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## Exhibit connects Native Polynesian art with work of famed Frenchman

By MIKE DUNHAM

On July 13, 1869, the French warship Jerome-Napoleon crossed the Arctic Circle north of Norway. Among the crew was an excitable sailor gawking at the fjords and icebergs, craving adventure and artistic inspiration.

The young mariner was Paul Gauguin. Ultimately he did not find his muse in the icy North. Nor in his native France or his childhood home in South America or his wife's home country of Denmark.

Instead, it was work he produced in Tahiti and the Marquesas Islands in his final years -- blunt, colorful, erotic and wildly fanciful -- that made him one of the most important painters in modern art history.

For the next two months, a rare American showing of 60 artworks by Gauguin, sculptures and prints as well as paintings, will be on display at the Seattle Art Museum.

However, "This is *not* a Gauguin show," stressed co-curator Chiyo Ishikawa.

The other 60 items in this exhibit are by Natives of Oceania and surrounding regions, from Easter Island to Cambodia to New Zealand. Some might say these pieces are the true stars of the show.

"Gauguin and Polynesia: An Elusive Paradise" is less an art exhibit than a sociological essay illustrated with artwork -- that of the Frenchman alongside that of the people and cultures he traveled halfway around the world to encounter.

Those encounters were not what he expected.

### Fabled Frenchman

Facts and fables about Gauguin abound. His friendship and feud with van Gogh. His departure for the South Seas to "immerse myself in virgin nature, see only savages, live their life ... using only primitive

artistic materials." His romantic escapades. His quarrels with church and government officials. His death from venereal disease in 1903. His posthumous fame and influence on modernists like Picasso.

What this show explores is the influence of aboriginal art on him.

"The Polynesian side of things is what we deal with," said Ishikawa in a walk through the 11 galleries that contain the sprawling exhibit.

That it came together at all is remarkable. The Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek museum in Denmark originally proposed the idea, Ishikawa said, since they had several works of Gauguin in their holdings. But they couldn't raise much interest and were on the verge of dropping the whole thing when the Seattle Art Museum found out.

"We were very interested," said Ishikawa. In part because the museum's own vast collection of Oceania is one of the museum's crown jewels.

Ultimately items were loaned by the British Museum, the Musee d'Orsay in Paris and other major repositories, as well as by private collectors. It makes for an astonishingly lush sampling.

It has already been seen in Copenhagen, the only other city to host the exhibit. But there are no plans for the show to travel after the Seattle viewing.

A walk through the exhibit starts with paintings done by Gauguin while in France and images from the 1889 Paris World's Fair. The fair featured pavilions showcasing cultures from around the world -- particularly those of French colonies. The curators assert that the displays were intended as a form of propaganda, a romanticized apology for empire and colonialism.

They note that Gauguin was enthralled by the exotic designs he saw there. "He was fascinated by non-western art," said Ishikawa. "That sets him aside from pretty much everyone else at the time."

He wangled a trip to Tahiti. But his Rousseauian expectations shattered against reality. His imagined "paradise" had evaporated long before the painter ever arrived. The "voluptuous" expressions of a "savage" society had been muted or suppressed by colonial bureaucracy, religious impositions, disease and contact with manufactured consumer goods.

Gauguin's "Tahitian Woman with a Flower" ("Vahine no te tiare") is one of several portraits in the show of Polynesian women in western dress. The curators suggest "an air of melancholy" in such pictures and mention "the dowdiness of her prescribed, missionary clothing."

(The melancholy may have been Gauguin's projection onto his model. The actual owner of such dress may have considered it a status symbol, a display of wealth and her importance. This reading is not considered in the exhibit descriptions, but it may resonate with those raised in rural Alaska.)

## Polynesian epiphany

At this point the show shifts to Polynesian pieces -- and they are stunning. War clubs. Headdresses. Containers. Depictions of elaborate whole-body tattoos and mysterious petroglyphs. House post statues. Tikis. Ancient macabre cadaverous forms from Easter Island, their expressivity still vibrant, perhaps made all the more lively by the fact that their extra-artistic import is lost to history.

The exhibit takes pains to connect specific Polynesian items to images in Gauguin's works. An earring design from the Marquesas pops up as a fence in a landscape. The Easter Island cadaver is reflected in a painting of the Crucifixion.

In contrast, the Frenchman is shown incorporating Polynesian people and settings into familiar European formats. The head of a Tahitian king at a funeral is said to suggest classical paintings of John the Baptist. A recurring woman with an apple seems drawn from Greek mythology as depicted by a Renaissance master. Panels from the end of his morphine-addled life have the chaotic surrealism of Hieronymus Bosch.

It might appear that the show is a mix-match of European art and South Seas anthropology. But in the final galleries, where exquisite carvings by Maori artists are displayed, an epiphany unfolds.

It is hard to overstate the artistic quality of these intricate pieces, though all had practical functions. There's the ornamented prow of a boat as complex as a Medieval Celtic illumination. One bowl is adorned by carved people in a pose that reminds one of similar figures in Tlingit art. A box featuring tattoo designs resembles Northwest Coast Indian form line designs.

But the most arresting part of these displays is the small print. It states that the bowl was made by Anaha Te Rahu (or Te Rahu). The box is the work of Patoromu Tamatea.

This is not anthropology. This is world art history.

"We're especially excited by the New Zealand pieces because we have the artists' names," said Ishikawa. "This is sort of the sleeper section of the exhibit."

There's something about knowing the name of the person who did the art work that changes the way we see it. It affirms the connection to a real human being that is generally missing in anonymity.

Gauguin likely saw some of these same items during a brief stay in New Zealand. We are told that he sought out the Maori makers and met some face to face, artist to artist. Such meetings cause one to rethink the cliches that have encumbered the Frenchman's legend for so many years. They reveal that the notoriously blustery and self-centered artist genuinely yearned to look beyond the boundaries of race or culture or aesthetic preconceptions in pursuit of a universal trans-national art.

In its main editorial on Feb. 11, The Seattle Times called the Gauguin work in the show "dazzling." "He inspires learning," wrote the art critic for The Stranger weekly, Jen Graves.

All true. But the art of Te Rahu and Tamatea inspire awe.