

# PAUL GAUGUIN (1848-1903) HIS LIFE AND WORK

DR. LAURENCE SHAFE  
ART@SHAFE.UK  
WWW.SHAFE.UK

- This talk is based on two exhibitions of Gauguin's work, *Gauguin Portraits* at the National Gallery and *Gauguin and the Impressionists* at the Royal Academy shortly after.
- My talk could be called *Gauguin Life* as I progress through his life chronologically and illustrate each stage with a representative work

## NOTES

### **Exhibitions**

- *Gauguin Portraits* (NG, 7 Oct – 26 Jan 2020, £34)
- *Gauguin and the Impressionists: Masterpieces from the Ordrupgaard Collection* (RA Spring 2020, £16.95)

### **Paul Gauguin (Paris, 1848-1903)**

- Born in Paris in 1848 during the revolutionary upheavals.
- Gauguin's idolised his maternal grandmother.

### **Marriage (1873)**

- Marriage, three children and move to Copenhagen.

### **First Paintings (1873-1885), Family Life in Paris (1873-84)**

- He became a stockbroker.
- *Portrait of Madame Gauguin*, c. 1880-81, Foundation E.G. Bührle
- *Study of a Nude (Suzanne Sewing)*, 1880, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek

### **Family Life in Rouen (1884)**

### **Family Life in Copenhagen (1884)**

### **Dieppe (1885)**

### **France 1885-86/87 Artist's colony, Pont Aven Brittany**

- *Women Bathing*, 1885, National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo

### **Cloisonnism and Synthetism**

- *Vision After the Sermon (Jacob wrestling with the angel)*, (1888)
- *The Yellow Christ*, 1889 Buffalo

### **Trip to Martinique (1887)**

- *Bord du Mer II*, 1887, private collection

## **Pont Aven (1888)**

## **Gauguin and Van Gogh (1888)**

## **Gauguin and Degas**

- *Riders on the Beach*, 1902, Museum Folwwang

## **First Visit to Tahiti (1890-93)**

*Vahine no te tiare (Woman with a Flower)*, 1891, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek

*Spirit of the Dead Watching* 1892, Albright–Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY

## **Return to France (1893-95), Pont Aven**

*Annah the Javanese*, (1893), Private collection

## **Residence in Tahiti (1895-1901)**

*Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*, 1897, oil on canvas, 139 × 375 cm (55 × 148 in), Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA

*O Taiti (Nevermore)*, 1897, Courtauld Institute

## **Marquesas Islands (1901-03)**

*Le Sorcier d'Hiva Oa (Marquesan Man in a Red Cape)*, 1902, Musée d'art moderne et d'art contemporain de Liège

*Self portrait*, 1903, Kunstmuseum Basel

**Death and his Legacy (8 May 1903)**

House

Children

Gauguin's Grave

Picasso



Paul Gauguin (Paris, 1848-1903), *Self-Portrait or Man in a Toque*, c. 1875-77, Harvard Art Museum

Paul Gauguin (1848-1903), *Self-Portrait or Man in a Toque*, c. 1875-77, Harvard Art Museum

- Gauguin is a misunderstood artist as we often associate him simply with his Tahitian figure groups. He is also a contentious person to deal with because of his **misogyny, racism and pedophilia**. But let us start at the beginning and take it a step at a time.
- This is **Eugène Henri Paul Gauguin** (1848-1903, aged 54) when he was about 28. He was an amateur artist at this time and did not become a professional full-time artist until 1882 when he was 34. He died when he was 54 so he had twenty years as an artist, the last 12 years in and around Tahiti.
- He was not recognised as a leading artist in his lifetime but thanks to his dealer **Ambroise Vollard** (1866-1939) who organised two important posthumous exhibitions which resulted in him becoming **recognised as a leading Post-Impressionist artist shortly after his death**.
- **He was born in Paris** during the **year of revolutions** across Europe, 1848, and as a result his family were **forced to flee**

**France** and travel to **Peru** where his mother's family lived. His father died on the journey (of a heart attack) but his mother, Paul and his sister were welcomed by his mother's family.

## NOTES

- Ambroise Vollard was one of the most important dealers in French contemporary art at the beginning of the twentieth century. He provided exposure and emotional support to numerous then-unknown artists, including Paul Cézanne, Pierre-Auguste Renoir, Pablo Picasso, André Derain, Georges Rouault, Paul Gauguin and Vincent van Gogh.

## BIO:GAUGUIN

### EARLY LIFE (1848)

- He was born in Paris and his birth in 1848 coincided with revolutionary upheavals all over Europe. His father was a liberal journalist who was forced to flee France when the newspaper he worked for was suppressed. His mother was a socialist activist and the daughter of an engraver.
- Gauguin's idolised his maternal grandmother and kept her books with him all his life. She was the illegitimate daughter of an aristocratic Peruvian family that lived in Peru. When his father fled France he went to Peru in the hope of continuing his job as a journalist but he died en route. His mother with Paul and his sister were welcomed by the family and Paul lived a life of luxury with nursemaids and servants until he was six. His early impression of Peru "haunted him the rest of his life".
- His family fell from political power and his mother returned to France. She got a job as a dressmaker in Paris leaving Gauguin with his paternal grandfather.

- Gauguin was sent to local schools and then a prestigious Catholic boarding school. When he was 12 he transferred to a naval preparatory school and then signed on as a merchant marine. Three years later he joined the French navy for two years and when he was in India in 1867 he heard his mother had died.
- In 1871 he returned to Paris and a close family friend secured him a job as a stockbroker at the age of 23. For the next 11 years he was a successful businessman earning the equivalent of about £200,000 a year in today's money including the money he made dealing in the art market. In 1882 the Paris stock market crashed along with the art market and Gauguin decided to pursue painting full-time. During this 11 year period he was painting as an amateur and became a friend of Camille Pissarro and exhibited in the Impressionist exhibitions of 1881 and 1882 although the critics dismissed his work. His work was bought by the dealer Paul Durand-Ruel until the stock market crash in 1882.

### **MARRIAGE (1873)**

- In 1873, he married a Danish woman and they had five children and in 1884 after the market collapse he moved with his family to Copenhagen to become a tarpaulin salesman. He failed as he did not speak Danish and the chief breadwinner became his wife who gave French lessons to trainee diplomats. He tried to earn a living as an artist and moved with his family to Rouen but the venture was unsuccessful. They all moved back to Copenhagen but tensions grew in the marriage and his wife and her family asked him to leave and he returned to Paris in 1885 with his six year old son Clovis.

## **HIS EARLY ART CAREER (1886)**

- He had no money and Clovis fell ill and Gauguin's sister paid for him to be sent to boarding school. He produced little work during this difficult period although *Women Bathing* introduced a theme he returned to later. He sold one painting and when George Seurat became leader of the avant-garde movement Gauguin rejected his Pointillist technique contemptuously and later in the year broke with his friend Pissarro.
- Gauguin spent the summer of 1886 in Pont-Aven in Brittany as it was cheap to live there. He dressed outlandishly and became a success with the young art students who flocked there. He made friends with the artist Charles Laval who accompanied him to Martinique and Panama the following year.
- He painted landscapes and nudes which were clearly indebted to Degas. An English illustrator called Randolph Caldecott produced naive drawings that influenced the young art students and Gauguin. The Symbolist subject matter and the use of pure colour is now called the Pont-Aven School. Gauguin became influenced by the art of Africa and Asia because of its mystical symbolism and vigour.

## **MARTINIQUE (1887)**

- In 1887, after first visiting Panama Gauguin went on to Martinique for the summer accompanied by his friend Charles Laval. He suffered from dysentery and produced only about 12 paintings. He was excited by the exotic location and the natives on the island. His work at this period was brightly coloured, loosely painted and outdoors.

## **VINCENT AND THEO VAN GOGH (1888)**

- On Gauguin's return he exhibited his work and they were seen and admired by Vincent van Gogh and his art dealer brother Theo, whose firm Goupil & Cie was the leading art dealer for avant-garde art in Paris. Theo purchased three works and introduced Gauguin to wealthy clients. Gauguin and Vincent became close friends and they corresponded perhaps helping Gauguin formulate his personal theory of art.
- In 1888, Theo convinced Gauguin to visit Vincent's Yellow House in Arles. Their relationship deteriorated and after nine weeks, on 23 December, according to Gauguin's much later account, Vincent confronted Gauguin with a razor and Vincent later cut off his ear, wrapped it in newspaper and handed it to a woman who worked in a brothel. Vincent was hospitalised the following day and Gauguin left Arles. They never saw each other again but they continued to write and Gauguin even proposed they form a studio together in Antwerp.

### **CLOISSONISM AND SYNTHÉTISME (1889)**

- Cloissonism is a style used to describe Émile Barnard's work which consisted of flat planes of colour and bold dark outlines. Gauguin appreciated the style and used it in 1889 to paint *The Yellow Christ*. His painting later evolved towards Synthetism in which neither form nor colour predominate but each has an equal role. In 1890, Maurice Denis summarised the goals for Synthetism as, "It is well to remember that a picture before being a battle horse, a nude woman, or some anecdote, is essentially a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order."

### **EDGAR DEGAS**

- Although Gauguin was friends with Pissarro his greatest

influence was Edgar Degas. Gauguin admired his artistic dignity and tact and it became his healthiest, longest lasting friendship that spanned his entire artistic career. Degas bought his work and persuaded the dealer Durand-Ruel to do the same. Gauguin's Durand-Ruel exhibition in 1893 received mixed reviews and was mocked by Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir and his former friend Pissarro but praised by Degas.

### **FIRST VISIT TO TAHITI (1891)**

- By 1890, Gauguin had conceived the idea of making Tahiti his next artistic project. He raised money by selling a few paintings and holding a banquet and benefit concert. He visited his wife and children in Copenhagen for what turned out to be the last time and set sail on 1 April 1891 promising to return a rich man. His idea was to escape from "everything that is artificial and conventional" about European art.
- He was disappointed by the capital Papeete as it was much influenced by French and European culture and he could not afford the lifestyle. He moved to a bamboo hut 28 miles away and painted the Tahitian life. Many of his finest paintings date from this period such as *Fatata te Miti (By the Sea)*, *la Orana Maria (Ave Maria)* and *Vahine no te tiare (Woman with a Flower)*, all 1891. He sent *Woman with a Flower* to a friend in Paris and it was displayed at the Goupil Gallery. He read books on the old Tahitian culture and produced some 20 paintings and a dozen wood carvings of the way he imagined it. He sent nine paintings back to Paris and was told they had been well received but in fact they were unfavourably compared with van Gogh. He ran out of funds and encouraged by his apparent success in Paris he returned with 70 works. He needed state support to gain a

free passage home and he was suffering from health problems which may have been early symptoms of cardiovascular syphilis.

- He wrote a travelogue called *Noa Noa* describing his experiences and he revealed he had married a 13 year-old girl called Teha'amana, who he called Tehura. She gave birth and in 1893 he left never to see her or the child again. She was the subject of a number of painting including the celebrated *Spirit of the Dead Watching*.

