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'Gauguin and Polynesia': dazzling mix-and-match

Seattle Art Museum's "Gauguin and Polynesia: An Elusive Paradise" presents work from the last 17 years of the French artist's life — and gives equal time to the Polynesian artworks that inspired him.

By **Michael Upchurch** (Seattle Times arts writer)

"Gauguin and Polynesia: An Elusive Paradise," the dazzling show at the Seattle Art Museum, *could* be seen as two exhibitions running in artful but separate parallel.

But the better way to see SAM's mix of nearly 60 Gauguin works and an equal number of indigenous Polynesian items is as a single harmonic vision.

The Gauguin portion of the exhibit covers the last 17 years in his career, starting in the late 1880s when his visits to Brittany and Martinique signaled his desire to lose himself in surroundings far from Paris' art epicenter.

Already, there were signs of things to come. In "Bonjour Monsieur Gauguin" (1889), you can spy proverbial "Gauguin colors" seeping into the Breton landscape, while in "Self-Portrait Dedicated to Carrière" (1886), the warm colors positively buzz and the confidence in the artist's eyes is electric.

It wasn't the colors of Polynesia, initially, but its artifacts (seen by Gauguin at the 1889 Paris World's Fair) that put Oceania on his radar as a potential "elsewhere" to go. The samples in "Gauguin and Polynesia" make clear what their appeal to him was, starting with a skeletal yet smiling male figure from Easter Island, both mordant in its wit and spooky in its power.

As the galleries alternate between suites of Gauguin paintings and groupings of Tahitian and Marquesan carvings, headdresses and weapons, the relation between exiled artist and islands aesthetic grows until, halfway through the show, Gauguin and Polynesia are suddenly in direct conversation with each other.

A beautiful woven fan from the Marquesas, for instance, appears in the painter's nearby oil-on-canvas "Tehamana Has Many Parents." In turn, the bas-relief patterns of Marquesan wooden bowls are adapted so deftly by Gauguin in his own "Deep Bowl" that he seems to have gone entirely native.

The show covers Gauguin's 1893-95 return to Paris, where his focus stayed on Tahiti and his color sense grew ever more extravagant. "Reclining Tahitian Women" (1894) uses feathering pinks and rounded russets and yellows as a springboard into something *well* beyond the real.

Collectors weren't interested, however, and in 1895 Gauguin headed once more for Tahiti where, by 1897, a curious thing began to happen in his paintings. His Tahitian figures, previously seen so sharply, grew almost camouflaged by their native landscape.

A passage from Gauguin's book "Noa Noa" suggests what's going on here, as he recalls a trip he took with a young Tahitian man into the island's interior: "My guide seemed to follow the trail by smell rather than by sight, for the ground was covered by a splendid confusion of plants, leaves, and flowers which wholly took possession of space. ... And it seemed to me I saw incarnated in him, palpitating and living, all the magnificent plant-life which surrounded us."

While these paintings push Gauguin's experiments with color and composition to a fluid extreme, an "Auckland Sketchbook," never before exhibited, shows him still addressing anew indigenous art that came his way. It dates from his 10-day layover in New Zealand in 1895 where, at the Auckland Museum, he saw Maori wood carving, included pieces in the SAM show that are every bit as fine as the best Gauguin items.

Colonial collectors in New Zealand, unusually, recognized the quality of this work at the time and preserved the names of the carvers of these masterpieces. It makes perfect sense that one of them, Patoromu Tamatea, was a longtime tattooist who adapted his art to detailed wood sculpture. A tattoo influence is also evident in a bowl by Anaha Te Rahu that pulses with energy as two battling figures tangle with each other on its lid and two bystanders, adorning the sides of the bowl, elastically stretch their hands toward each other as though to contain the conflict.

A wry coda to the show is provided by a white hilltop cross that appears in Gauguin's "Women and a White Horse" (1903). With that cross, the artist who'd tried so hard to escape European influence unwittingly painted the Catholic cemetery where, within months, he would be buried.

Loans of Gauguin masterpieces are tough to arrange, and there's one painting, commonly seen as the culmination of his time in Tahiti, that's conspicuous in its absence: "Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?"

The show makes up for it by spotlighting lesser known Gauguin gems: woodcuts whose curving lines and sinister shadowplay make a big impression; a sobering 1897 self-portrait in profile that's in total contrast to the brash challenge of his 1886 self.

Those touches, along with the exhibit's impeccable flow and lighting, make "Gauguin and Polynesia" near perfect.

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