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SAM's Gauguin show gives equal due to different traditions

The Seattle Art Museum's "Gauguin and Polynesia: An Elusive Paradise" gives equal weight to French artist Paul Gauguin and the Oceanic art that inspired him.

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

If you have a painting by Paul Gauguin in your collection, chances are you don't want to lend it.

Yet dozens of museums and private collectors have temporarily parted with their treasures for the sake of the Seattle Art Museum's upcoming "Gauguin and Polynesia: An Elusive Paradise." That makes the exhibit, billed as SAM's first major Gauguin show, a most unusual opportunity for local art lovers.

The second unusual feature of the exhibit is the 50-50 balance it strikes between the artwork of the French painter (1848-1903) and the Polynesian art that inspired him (mostly sculpture from Tahiti, the Marquesas and New Zealand).

"Gauguin and Polynesia" was produced by Art Centre Basel (an exhibit packager) in collaboration with SAM and Copenhagen's museum, the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, the only two venues on its tour. Between the exhibit and its companion catalog ("Gauguin Polynesia"), plenty of new light is shed on Gauguin's later paintings and the surroundings in which he painted them.

One thing both catalog and exhibit make clear is that when Gauguin went looking for Paradise in Tahiti in 1891, he didn't find it. So he had to make it up.

The building blocks for his imagined Eden came largely from artifacts he encountered in museums (the Oldnordisk Museum in Copenhagen when he lived there in the mid-1880s; the Auckland Museum where he stopped for 10 days in 1895) and at the 1889 World's Fair in Paris.

Chiyo Ishikawa, SAM's co-curator for the exhibit, acknowledged in an interview last month that the 1889 fair is best known for bringing us the Eiffel Tower. But it also celebrated France's global colonizing role.

"They had these pavilions from French outposts," Ishikawa says, "and they brought in members of those populations. They had Javanese dancers. There was a 'Tahitian hut' too."

Gauguin, she adds, frequented all these attractions. But the connection between his artwork and specific pieces he saw in Copenhagen, Paris and Auckland hadn't had much attention. That, says Ishikawa's co-curator Pam McClusky, is why "Gauguin and Polynesia" takes the format it does.

McClusky, SAM's curator of Oceanic and African art, explains that the show was triggered by conversations between academics Carol S. Ivory and Elizabeth C. Childs, who both have informative essays in the catalog. Both women noticed how previous Gauguin shows kept mentioning Polynesian influences, but never following through with examples.

So they asked themselves: Where did Gauguin see the Polynesian art that inspired him?

They started with the 1889 fair, looking into what Polynesian art was on display there and when it had left its source. Some works dated as far back as the 18th century. Later items he would have seen were on sale in the shops in Tahiti when he got there, carved mostly for the tourist trade.

"So this exhibition is able to show you what happened in the course of two centuries to Polynesian art," McClusky says. Gauguin might not have been fully looped into the history involved, she adds, but he was well aware that something had changed.

"He kept wondering: *Where is it? What has happened here?* And I do think you see some of that in his paintings of Polynesian people, who were thinking that as well. Because much of what had happened in many communities was quite devastating, especially in the Marquesas and parts of Tahiti: population decimation, and a great deal of difficulty in interactions with Europeans."

Of course for many visitors Gauguin, both the man and the artist, will be the main draw of the exhibit. And in doing research for the show, Ishikawa had a couple of "aha" moments.

"The clichéd way to discuss Gauguin is: He was a stockbroker. He was married. He had five children. He lived in Paris. He was wealthy. And he chucked it all to run away to Polynesia. But in fact," she says, "that's the anomaly in his life, that period of stability."

Most of Gauguin's early boyhood years were spent in Lima, Peru, where his mother's family lived. Upon returning to France at age 7, he spoke only Spanish. His openness to the flavors of other cultures — their sense of color and design, their different beliefs — may have had its roots in his itinerant childhood and in his later travels with the French merchant marine, before his marriage.