### **RETURN TO FRANCE (1893)**

- Back in Paris he continued to paint Tahitian scenes and an exhibition held by Durand-Ruel was a moderate success. He adopted an exotic persona wearing Polynesian dress, held a weekly salon and conducted a public affair with a teenager called Annah the Javanese.
- At this point disaster struck. For reasons we don't know he lost the patronage of Durand-Ruel, his main route to market which meant he did not have access to the American market which was starting to buy Impressionist works at elevated prices. He tried to hold an exhibition himself but it was not a success.
- Gauguin inherited 13,000 francs from his uncle but would only give his wife 1,500 francs. All hopes of a reconciliation with his wife vanished when they quarrelled over the money and neither visited the other.

### **RESIDENCE IN TAHITI (1895)**

- Gauguin failed to raise funds for a return to Tahiti but a friend arranged a cheap passage there and he never saw Europe again. He returned at a low ebb because of critics who attacked his work and his disillusionment with the Paris art

scene. He arrived three months later in September 1895 and spent the next six years living, apparently comfortably as an artist-settler near the capital Papeete. He had a steady but slow stream of sales to friends although at one point he had to take a desk job. He built a thatched house with a large studio in a wealthy area 10 miles to the east of Papeete. He owned a horse and trap, took the *Mercure de France* and engaged in a lively correspondence with artist, dealers, critics and patrons in Paris. He played a lively role in local government politics wrote for a local journal called *The Wasps* attacking the governor and the colonial government and eventually published his own newspaper and became paid editor of *The Wasps*.

- For the first year he produced a few sculptures and no paintings. When he resumed painting, it was to continue his long-standing series of sexually charged nudes in paintings such as *Te tamari no atua (Son of God)* and *O Taiti (Nevermore)* which also included elements of Chritain symbolism. He was now painting for his fellow colonists not the avant-garde in Paris.
- He was hospitalised several times, partly an ankle injury resulting from a pub brawl that never healed properly, partly debilitating sores that opened up on his legs. He described it as eczema but it was probably the progress of syphilis.
- He began a relationship with Pahura (Pau'ura) when she was fourteen and fathered two children of which one died in infancy. The other, a boy, she raised and his descends still live in Tahiti.
- In April 1897 he received news his favourite daughter Aline had died and that he had to vacate his house as the land had been sold. He took out a loan and built a much larger house with beautiful views of the sea. He had over extended

himself and the bank threatened to foreclose. Failing health and pressing debts brought him to the brink of despair. At the end of the year he completed his monumental *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*, which he regarded as his masterpiece and final artistic testament (in a letter to Monfreid he explained that he tried to kill himself after finishing it). It was exhibited with other paintings in Paris and was a mild success. He eventually sold *Where Do We Come From?* in 1901 for 2,500 francs. A Paris dealer, Vollard, agreed to pay Gauguin 300 francs a month against 25 unseen paintings a year and provide art materials.

### **MARQUESAS ISLANDS (1901)**

- With a regular income Gauguin was able to move to the Marquesas islands and he spent his final months in considerable comfort. Pau'ura did not come to the island with him as it was too far from her family. He could not continue sculpture as there was no clay available on the island.
- The Marquesas Islands had been ravaged BY European diseases and the population shrank from 80,000 to just 4,000. Catholic missionaries were in control and all the children attended missionary school until their teens.
- Gauguin settled near the capital of the islands although it was small and there was a military doctor but no hospital. The doctor left the island and Gauguin had to rely on two health care workers and his friends. He built a two-storey house that included a studio and held parties every night for the locals. This upset his relationship with the bishop which took a turn for the worse when Gauguin erected a statue of the bishop with his reputed mistress and attacked the missionary school system. Many teenage daughters were

withdrawn from the school and one of these was Vaeoho (also called Marie-Rose), the fourteen-year-old daughter of a native couple, who became his mistress. She gave birth to a daughter whose descendants still live on the island.

- The partying stopped and he began a productive period and sent 20 paintings to Vollard in Paris. Gauguin chose to paint landscapes, still lifes, and figure studies at this time, with an eye to Vollard's clientele, avoiding the primitive and lost paradise themes of his Tahiti paintings.

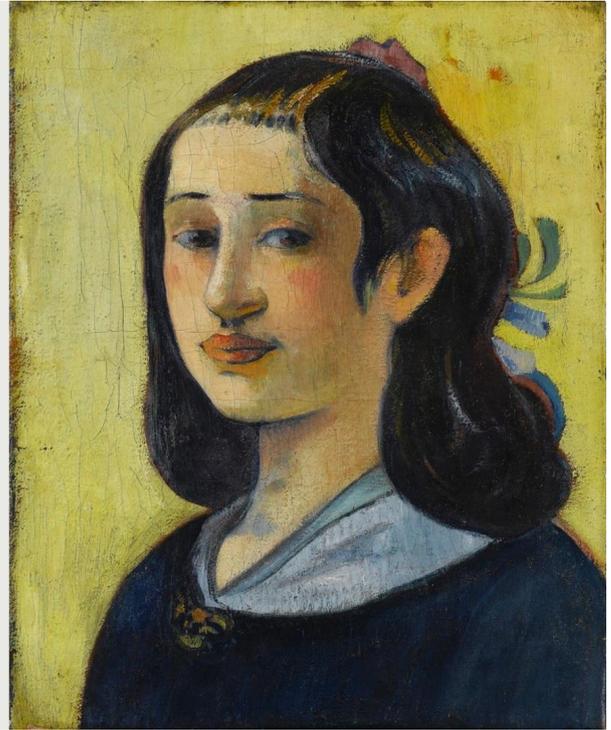
### **DEATH (1903) & LEGACY**

- In 1902 Gauguin's health began to deteriorate, his unhealed ankle became more and more painful until he had to take morphine. His sight was beginning to fail as well and he considered returning to Europe for treatment but a friend advised him to stay for the sake of his art and to keep his enemies silent. *Noa Noa* was finally published and he wrote some other essays. The written attacks on the governor, the bishop and the gendarmerie continued but by December 1902 his health was so poor he could hardly paint. He began an autobiographical memoir (*Before and After*) which he completed in two months. At the beginning of 1903 he began another attack on the gendarmerie but the allegations could not be substantiated and he was fined 500 francs and three months in prison for libel. He was in such great pain he resorted to morphine again and died suddenly on the morning of 8 May 1903 probably of a heart attack.
- He was buried in the Catholic cemetery and his effects were quickly auctioned leading to the loss of much valuable information about his later years. One small painting of Pau'ura was sold for 150 francs to a naval officer and it was sold at Sotheby's in 2004 for \$39 million.

- Gauguin was the first artist to systematically develop a style of art called Primitivism with exaggerated figures, animal totems, geometric designs and stark contrasts. Like Picasso Gauguin was inspired by the raw power and simplicity of the so-called primitive art of foreign cultures.
- Gauguin is also known as a Post Impressionist because of his bold, colourful and design oriented paintings.
- Gauguin had two posthumous exhibitions at the Salon d'Automne in Paris in 1903 and 1906 and they had a powerful influence on French avant-garde art and on Pablo Picasso in particular.
- Gauguin's initial artistic guidance was from Pissarro, but the relationship left more of a mark personally than stylistically. Gauguin's masters were Giotto, Raphael, Ingres, Eugène Delacroix, Manet, Degas and Cézanne. His own beliefs, and in some cases the psychology behind his work, were also influenced by philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer and poet Stéphane Mallarmé.



Aline Chazal (1825-1869), c. 1840, photograph



Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), *The Artist's Mother*, 1890-93, 41 x 33 cm, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart

Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), *The Artist's Mother*, 1890-93, 41 x 33 cm, Staatsgalerie Stuttgart

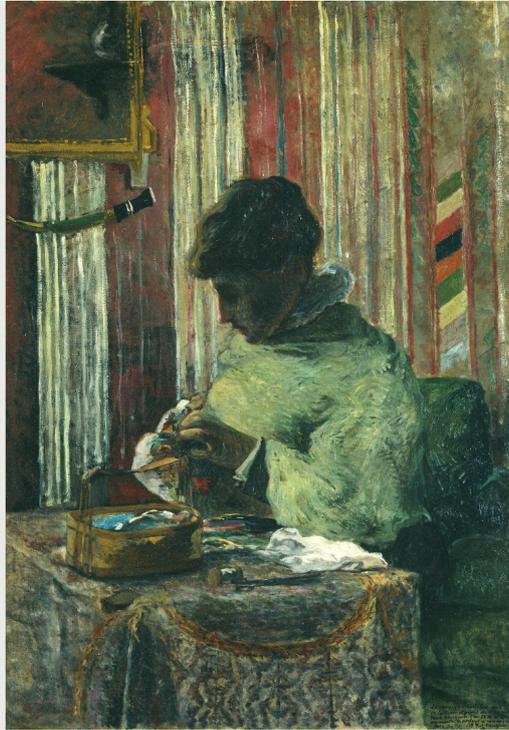
Depicted person: Aline Marie Chazal Gauguin (1825-1867)

Aline Chazal (1825-1869), c. 1840, photograph

- Gauguin's mother was a beautiful half-Peruvian women who had died 25 years before he painted this portrait. He based the painting on an old photograph (CLICK) , possibly this one, and he has given the work the aura of a devotional image with its gold background and direct gaze. This is from just before his first visit to Tahiti which was when he started exploring the themes of womanhood and fertility.
- **His grandmother** was the illegitimate daughter of a Peruvian aristocrat and the **family was wealthy** so Gaugin lived a life of luxury until he was six and he clearly remembered the experience all his life.
- The family **fell from political power** and Gaugin returned to France where his mother got a job as a **dressmaker** and Gaugin was brought up by his grandmother who he idolised and

who was a major influence on his life. He kept her books with him until the end of his life.

