kings.

"Finding worlds without government was one of his quests in life," Brettell explained. Those images of tropical bathers, those elegaic pictures, weren't just glimpses of people unhindered by late-19th-century Christian morality. They also

showed a society without government; a people who were operating freely. Gauguin hoped his "images would create reverberations that would change European society," Brettell said.

They didn't, of course. In Germany, Otto von Bismarck had already started assembling the modern welfare state. The carnage and governmental aggrandizement of World War One lay only a couple of decades away. (The war broke out 11 years after Gauguin died, but the Boer War and the Spanish-American War took place while he was in the islands.)

The simplistic view of Polynesian society portrayed in Gauguin's paintings also hints of political romanticism. In contrast, the wonderful Tahitian breastplate from the British Museum, an elegant piece made of feathers, shark teeth and dog hair, suggests a society with a complex hierarchy, where luxuries were available to people at the top that those lower down could never hope to enjoy.

Brettell concedes that Polynesian society was a complex hierarchy, but he says the scale of things didn't compare to the European hierarchy with which Gauguin was so disillusioned.

"[The Polynesian island societies] were so consensually based and so small that to [Gauguin] they were a world to which he aspired."

According to Brettell, the only Polynesian works in the SAM show that Gauguin actually saw are the Maori carvings — including a dark, filigreed panel for the stern of a war canoe, and elaborately carved and shell-inlaid bowls — which he encountered at an Auckland, New Zealand museum. One bowl wasn't simply on display; it had been bizarrely fitted out with a brass lock and coin slot, so that it could serve as a receptacle for museum donations.

Gauguin was there, all right. "The critical missing thing [from the SAM exhibit]," Brettell suggested, "is the guest book of the Auckland municipal museum." If it were here, you'd see that Gauguin had signed the book, "Paul Gauguin, de Paris."

Brettell finds that signature hugely significant. Gauguin may have abandoned his wife and kids back in France, chucked his job as a stockbroker, and relocated to the islands to live in a hut with his barely-pubescent local mistress, but he didn't lose sight of his origins.

"Gauguin really knew that he was a European and he was a Christian. He took with him a [European Christian's cultural] system of guilt and paradise," explained Brettell. "He couldn't pretend to be something that he wasn't. That's his ultimate intelligence: He realized that he was *'de paris'* and they were not."

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