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Gauguin's struggle with authenticity lands at Seattle Art Museum

In an ironic match, SAM's curators pair Paul Gauguin's paintings with the virgin Polynesian culture he so unendingly and unsuccessfully sought.

By Katherine Luck

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A year after its attendance record-breaking exhibition of the work of Picasso closed, Seattle Art Museum has done it again. The museum is once again opening a major showcase of one of the most popular and artistically significant Post-Impressionist painters, showcased for the first time ever in Seattle.

Following a three-month sojourn at Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen, Denmark, Seattle Art Museum became the second of only two museums in the world to host *Gauguin and Polynesia: An Elusive Paradise*, which places the paintings, woodcuts, and sculptures of French artist Paul Gauguin (1848–1903) in blunt juxtaposition with the Polynesian art that both inspired and antagonized him.

Opening in Seattle on Feb. 9, the exhibit is arranged chronologically, graphically tracking the evolution of Gauguin's powers of artistic observation and of sheer invention. Stocked by Switzerland's Art Centre Basel with pieces on loan from museums around the world, *Gauguin and Polynesia* is the first showing of a significant body of Gauguin's work ever presented in Seattle. Though Seattle's exposure to Gauguin has been sparse, according to Chiyo Ishikawa, one of Seattle Art Museum's two in-house curators of the exhibit, *Gauguin and Polynesia* is doubly unusual because it trains a spotlight on his relationship with the Polynesian environment and culture.

Seventeen years of the French artist's work is placed alongside over two centuries of cultural, religious, and decorative artifacts that are, unfortunately, among very few that survived the colonial era. The exhibit is evenly balanced, with nearly 60 of Gauguin's works stacked up against 60 sculptures, body ornaments, ceremonial objects, and functional but exquisitely carved household goods from Tahiti, the Marquesas Islands, Easter Island, and New Zealand.

Notorious as the staid stockbroker who chucked it all to become a painter in paradise, Gauguin was in fact one of the most widely traveled people of his time by age 21. A trip to Peru as a one-year-old, a stint in the merchant marines at age 17, and a two-year tour around the globe with the French navy cemented an undeniable wanderlust in Gauguin. His

lifelong quest for aboriginal authenticity was in reality a quest for a sense of permanency, according to Ishikawa, with his decade of bourgeois married life representing the true anomaly in his biography.

When the stock market collapsed in 1882, Gauguin's amateur passion for painting became an all-consuming mania. He decided to become a full-time artist, left his wife and five children, and embarked on a quest to find a muse in the form of an unspoiled environment, which would consume the rest of his life. Following a tumultuous nine weeks spent in Arles with Vincent van Gogh that culminated in the famous ear amputation, Gauguin successfully petitioned the French government for a grant that would allow him to travel to Tahiti.

His mission: to record the landscapes and customs of paradise.

The seat of utopian fantasies of unfettered exoticism, Tahiti represented nothing less than an escape from civilization and a return to an idealized "primitive" state for Gauguin. He was in for a shock though, when he landed in Papeete, Tahiti, in June 1891.

He had moved across the globe to get away from Europe, only to find that Europe had already placed an indelible stamp upon the Tahitian people. Their culture and language were in decline, much of their art had been destroyed by missionaries, and the islanders and indeed the island that Gauguin encountered bore little resemblance to his mythic visions.

An opponent of the emphasis placed on intense observation by the Impressionist movement, Gauguin nonetheless attempted to capture the reality of Tahiti — at least initially.

His "Vahine no te Tiare" ("Tahitian Woman with a Flower"), painted in 1891, bluntly displays the constricting missionary dress, passive gaze, and repressed florescence of young womanhood on the impoverished island at the end of the 19th century.

His "Faaturuma" ("Melancholic") from the same year pushes the sense of apathy yet farther. His model slumps in a European-style rocking chair, constrained as much by her drab pink granny gown as by her cheerless room, which offers only a cramped view of the outside world through a small window.

Gauguin's tendency to use artifice to realize his preconceptions about native authenticity soon overwhelmed him. Just a year later, he was inventing tiki capped mountains, an impossible hill of yellow feathers and fences fabricated out of traditional ear ornaments for "Parahi te Marae" ("The Sacred Mountain"). His paintings grew more colorful and sensational as his vision of voluptuousness transcended the reality around him.

His imaginings reached their apex the same year in "Arii Matamoe" ("The Royal End"), which features a spurious image of the decapitated head of Tahiti's King Pomare V, displayed in direct reference to the biblical story of John the Baptist, flanked by a figure inspired by a Peruvian mummy and assorted tiki sculptures.

Though Gauguin never found it, the much-sought-after pre-colonial culture that the artist sought after during his initial two years in Tahiti can be found in artifacts strategically scattered throughout *Gauguin and Polynesia*. On display are one of only 14 such bowls from the Marquesas Islands, elegantly polished to resemble a roosting bird; an anthropomorphic dancing paddle from Easter Island once twirled by young dancers during ceremonies; and an intricate Tahitian collar made from feathers, dog hair, shark teeth, and twined fiber worn only by the society's most elite members.

Created between the late 18th and early 19th centuries, these objects were collected during the earliest days of European contact and formed the basis for Gauguin's expectations of Polynesian culture, when he encountered similar artifacts at the 1889 World's Fair held in Paris.

Also prominently featured in *Gauguin and Polynesia* are tikis carved from stone and wood on the Marquesas Islands during the 19th century. At once squat and stately, these sacred sculptures speak mutely to the dignity of the vanished religion Gauguin could never quite uncover beneath the colonial trappings.

Though he sought his romanticized image of pristine paradise again in 1895, eventually moving to the yet-more-remote Marquesas Islands, civilization continued to intervene. Plagued by syphilis, heavily self-medicated with alcohol and morphine, and devastated by the death of his daughter in far-off France, Gauguin's artistic utopia crystallized on canvases in the form of lithe and luminous figures in settings so fantastic they became timeless and placeless. Abandoning any pretense of ethnographic reportage on behalf of the French government, Gauguin's exploration of brilliant coloration in vivid reds, yellows and blues exploded.

Though Gauguin may never have found the tropical heaven on earth he sought, the rare and priceless Polynesian artifacts that mingle with his life's work in *Gauguin and Polynesia* do offer museum-goers a glimpse of a lost world of genuine grace and artistry.

If you go: *Gauguin and Polynesia: An Elusive Paradise* is on exhibit at Seattle Art Museum through April 29. \$18-\$23. For more information, visit www.seattleartmuseum.org.

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