- From the age of 11 to 16 he studied at a Catholic seminary where one of the teachers was the Bishop of Orléans. He devised a catechism (a series of questions and answers) which was "where does humanity come from?" "where is it going to?", and "how does humanity proceed?". It was the 'where' question that lodged in his mind and informed his art.
- But he did not become an artist then. When he was 16 he joined a naval college and then signed up for three years and was transferred to India which was where he heard his mother had died.
- In 1871, aged 23, he returned to Paris where a close family friend got him a job as a **stockbroker**. For the **next 11 years** he was a **successful businessman** making the equivalent of about **£200,000 a year** including the money he made dealing in the art market. During this time he was an **amateur painter** and painted the self-portrait we just saw.
- He became friends with **Camille Pissarro** and exhibited in the **Impressionist exhibitions** of 1881 and 1882 and although the critics dismissed his work it was bought by the dealer Paul Durand-Ruel. So, when the **stock market crashed in 1882 he decided to become an artist full-time.**



Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), *The Embroiderer or Portrait of Madame Gauguin*, 1880, 116 x 81 cm, Foundation E.G. Bührle

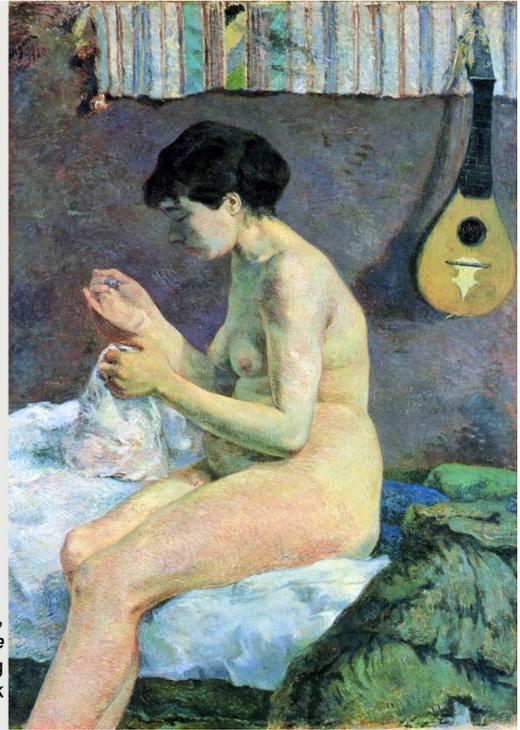
Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), *The Embroiderer or Portrait of Madame Gauguin*, 1880, 116 x 81 cm, Foundation E.G. Bührle

### **MARRIAGE (1873)**

- In 1873, while he was **still a wealthy stockbroker** (at the broker Bertin) he fell in **love with and married** this woman, Mette Sophie Gad (pronounced 'May-de', b. 1850-1920, m. 1873-1894) a **Danish woman** from a middle-class Danish family (her father was a judge). They had **five children** and their first child, Emile, was born in 1874 and their last child was born eleven years later in 1883.
- As I said, he started collecting Impressionist works and became a friend of Camille Pissarro (1830-1903, died aged 73) who influenced his painting style during that early period. It was thanks to Pissarro he was invited to exhibit at the Impressionist exhibition and he spent the summer of that year with Pissarro learning from the man who would become known as the 'Father of Impressionism'.



Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres (1780–1867), *The Valpinçon Bather*, 1808, 146 x 98 cm, Musée du Louvre



Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), *Study of a Nude (Suzanne Sewing)*, 1880, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek

Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), *Study of a Nude (Suzanne Sewing)*, 1880, 114.5 × 79.5 cm, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek

Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres (1780–1867), *The Valpinçon Bather*, 1808, 146 x 98 cm, Musée du Louvre

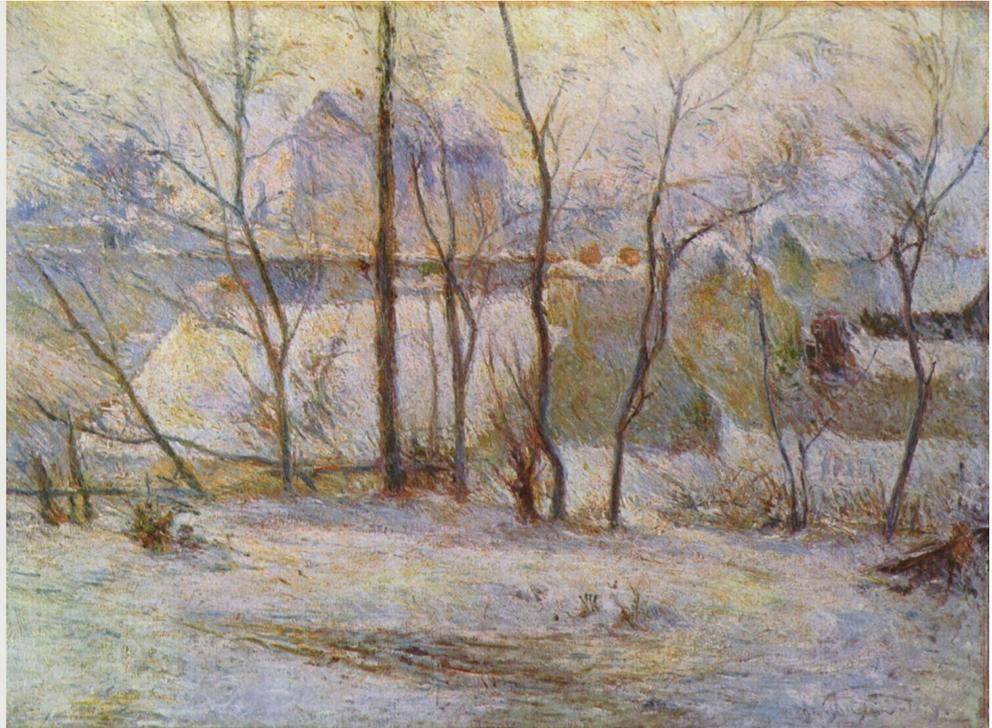
- In 1877 he moved **downmarket** across the river and bought a **bigger house**. The family lived in style with servants in a comfortable house with a garden. He set up a studio in his home where he painted this life-size portrait of a pregnant model called Suzanne. It was painted in Paris in 1880, the same year as the previous painting. By combining a nude with a domestic scene of everyday life he removed the eroticism and refused to idealise the figure. It caused a big impact at the Impressionist exhibition and received some positive reviews but he was unable to sell it and his wife Mette (pronounced 'May-de', Mette Sophie Gad, m. 1873) refused to allow it to be hung in the house.
- (CLICK) The painting is influenced by one of his favourite painters Jean Auguste Ingres, particularly his *The Valpinçon Bather* of 1808 but also his *The Turkish Bath* where one of the

nudes is playing a mandolin. (CLICK).

- When Gauguin left his family living in Copenhagen his wife retained it and sold it to an artist who later donated it to the national museum.

## NOTES

- His close friend **Émile Schuffenecker** (1851-1934), a former stockbroker who also aspired to become an artist, lived close by. He was a French Post-Impressionist artist, painter, art teacher and art collector. A friend of Paul Gauguin and Odilon Redon, and one of the first collectors of works by Vincent van Gogh. His reputation suffered as he was accused of imitating and even forging works of other artists such as Van Gogh.
- The painting can be seen as Gauguin's **tribute to one of his favourite painters, J.A.D. Ingres** particularly his *Valpinçon Bather* of 1808 (Louvre, pronounced 'val-pan-sonne') and his *The Turkish Bath* (1852-59, modified 1862, Louvre) with a similar figure playing a mandolin and the *Grande Odalisque* (1814, Louvre).



Paul Gauguin (1848–1903),  
*Garden under Snow (La Neige  
à Vaugirard II, ou Jardin sous la  
neige)*, 1879, 60.5 × 81 cm,  
Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest

Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), *Garden under Snow (La Neige à Vaugirard II, ou Jardin sous la neige)*, 1879, 60.5 × 81 cm, Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest

- This is an area in Vaugirard (pronounced 'voh-zhee-rah'r') near Gauguin's house. Although we think of him as a painter of Tahitian figures he painted a large number of landscapes and many still-lives including flower paintings.
- This was painted when he was still a self-taught 'Sunday painter'. The impressionist brushwork shows the influence of Pissarro who had been mentor to the young artist for the previous five years. Snow scenes were popular with the impressionists as they allowed the exploration of subtle variations in colour and tone with fine transitions from purple to bluish shades. We shall see how Gauguin later broke with the Impressionists and developed his own style.
- But then the big life-changing event happened. **In 1882 the Paris Bourse (the stock market) collapsed**, it was the worst crisis in the French economy in the nineteenth century. **Gauguin lost his job and most of his savings** and had to

move with his family to Rouen where the cost of living was lower. Suddenly the family went from comfortable upper-middle class to no income and living on their savings.

## **NOTES**

- The stock market collapse had a number of causes but the principal one was speculation in the shares of **l'Union Générale** which collapsed in January 1882. The collapse led to a recession which lasted until the end of the decade. The bank blamed the collapse on an anti-Catholic Jewish-German conspiracy of Freemasons but historians now know there was no conspiracy. Seven stockbrokers went bankrupt and 14 of 60 were close to collapse.

## **REFERENCES**

<https://en.mng.hu/artworks/garden-under-snow/>



Paul Gauguin and Mette Sophie Gad by Julie Laurberg, 1885, photograph, Royal Danish Library, Copenhagen

Mette Gauguin and Her Children in Copenhagen, c. 1889, photograph

- **Gauguin decided to become a full-time artist** but found it difficult to sell his own work and he started to sell his art collection. Mette ('May-de') became dissatisfied and moved back to her parent's house in Copenhagen with the children (CLICK). Mette later returned to Rouen and convinced Gauguin to join her in Copenhagen. He found a job as a commission-only tarpaulin salesman to make some money. Needless to say, he failed completely as he did not speak Danish and no one wanted French tarpaulins. The chief breadwinner became his wife who, with the help of family connections, gave French lessons to trainee diplomats.
- Tensions grew in the marriage and with his in-laws. His wife and her family asked him to leave and **he returned to Paris in June 1885 with his six-year-old son Clovis**. Remember, by this time he had been trying to earn a living as a full-time artist for

three years but was unable to sell his work.

- Gauguin and Mette were never to live as husband and wife again. Gauguin frequently wrote her letters but for the remaining 23 years of his life he travelled and painted. He saw them once more in 1891.

## **NOTES**

- Émile (1874–1955), the eldest;
- Aline (1877–1897), his favourite daughter who died when he was in Tahiti;
- Clovis (1879–1900), who he took to Paris;
- Jean René (1881–1961), who became a sculptor; and
- Paul Rollon (1883–1961), who became a painter and art critic known as Pola Gauguin.



Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), *Women Bathing*, 1885, 38. x 46.2 cm, National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo

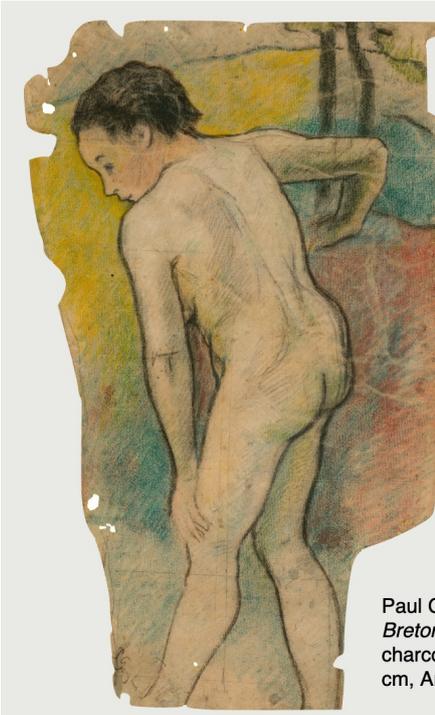
Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), *Women Bathing*, 1885, 38. x 46.2 cm, National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo

### **HIS EARLY ART CAREER (1886)**

- So, he was in Paris with his son and had no money Then his son, Clovis fell ill and Gauguin's sister (Marie) paid for him to be sent to boarding school. He produced little art during this difficult period although *Women Bathing* introduced a theme he returned to later.
- He exhibited 19 paintings and a wood relief at the eighth and last Impressionist exhibition in May 1886 but he only sold one painting. When **George Seurat became seen as the leader** of the avant-garde movement **Gauguin rejected his Pointillist technique contemptuously** and later in the year broke with **his friend Pissarro**.
- Gauguin spent the **summer of that year in Pont-Aven in Brittany** as it was cheap to live there. The people were **fervently religious** and it was a long way from the sophistication of Paris. Gauguin was **energised** by this rural,

**even 'primitive' culture.** The term 'primitive' was used to refer to any culture outside the capital cities of Europe. It might be used to refer to a rural village, a country in the Middle East or an earlier period excluding the classical period. For Gauguin and many other artists it was a term of praise, 'primitive' meant closer to nature, more honest more energetic and without the hypocrisy of middle-class society.