Another myth that lost its luster as Ishikawa did her research was the notion of Tahiti being "*the* destination" in Gauguin's life.

"That was kind of random for him," she points out. "He knew that it was going to be a French-owned colony. But he was looking at Vietnam, he was looking at Madagascar. It wasn't as though his quest was for Tahiti. It was to be *elsewhere*."

The earliest paintings he made there reflect the fact that he'd won funding from France's Ministry of Public Education and Fine Arts to study Tahiti in an almost anthropological way. Ishikawa describes these works as straightforwardly "reportorial."

"But then when he moves to a more remote part of the island," she notes, "he talks about the riot of colors that he has been ignoring." She quotes a passage from Gauguin's "Noa Noa," his book about his Polynesian experience, published posthumously in 1919.

"The landscape with its pure, intense colors dazzled and blinded me," the artist wrote. "Golden forms in the streams enchanted me. Why did I hesitate to make all of that gold and all of that sunny joy flow on my canvas? Old European habits: expressive limitations of degenerate races."

Yet another characteristic of Gauguin's artwork that came to the fore for her as Ishikawa worked on the exhibit was the way he had his feelers out in all cultural directions. His awareness of Cambodian, Peruvian, Egyptian, Japanese and other cultures all had a big influence on him.

"It's the kind of thing that a post-photography person can do," Ishikawa theorizes. "He had photographs of things that he hadn't seen himself. And he could take those with him, so that he always had this little gallery of images that were important to him."

Gauguin's receptivity to non-Western art influences continued to the end of his life. When he returned to Tahiti in 1895, after a dispiriting interval in Paris, an unexpected 10-day delay in Auckland led to a visit to the Auckland Museum with its extensive collection of Maori artifacts.

"Gauguin and Polynesia" displays for the first time pages from the artist's "Auckland Sketchbook."

"These are not masterworks or anything like that," Ishikawa cautions, "but I just love that we're seeing Gauguin as a student."

The Maori objects themselves are a different story.

"These are just going to bowl people over," says Ishikawa, who saw them in Copenhagen. "They have so much vigor and life."

One sculpture dates from circa 1840 and is a centerpiece of "Gauguin and Polynesia." It once served as a house post in a Maori meeting house and will have a whole room to itself in the exhibit. It's on loan from the

Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongewera in Wellington, and the way it arrived here marks an interesting new development in museum-lending protocol, says McClusky.

It was escorted here by Te Papa courier Shane James, a sculptor in his own right of Muaupoko descent (a tribe centered at the south end of the North Island).

"It's not just an object," James says. "It's actually the embodiment of our ancestor. So we see it as if we are leaving our family member here with people of Seattle, to share our culture, our values and our beliefs."

One of the conditions of the loan is that SAM's curators greet the figure every morning. Museum visitors are invited to do the same.

Gauguin, more than many European artists of his day, might have been in sympathy with this cultural exchange. In much of his later work, Ishikawa says, he incorporates Polynesian icons and design motifs as if to summon "some sense of spirituality that he feels was there."

Latter-day takes on Gauguin's Polynesian period can be skeptical. The last chapter in the catalog cites contemporary Oceanic artists who view Gauguin's liaisons with teenage Tahitian and Marquesan girls as a product of "quasi-pedophilic fantasies."

McClusky is diplomatic in addressing this issue. She can have her own personal reactions to him, she says, but she tries not to let them color her work. To her mind, the show was a chance to ponder the achievement of "someone who goes to a place and is more than a tourist, but has his own purposes for looking at other people. And sometimes those purposes were not as clear and as clean as we might like."

Besides, Gauguin is not the only focus of the exhibit.

"I think that the show really makes a case for the greatness of Polynesian art," Ishikawa says. "These are not just artifacts of anthropological interest."

"It's a short, dense exhibition," McClusky wraps up. "It's not the conventional one-person-narrative superstar show. We're going to do our best to make sure the mix is enhanced and valuable for people to consider."

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