- In Pont Aven he **forged a new style** and this painting called ***Women Bathing*** is **transitional** between his old and his new style. It was here as we shall see in a moment that he started to use **colour** not to mimic nature but for its **emotional qualities**.
- **He dressed outlandishly** and became a **success with the young art students** who flocked there. He made friends with the artist Charles Laval who accompanied him to Martinique and Panama the following year.
- There was a fashion among artists for the work of other cultures, especially of Japan. Gauguin developed a love of African and Asian art because of its energy and symbolism.



Paul Gauguin (1848–1903),  
*Breton Bather*, 1886–1887,  
charcoal and pastel, 58.5 × 35  
cm, Art Institute of Chicago



Edgar Degas (1834-1917), *Le Tub*, 1886, pastel on paper, 60 × 83 cm, Musée d'Orsay

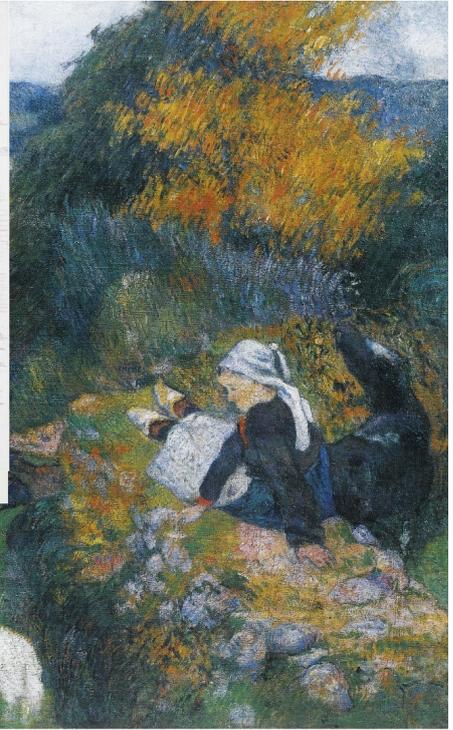
Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), *Breton Bather*, 1886–1887, charcoal and pastel, with touches of brush and brown ink, on ivory laid paper (discoloured to tan), partially outlined in graphite and squared in black fabricated chalk, with yellow paint residue on verso, Signed lower left, in charcoal: "P Gauguin"; inscribed upper right, in charcoal: "Marz 87", 58,5 × 35 cm, Art Institute of Chicago

Edgar Degas (1834-1917), *Le Tub*, 1886, pastel on paper, 60 × 83 cm, Musée d'Orsay

- He painted landscapes and nudes which were **clearly indebted to Degas** (CLICK). This is *The Tub*, one of seven pictures exploring the theme of women washing. It was exhibited at the final Impressionist exhibition in 1886. Degas's picture is unlike any previous scene of ladies at their toilette which were idealised. Contemporary critics described its animal-like pose reminiscent of the *Crouching Venus* of antiquity.



Randolph Caldecott (1846-1886), *Children on the Beach*, published in *The Graphic* October 1879



Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), *La bergère bretonne (The Breton Shepherdess)*, 1886, 60.4 × 73.3 cm, Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle-upon-Tyne

Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), *La bergère bretonne (The Breton Shepherdess)*, 1886, 60.4 × 73.3 cm, Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle-upon-Tyne

Randolph Caldecott (1846-1886), *Children Playing on the Beach*, published in *The Graphic* October 1879

### **PONT-AVEN, BRITTANY**

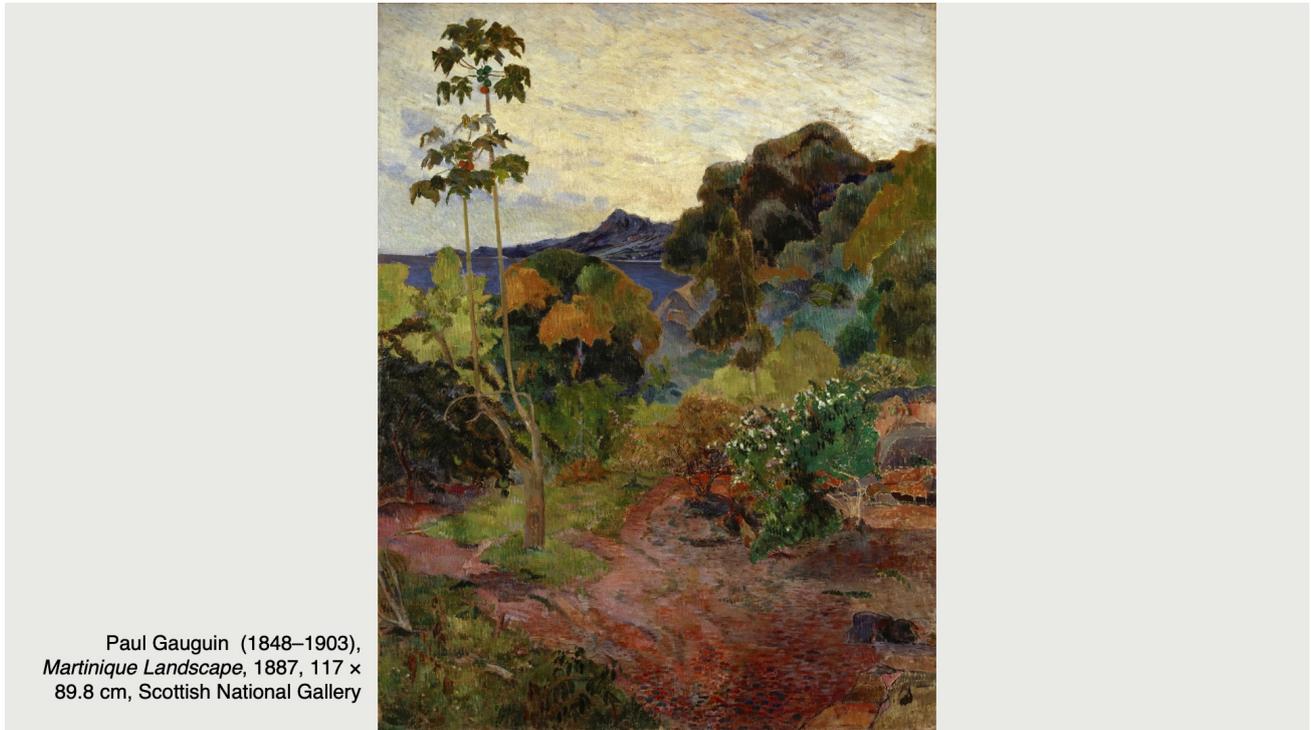
- The Pont Aven area of southern Brittany was still one where a 'primitive' way of life was followed and artists were inspired by this lifestyle.
- An English illustrator called Randolph Caldecott (1846-1886, aged 39) produced naive drawings of the area for travel brochures (CLICK) and his style influenced young art students in Pont Aven including Gauguin, Émile Bernard and Van Gogh although Van Gogh did not visit the town. Caldecott later became well known for his illustrations of children's books. It was Gauguin who emerged as the intellectual leader and advocated a style called Synthétisme (pronounced 'san-tay-tiss-ma' or 'sin-thet-ism' in English). The style is characterised by its use of bold colours, rhythmic lines and simplified two-dimensional forms. It was a decorative style that synthesised

the subject matter with the artists feelings to evoke a mood.

- Gauguin became friends with Pierre Laval who went with him to Panama and Martinique the following year...

## NOTES

- An exhibition of 'synthétisme' was mounted by the Pont-Aven artists in 1889 and the 'groupe synthétiste', including Gauguin and **Emile Bernard**, was founded in 1891. Another follower of the movement, **Paul Sérusier** (pronounced 'ser-ooze-e-ay'), **founded the Nabis group**. The group included Pierre Bonnard, Edouard Vuillard and Maurice Denis and their bold, simplified style was inspired by Paul Gauguin's Synthetism.



Paul Gauguin (1848–1903),  
*Martinique Landscape*, 1887, 117 ×  
89.8 cm, Scottish National Gallery

Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), *Martinique Landscape*, 1887, 117 × 89.8 cm, Scottish National Gallery

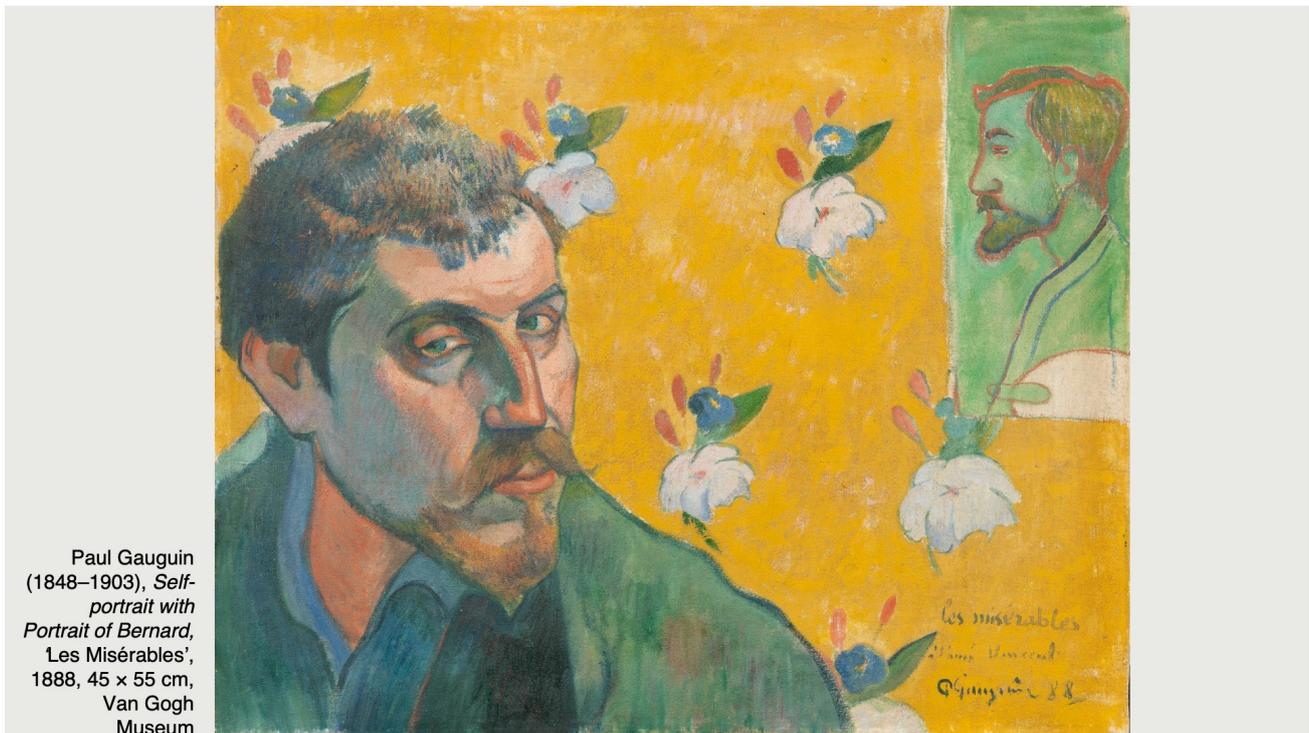
### **MARTINIQUE (1887)**

- In 1887, Gauguin and Lavel were enticed to Panama where the Panama Canal was being built by the offer of a lucrative job. There was no job and they had no money so they had to work as labourers in terrible conditions to earn enough to get a boat to Martinique.
- Unfortunately, while he was there he caught dysentery and produced only about twelve paintings. He was excited by the exotic location and the natives on the island. His work at this period started to become brightly coloured, loosely painted and set outdoors.
- **It was here that he became inspired by finding an unspoiled culture and an exotic and sensual surroundings.** However, he found a world that had already been transformed by western missionaries and colonial rule so he largely had to invent his own primitive world inspired by his location.

- Notice how his landscape style has changed since his *Garden under Snow* painted eight years previously.
- By this time he was dreaming of **escaping from urban 'civilisation'** and immersing himself in a tropical paradise where he could feel closer to nature and where he believed life would be **more mysterious and more sensuous**.

## **NOTES**

- Martinique is a Caribbean island and an overseas region of France. The painting shows the bay of Saint-Pierre with the volcano Mount Pelée in the background. It is a tropical paradise unmarked by human hand.



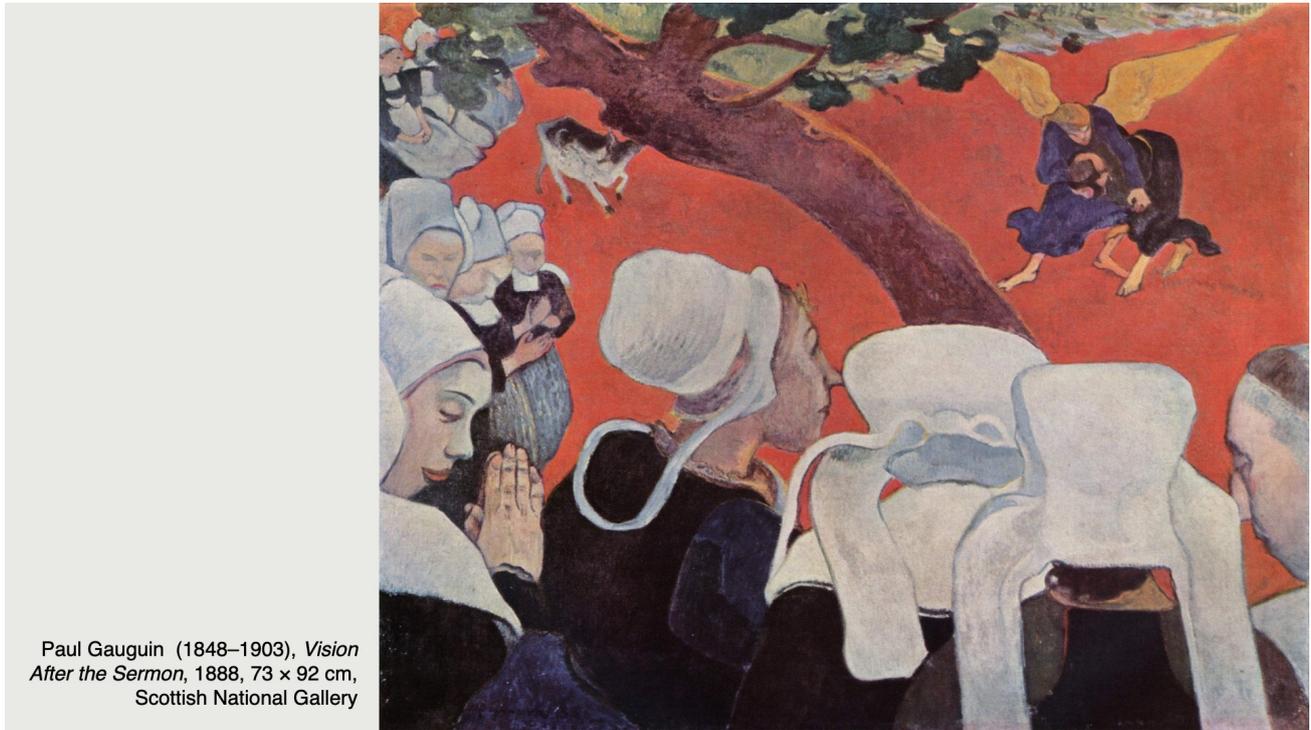
Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), *Self-portrait with Portrait of Bernard, Les Misérables*, 1888, 45 × 55 cm, Van Gogh Museum

- Gauguin became convinced **he was misunderstood by society** and saw Victor Hugo's Valjean as a symbol of the misunderstood and rejected, like Bernard, Van Gogh and himself. Note the sharply contrasting background, which Gauguin declared to "refer to artistic purity".
- He became influenced by folk art and by Japanese prints.

### VINCENT AND THEO VAN GOGH (1888)

- **On Gauguin's return from Martinique he exhibited his work and they were seen and admired by Vincent van Gogh and his art dealer brother Theo**, whose firm Goupil & Cie was the leading art dealer for avant-garde art in Paris. Theo **purchased three works** and introduced Gauguin to wealthy clients. Gauguin and Vincent became close friends and they corresponded perhaps helping Gauguin formulate his personal theory of art. Vincent van Gogh **hero-worshipped Gauguin** and dreamed of setting up a 'Studio of the South' with him.

- In 1888, **Theo convinced Gauguin to visit Vincent's Yellow House in Arles by paying him an allowance.** Gauguin's indifference to Vincent turned his hero-worship into anger and after nine weeks. They disagreed about many things but in particular their approach to art was diametrically opposed. Van Gogh thought the artist should **confront nature directly** and Gauguin thought the artist should **work from their imagination.** As we shall see most of Gauguin's later works were not painted from nature but developed out of his imagination.
- On 23 December, according to Gauguin's much later account, Vincent confronted Gauguin with a razor. Gauguin later wrote that he went for a walk in the public gardens when: **"I heard behind me a well-known step. Short, quick, irregular. I turned about the instant that Vincent rushed towards me, an open razor in his hand. My look at that moment must have had great power in it, for he stopped and, lowering his head, set off running towards home."**
- Vincent later cut off his ear, wrapped it in newspaper and handed it to a woman who worked in the local brothel with instructions to hand to a shy, young prostitute called Rachel. Vincent was hospitalised the following day and Gauguin left Arles. They never saw each other again but they continued to write and Gauguin even proposed they form a studio together in Antwerp.



Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), *Vision After the Sermon*, 1888, 73 x 92 cm, Scottish National Gallery

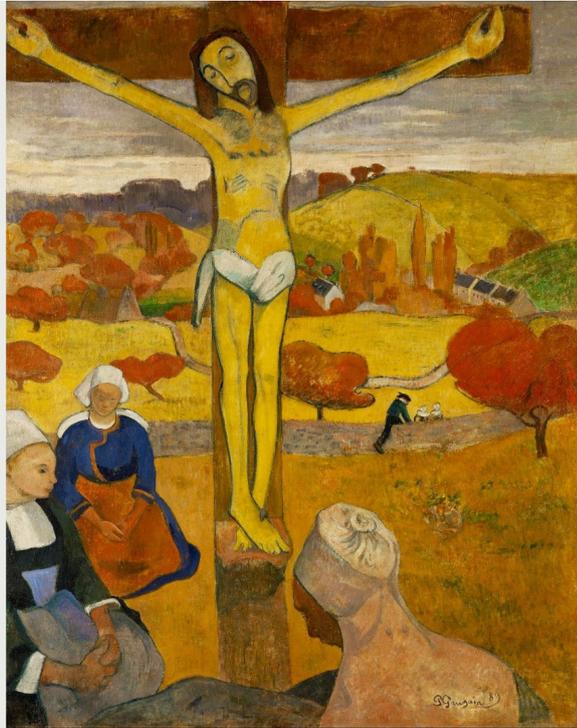
Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), *Vision After the Sermon*, 1888, 73 x 92 cm, Scottish National Gallery

*La Vision après le Sermon* or *La Lutte de Jacob avec l'Ange* (The Vision After the Sermon or Jacob wrestling with the Angel)

- This is one of Gauguin's **best known paintings** and one of the first to use his signature style of **flat areas of colour, unusual perspective**. It is clearly a work of the imagination and represents a dream described in the Bible.
- It was painted on his second visit to the **highly religious village of Pont-Aven**, Brittany. He had become dissatisfied with Impressionism and **met a young artist called Émile Bernard** (1868-1941) who was painting in a **simplified style** influenced by Japanese prints. Gauguin took the ideas much further and he interpreted the subject matter in a highly personal way. He found the Breton peasants exotic and what he called 'primitive'.
- He became **recognised as a leader in a new style called Synthétism** which aimed to combine the appearance of natural forms with the artist's feelings and express it with simplified forms and colours. It was closely associated with Cloisonnism

where areas of colour are separated by dark, black outlines invoking *cloisonné* a technique of soldering wires to a base, filling the areas with coloured, powdered glass and then firing it to melt the glass.

- The women are wearing traditional Brittany clothes and they have **just heard a sermon from Genesis (32:22-32)**. In the **story of Jacob**, after fording the river Jabbok with his family, spends a whole night wrestling with a mysterious angel. In a letter Gauguin wrote to Van Gogh he said '**For me the landscape and the fight only exist in the imagination of the people praying after the sermon.**' He uses the **diagonal tree to separate the real world from the imaginary**. The style is related to **Japanese prints by Hiroshige and Hokusai we know Gauguin possessed**.
- Gauguin felt lonely and misunderstood and often **saw himself as a Christ-like figure**. Like Jacob, Gauguin was struggling with questions of life and death, knowledge and evil and these themes were worked through in his art for the rest of his life.



Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), *The Yellow Christ (Le Christ jaune)*, 1889, Albright–Knox Art Gallery, NY

Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), *The Yellow Christ (Le Christ jaune)*, 1889, Albright–Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY

Émile Bernard (1868–1941), *Self-Portrait with Portrait of Gauguin*, 1888, 46.5 × 55.5 cm, Van Gogh Museum

This painting is dedicated to Vincent van Gogh - the text reads "à son copain [slang for "for his fellow"] Vincent, 1888". Van Gogh had asked Bernard for a portrait of Gauguin, but Bernard did not feel able to create it (Gauguin, 20 years older, was already famous at this time). Van Gogh however liked Bernard's painting, for its simplicity, and compared it to "a genuine Manet". To 'compensate' Gauguin painted a self-portrait "with portrait of Bernard" in same year. Both paintings are held by VGM.

### CLOISONNISM AND SYNTHÉTISME (1889)

- Cloisonnism was a style developed by Émile Barnard, Gauguin and others. It consisted of flat planes of colour and bold dark outlines suggesting the enamelling technique of **cloisonné** (where wires are soldered to a base and filled with powdered glass and fired).
- Gauguin was inspired by the style and used it in 1889 to paint

this— *The Yellow Christ*. His painting could be regarded as an example of Cloisonnism or of Synthétisme in which the decorative and representation of the subject play an equal role.

- In 1890, Maurice Denis wrote the following concerning the basis of Synthétisme, "**It is well to remember that a picture before being a battle horse, a nude woman, or some anecdote, is essentially a flat surface covered with colours assembled in a certain order.**" In other words, it reminds us of the physicality of the painted surface at the same time as invoking the subject.

## NOTES

- "Under the influence of folk art and Japanese prints, Gauguin's work evolved towards **Cloisonnism, a style given its name by the critic Édouard Dujardin to describe Émile Bernard's method of painting with flat areas of colour and bold outlines**, which reminded Dujardin of the Medieval cloisonné enamelling technique. Gauguin was very appreciative of Bernard's art and of his daring with the employment of a style which suited Gauguin in his quest to express the essence of the objects in his art" (Wikipedia)



Edgar Degas (1834-1917), *Racehorses before the Stands*, 1872, 46 x 61 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), *Cavaliers sur la plage (I)* (*Riders on the Beach*), 1902, 65.6 x 75.9 cm, Museum Folkwang

Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), *Cavaliers sur la plage (I)* (*Riders on the Beach*), 1902, 65.6 x 75.9 cm, Museum Folkwang

Edgar Degas (1834-1917), *Racehorses before the Stands*, 1872, 46 x 61 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

## EDGAR DEGAS

- I have mentioned many artists that influenced Gauguin but one I should emphasise is **Edgar Degas (1834-1917)**. I previously showed you *Breton Bather* influenced by Degas's *The Tub*. This is a late painting which I am showing you now to emphasise the importance of his relationship with **Degas**. Gauguin admired his artistic dignity and tact and it **became his healthiest, longest lasting friendship that spanned his entire artistic career**.
- **Degas bought Gauguin's work and persuaded the dealer Durand-Ruel to do the same**. Gauguin's Durand-Ruel exhibition in 1893 received mixed reviews and was **mocked by Claude Monet, Pierre-Auguste Renoir and his former friend Pissarro but praised by Degas**.
- This is one of two works painted in Hiva Oa (pronounced 'Hee-

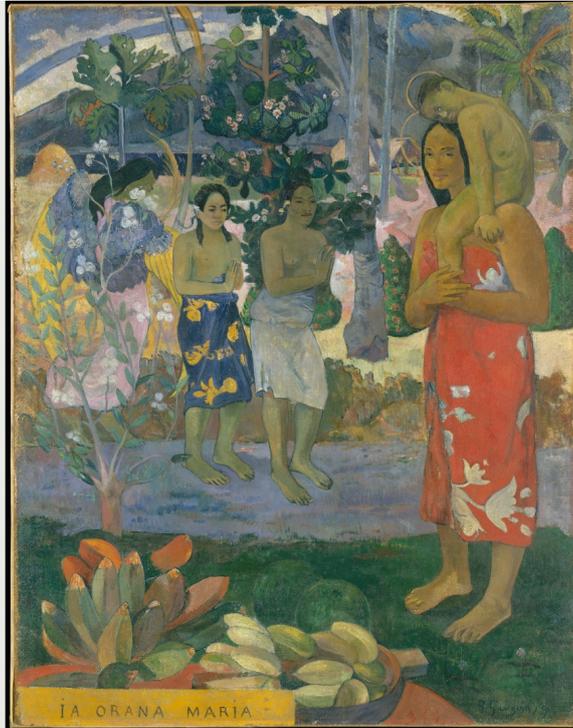
vuh oh-uh') **the year before he died**. Two ghostly riders appear to be blocking the path of three horsemen riding along the beach. It is clear that the influence of Degas is still present in his late work.

## **REFERENCES**

[https://www.wga.hu/html\\_m/g/gauguin/07/marque08.html](https://www.wga.hu/html_m/g/gauguin/07/marque08.html)

<https://www.gauguin.org/riders-on-the-beach.jsp>

<https://www.paulgauguin.org/riders-on-the-beach/>



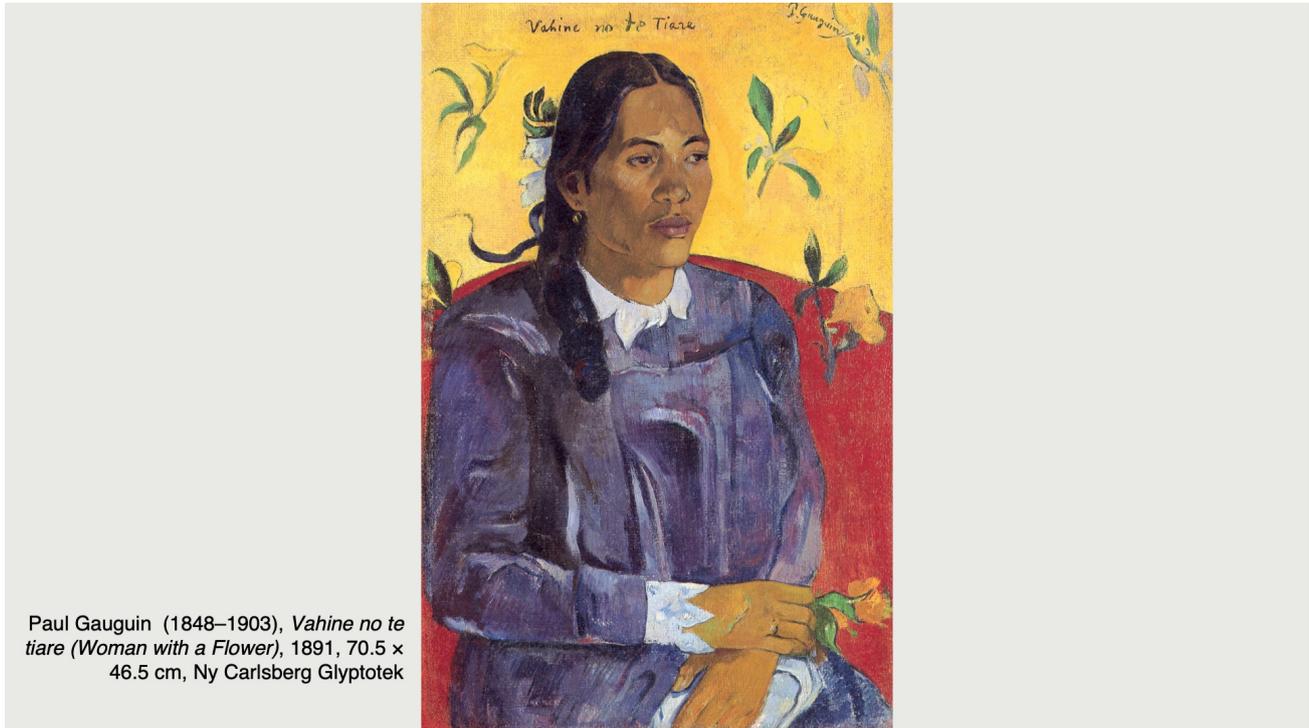
Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), *Ia Orana Maria (Hail Mary)*, 1891, 113.7 x 87.6 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), *Ia Orana Maria (Hail Mary)*, 1891, 113.7 x 87.6 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art

### FIRST VISIT TO TAHITI (1891)

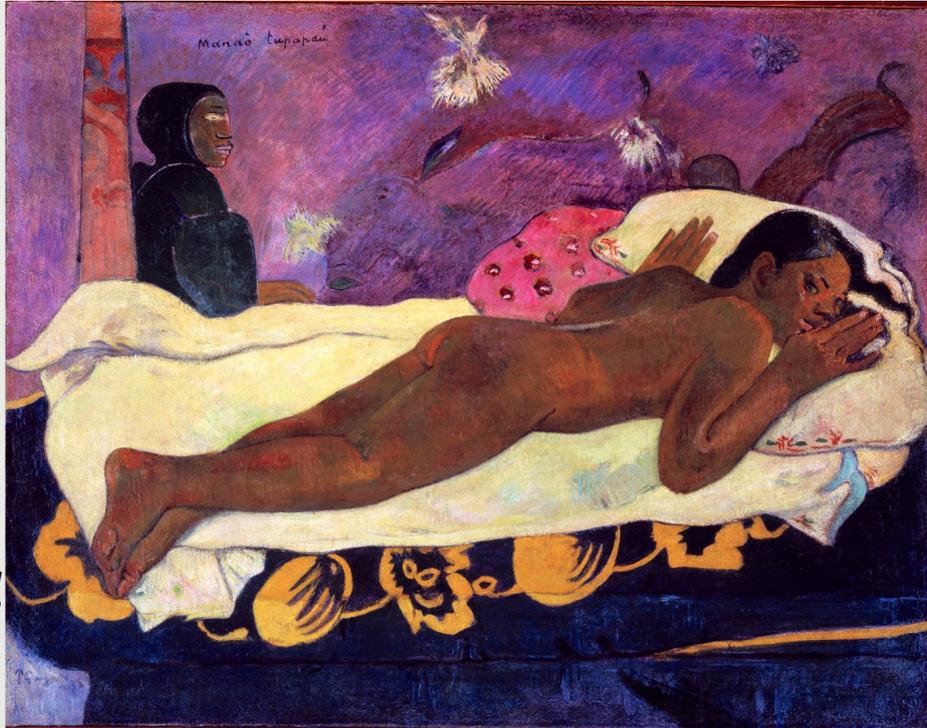
- **By 1890**, Gauguin had conceived the idea of making **Tahiti his next artistic project**. He raised money by selling a few paintings and holding a banquet and benefit concert. **He visited his wife and children in Copenhagen for what turned out to be the last time and set sail on 1 April 1891 promising to return a rich man**. He also left behind his twenty-year-old mistress Juliette Huet who left pregnant. His idea was to escape from "everything that is artificial and conventional" about European art and **produce a new type of art** inspired by an honest culture uncorrupted by civilisation.
- **He was disappointed by the capital Papeete** (pronounced 'par-pay-ay-tee' or 'pa-pete') as it was much influenced by French and European culture and he could not afford the lifestyle. He moved to a bamboo hut 28 miles away and painted the Tahitian life.

- **This is the first major picture he painted** and it is based on a Christian theme. Gauguin described it in a letter "**An angel with yellow wings reveals Mary and Jesus, both Tahitians, to two Tahitian women**, nudes dressed in pareus, a sort of cotton cloth printed with flowers that can be draped from the waist. Very somber, mountainous background and flowering trees . . . a dark violet path and an emerald green foreground, with bananas on the left. **I'm rather happy with it.**" The composition was inspired by a photograph he owned of a Javanese temple. The painting is an unusual combination of Catholic symbolism, Tahitian subject matter and a Javanese temple.



Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), *Vahine no te tiare (Woman with a Flower)*, 1891, 70.5 × 46.5 cm, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek

- **Many of his finest painting date from this period** such as *Fatata te Miti (By the Sea)*, *la Orana Maria (Ave Maria)* and *Vahine no te tiare (Woman with a Flower)*, all 1891. **He sent *Woman with a Flower* to a friend in Paris and it was displayed at the Goupil Gallery.**
- He read books on the old Tahitian culture and **produced some 20 paintings** and a **dozen wood carvings** of the way he imagined it. He sent nine paintings back to Paris and **was told they had been well received** but in fact they were unfavourably compared with van Gogh.
- He ran out of funds and **encouraged by his apparent success in Paris he returned with 70 works.** He needed state support to gain a free passage home and he was suffering from health problems which may have been early symptoms of cardiovascular syphilis.



*Spirit of the Dead Watching (Manao tupapau)*, 1892, 72.4 × 92.4 cm, Albright-Knox Art Gallery

*Spirit of the Dead Watching (Manao tupapau)*, 1892, 72.4 × 92.4 cm, Albright-Knox Art Gallery

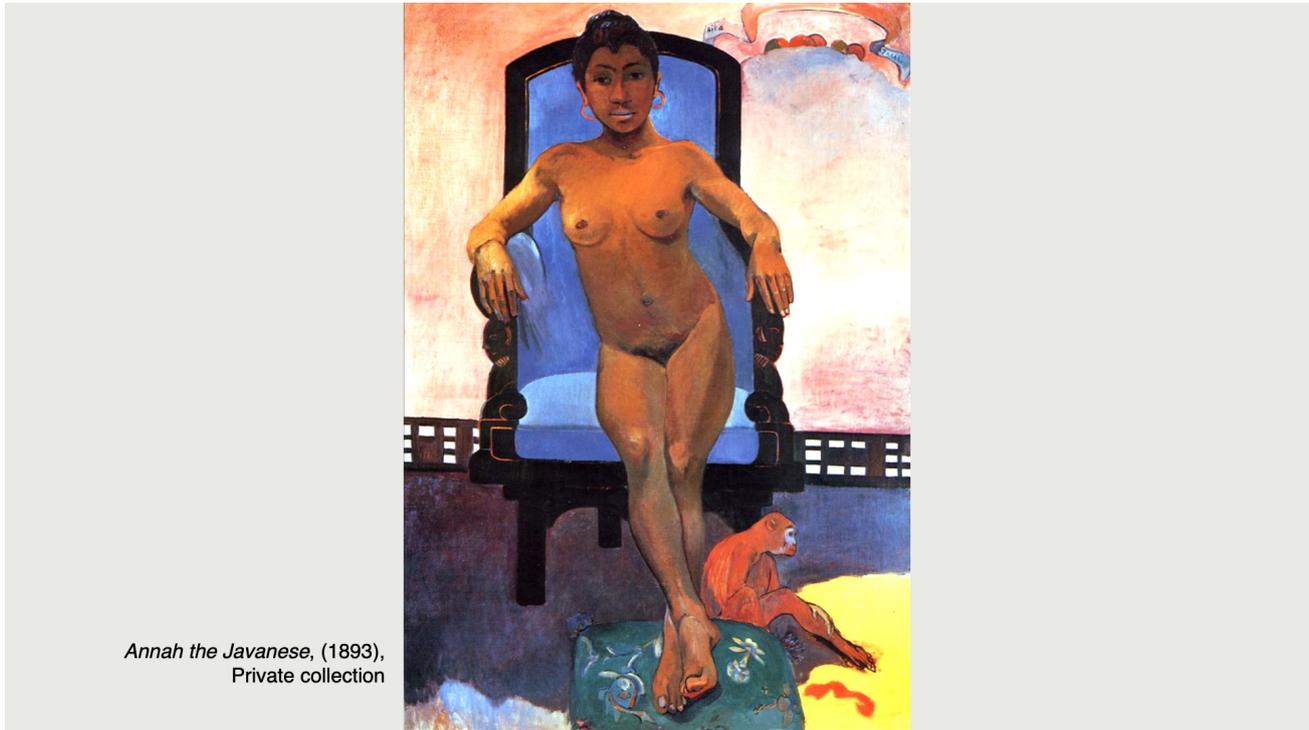
- **He wrote a travelogue called *Noa Noa*** describing his experiences and **he revealed he had married a 13 year-old girl** called Teha'amana, who he called Tehura. She gave birth and in 1893 he left never to see her or the child again. She was the subject of a number of painting including the celebrated *Spirit of the Dead Watching*. Gauguin came home one night to find her in the position with her eyes wide open with fear.
- Gauguin painted an old woman or ghost seated behind her and he said the title may refer to either the girl imagining the ghost, or the ghost imagining her.
- His painting was described by one art historian as ""a veritable encyclopaedia of colonial racism and misogyny". In his letter to his wife Mette he never mentions she is his lover and it has been suggested that her fear arises from Gauguin's aggressive behaviour which is consistent with his physical abuse of his wife. When he went to French Polynesia it was believed he had syphilis which he gave to the girl. However, recent (2014)

forensic analysis of four molar teeth found in a well near his house have been proved to belong to Gauguin but show no trace of mercury which was used to treat syphilis.

- By July 1893 Gauguin had decided to return to Paris and would never see her or her child again even though he returned to Tahiti.

## **REFERENCES**

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spirit\\_of\\_the\\_Dead\\_Watching](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spirit_of_the_Dead_Watching)



Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), *Annah the Javanese*, (1893), Private collection

### RETURN TO FRANCE (1893)

- He returned to Paris where he continued to paint Tahitian scenes and an exhibition held by Durand-Ruel was a **moderate success**. He adopted an exotic persona **wearing Polynesian dress**, held a weekly salon and **conducted a public affair with a teenager** called **Annah the Javanese**.
- At this point **disaster struck**. For reasons we don't know he **lost the patronage of Durand-Ruel**, his main route to market which meant **he did not have access to the American market** which was starting to buy Impressionist works at elevated prices. He tried to hold an exhibition himself but it was not a success.
- **Gauguin inherited 13,000 francs from his uncle** but would only give his wife 1,500 francs. All hopes of a reconciliation with his wife vanished when they **quarrelled over the money** and neither visited the other. They separated in 1894.

Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), *The Birth or Son of God, (Tahitian: Te Tamari no Atua)*, 1896, 96 × 128 cm, Neue Pinakothek, Munich



Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), *The Birth or Son of God, (Tahitian: Te Tamari no Atua)*, 1896, 96 × 128 cm, Neue Pinakothek, Munich

### RESIDENCE IN TAHITI (1895)

- In June 1895, **Gauguin failed to raise funds for a return to Tahiti** but a friend arranged a cheap passage there and **he never saw Europe again**. He returned at a low ebb because of **critics who attacked his work** and his disillusionment with the Paris art scene.
- He arrived three months later in September 1895 and **spent the next six years living, apparently comfortably as an artist-settler near the capital Papeete** (pronounced 'par-pay-ay-tee'). He had a steady but slow stream of sales to friends although at one point he had to take a desk job.
- **He built a thatched house with a large studio in a wealthy area** 10 miles to the east of Papeete. He owned a horse and trap, took the *Mercure de France* and engaged in a lively correspondence with artist, dealers, critics and patrons in Paris.

He played a **lively role in local government politics** wrote for a local journal called *The Wasps* **attacking the governor and the colonial government** and eventually published his own newspaper and became paid editor of *The Wasps*.

- For the first year **he produced a few sculptures and no paintings**. When he resumed painting, he painted this work of Christian symbolism, *Te tamari no atua* (*Son of God*). He was now painting for his fellow colonists not the avant-garde in Paris.
- He was hospitalised several times, partly an **ankle injury resulting from a pub brawl that never healed properly**, partly debilitating sores that opened up on his legs. He described it as eczema but it may have been the progress of syphilis although recent forensic analysis of his teeth found no trace of mercury used to treat syphilis.
- During this period he began a relationship with Pahura (Pau'ura) when she was fourteen and fathered two children of which one died in infancy. The other, a boy, she raised and his descends still live in Tahiti.



*Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*, 1897, oil on canvas, 139 × 375 cm (55 × 148 in), Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*, 1897, oil on canvas, 139 × 375 cm (55 × 148 in), Boston Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, MA

- In April 1897 he received news **his favourite daughter Aline** had died and that he had to vacate his house as the land had been sold. He took out a loan and built a much larger house with beautiful views of the sea. He had over extended himself and the bank threatened to foreclose. Failing health and pressing debts brought him to the brink of despair.
- At the end of the year he completed his monumental ***Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?***, which **he regarded as his masterpiece** and final artistic testament (in a letter to Monfreid he explained that he tried to kill himself after finishing it).
- The painting shows three groups. The group on the right represent the beginning of life, the middle group the daily life of young adulthood including a woman picking fruit as a reference to Eve, and the group on the left Gauguin wrote shows how "an old woman approaching death appears reconciled and resigned

to her thoughts"; at her feet, "a strange white bird...represents the futility of words" or "the uselessness of vain words". So overall, from right to left it represents the cycle of 'birth-sin-death'. Outside the cycle the blue idol Gauguin said represents 'the Beyond'.

- It was exhibited with other paintings in Paris and was a **mild success**. He eventually sold *Where Do We Come From?* in 1901 for 2,500 francs. A Paris dealer, Vollard, agree to pay Gauguin 300 francs a month against 25 unseen paintings a year and provide art materials.



Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), *O Taiti (Nevermore)*, 1897, Courtauld Institute

Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), *O Taiti (Nevermore)*, 1897, Courtauld Institute

- **This disconcerting painting combines beauty and eroticism with a strong feeling of unease.** The young woman is not at rest but anxiously aware of the bird and the strange beings behind her, who may be evil spirits. For modern viewers, the youth of the nude figure, sometimes identified as Paul Gauguin's 15-year-old partner Pahura, is its most unsettling aspect.
- The painting's title associates the bird on the ledge with Edgar Allan Poe's poem *The Raven* (first published in 1845, translated into French in 1875). In it, a poet, driven mad by the death of his lover, hears a raven endlessly repeating 'nevermore'. This **sense of loss** has sometimes been seen as alluding to **Gauguin's disillusionment at the destruction of Tahitian culture by the French authorities.** Instead of the unspoilt paradise he had imagined, he found a society **corrupted by decades of colonialism.** This did not prevent him from **taking advantage of his position as a European coloniser.** Pahura was one of several teenagers that he took on

as 'wives'. **The widespread racist fantasy of Tahitian girls as sexually precocious led to their unabashed exploitation.**" (Courtauld website)

## **NOTES**

- "Paul Gauguin painted *Nevermore* in February 1897, during his second and final stay in Tahiti, an island in the southern Pacific colonised by France. Intended for a white European male audience, the sensual reclining nude belongs to a long artistic tradition. To this familiar theme however, Gauguin added a sense of exoticism, writing to a friend that his nude is meant to suggest "a certain barbarian long-lost luxury".

## **REFERENCES**

<https://courtauld.ac.uk/highlights/nevermore/>



*Le Sorcier d'Hiva Oa (Marquesan Man in a Red Cape)*, 1902, Musée d'art moderne et d'art contemporain de Liège

*Le Sorcier d'Hiva Oa (Marquesan Man in a Red Cape)*, 1902, Musée d'art moderne et d'art contemporain de Liège

- Gauguin was critical of the exaggerated difference between the sexes in Europe. In Tahiti he comments on the ‘**androgynous aspect of the savage**’ which he respected and admired. **When he first arrived he was called a *taata vahine* (man-woman) because of his shoulder length hair.** It was assumed he was a *mahu*, a recognised and accepted male transvestite figure.
- His fascination with this sexual ambiguity is shown in the ‘soft-masculine’ figures of the women he painted with their solid arms, heavy thighs and masculine calves and the feminised form of the men such as in this later work *Marquesan Man in a Red Cape*, a figure that one historian describes as a *mahu*.

## NOTES

- **One mystery is that the bird** in the jaws of the dog is an unknown or uncertain species. It is similar to the New Zealand *takahe*. What makes it intriguing is that the famous Norwegian

voyager **Thor Heyerdahl** briefly saw a **hen-sized flightless bird** when he visited Hiva Oa (pronounced 'Hee-vuh oh-uh') in 1937. It scuttled into a burrow like a rabbit and locals said it was a kobo.



Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), Tehura (Teha'amana), Head of a Tahitian Woman with a Standing Female Nude on the Reverse, 1891–3, polychromed pua wood, 25 x 20 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), 'Father Lechery' or 'Debauchery', Père Paillard, 1902, painted miro wood, 67.9 x 18 x 20.7 cm, Chester Dale Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.



Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), 'Father Lechery' or 'Debauchery', Père Paillard, 1902, painted miro wood, 67.9 x 18 x 20.7 cm, Chester Dale Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.

Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), Tehura (Teha'amana), Head of a Tahitian Woman with a Standing Female Nude on the Reverse, 1891–3, polychromed pua wood, 25 x 20 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

A sculpted head in the form of a hollow mask that contains a carving of a standing nude on the inside.

## PRIMITIVISM

- Gauguin was the **first artist to systematically develop a style of art called Primitivism** with exaggerated figures, animal totems, geometric designs and stark contrasts. Like Picasso, Gauguin was inspired by the raw power and simplicity of the so-called 'primitive art' of foreign cultures. We see two here, the one on the left is his young Tahitian lover or wife and on the right is a statuette of Bishop Martin who he lampooned as **Father Lechery** for his affairs with the local women.
- Gauguin had two posthumous exhibitions at the Salon

d'Automne in Paris in 1903 and 1906 and they had a powerful influence on French avant-garde art and on Pablo Picasso in particular.

- Gauguin's initial artistic guidance was from Pissarro, but although he influenced his early work the relationship left more of a mark personally than stylistically. **Gauguin's acknowledged masters were Giotto, Raphael, Ingres, Eugène Delacroix, Manet, Degas and Cézanne.** His own beliefs, and in some cases the psychology behind his work, were also influenced by philosopher **Arthur Schopenhauer** and poet **Stéphane Mallarmé.**



Self portrait, 1903, Kunstmuseum Basel

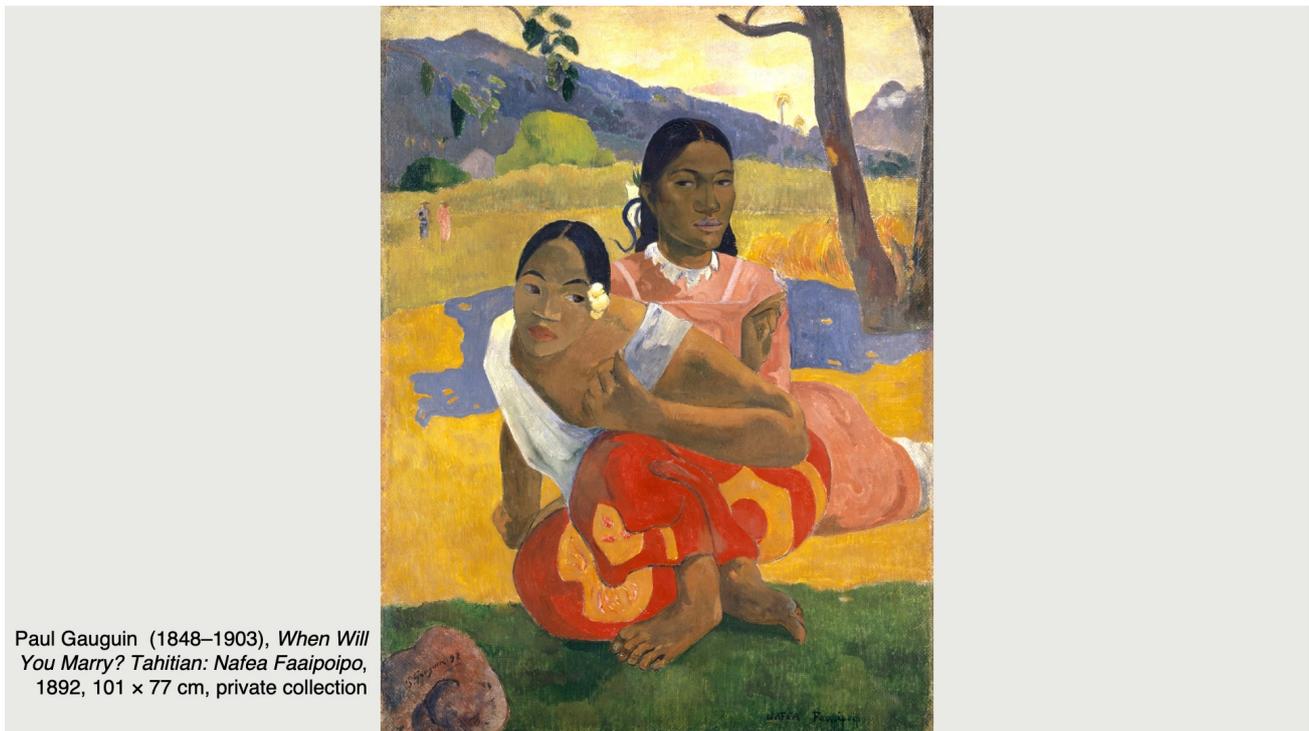
*Self portrait, 1903, Kunstmuseum Basel*

### **MARQUESAS ISLANDS (1901-03)**

- **With a regular income Gauguin** was able to move to the **Marquesas islands** (about 1,000 miles from Tahiti) and he spent his final months in **considerable comfort**. Pau'ura did not come to the island with him as it was too far from her family. He could not continue sculpture as there was no clay available on the island.
- The Marquesas Islands had been ravaged by European diseases and the population shrank from 80,000 to just 4,000. **Catholic missionaries were in control** and all the children attended missionary school until their teens.
- Gauguin settled near the capital of the islands although it was small and there was a military doctor but no hospital. The **doctor left the island** and Gauguin had to rely on two health care workers and his friends. **He built a two-storey house that included a studio and held parties every night for the locals**. This upset his relationship with the bishop which took a

turn for the worse when Gauguin erected a statue of the bishop with his reputed mistress and attacked the missionary school system. Many teenage daughters were withdrawn from the school and one of these was **Vaeoho** (also called Marie-Rose), the **fourteen-year-old daughter of a native couple**, who became his mistress. She gave birth to a daughter whose descendants still live on the island.

- The partying stopped and he began a **productive period and sent 20 paintings to Vollard in Paris**. Gauguin chose to **paint landscapes, still lifes, and figure studies** at this time, with an eye to Vollard's clientele, **avoiding the primitive** and lost paradise themes of his Tahiti paintings.
- Always contentious, in 1903 Gauguin started a campaign against the local gendarmes for incompetence. The charges could not be substantiated and they charged him with libelling a gendarme and he was fined and sentenced to three months in prison. He appealed but was very weak and in great pain and he was taking morphine. He died suddenly on the morning of 8 May. He was **buried in the Catholic cemetery** ironically next to **Bishop Martin** who he had lampooned with a statuette called ***Father Lechery***. His effects were quickly auctioned leading to the loss of much valuable information about his later years.



Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), *When Will You Marry? Tahitian: Nafea Faaipoipo*, 1892, 101 × 77 cm, private collection

Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), *When Will You Marry? Tahitian: Nafea Faa Ipoipo*, 1892, 101 × 77 cm, private collection

February 2015: acquired by Al-Mayassa bint Hamad bin Khalifa Al-Thani for Qatar.

### **Death and his Legacy (8 May 1903)**

- **Gauguin's fame began to grow shortly after his death** and many of his works were **bought by a Russian collector** and they are now in the **Pushkin Museum and the Hermitage**. This 1892 work, *When Will You Marry? (Nafea Faa Ipoipo)* became the world's third-most expensive artwork when its owner (the family of Rudolf Staechelin) sold it privately for **US\$210 million** in September 2014. The buyer is believed to be the Qatar Museums
- The last word is from Gauguin himself who wrote just before he died, **"I have wished to establish the right to dare, the public owes me nothing, since my achievement in painting is only relatively good, but the painters - who today profit by this liberty - they owe something to me."** That is, above all, he dared to be different.

## NOTES

- In 2014 the painting *Fruits on a Table* (1889), with an estimated value of between €10m and €30m (£8.3m to £24.8m), which had been stolen in London in 1970, was discovered in Italy. It had been bought, together with a work by Pierre Bonnard, by a Fiat employee in 1975, at a railway lost property sale, for 45,000 lira (about £32). One small painting of Pau'ura was sold for 150 francs to a naval officer and it was sold at Sotheby's in 2004 for \$39 million.
- In 1902 Gauguin's health began to deteriorate, his unhealed ankle became more and more painful until he had to take morphine. His sight was beginning to fail as well and he considered returning to Europe for treatment but a friend advised him to stay for the sake of his art and to keep his enemies silent. *Noa Noa* was finally published and he wrote some other essays. The written attacks on the governor, the bishop and the gendarmerie continued but by December 1902 his health was so poor he could hardly paint. He began an autobiographical memoir (*Before and After*) which he completed in two months. At the beginning of 1903 he began another attack on the gendarmerie but the allegations could not be substantiated and he was fined 500 francs and three months in prison for libel. He was in such great pain he resorted to morphine again and died suddenly on the morning of 8 May 1903 probably of a heart attack.



## NEXT WEEK - AUBREY BEARDSLEY

Beardsley achieved huge fame and notoriety in his short life and was then forgotten until he was dramatically revived in the 1960s. The talk was inspired by two recent exhibitions at the Victoria and Albert Museum and at Tate Britain.