

Gauguin's Paradise: Only Part Tahitian and All a Fantasy

By HOLLAND COTTER

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BOSTON — ISN'T paradise always lost? Isn't that the point? Almost by definition, it's the place we long for but cannot find. And if we did find it, it wouldn't be paradise anymore because we would bring to it all our worldly needs and expectations and alter the perfect atmosphere, dim the glow. John Milton can tell you how this spoilage works. So can any reflective modern tourist.

Actually, some people do find Eden and hold on to it, but they are special people. The historian Alison Goddard Elliott wrote about them in "Roads to Paradise: Reading the Lives of the Early Saints," a small book published after her death in 1984. In it she connected the stories of Christian saints to those of the questing heroes of medieval romances.

Both, she said, leave the seductions of the material world behind to seek one pure thing, purity of heart. Both venture into a wilderness — a desert, a dark wood — that is a marginal state "between bestiality and divinity." There they find a lost paradise, a place of natural repose, of "harmony with the beasts." Single-mindedness takes them there.

Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) thought of himself as a questing hero. He may even have imagined himself a saint, though he wasn't. In fact, he was in many ways a dreadful man, a bully, a whiner, a conniver, a sexual opportunist who would hit on your wife or your daughter or your son the minute you left the room. (On this, Nancy Mowll Mathews's "Paul Gauguin: An Erotic Life," published by Yale University in 2001, is well worth a read.)



But he was a worldly paradise seeker of unusual persistence. And although he never found what he was after, he invented its image in art. That invention, an unforgettably fragrant, perverse, panoramic spectacle that consumed him until he died, is the subject of "Gauguin Tahiti" at the Museum of Fine Arts here. It is really something to see.

The show, a big hit in Paris last fall, begins in 1889 with Gauguin in Europe but itching to leave. He was 41, a former stockbroker who had come late to art as a full-time career. But by this point he had already barreled through a succession of contemporary styles, ending in Symbolism, a movement mystically inclined and infatuated with exoticism.

He had also all but abandoned his wife and four children. The persona that would make him legendary was fully in place: the visionary buccaneer, uncouth and poetic, romantic and calculating, unworldly (in his view) and intensely competitive.

He was by disposition an outsider. He had lived in Peru as a child and traveled the globe as a merchant marine; as late as 1887 he visited the lush Caribbean island of Martinique and planned to make it his home. Almost



revolted by his own sophistication, he thought of himself as an Indian and a savage. One of the first pictures in the show, a self-portrait, is an emblem of a man poised between two worlds.

Painted in Brittany, a part of France that appealed to him for its archaic culture and religious fervor, the picture presents him dressed in a Breton fisherman's sweater, with two large objects behind him. To his right is a yellow-skinned crucified Jesus whose face vaguely resembles his own. To his left, set in a dark niche, is a squat brown form: a huge head with a tiny protruding hand. It was based on a ceramic sculpture, also a self-portrait, that Gauguin had made the same year and that embodies an identification with the primitive, the grotesque and the bestial that would run through his art.

He moved to Brittany to get away from Paris, where he had made enemies and had received what he felt was insufficient acclaim. But basically he wanted to leave Europe altogether. Partly because of reading a semifictional description of Tahiti as a latter-day Eden of easy living and free love, he left for the South Pacific.

He carried his preconceptions with him. The Tahiti he expected and demanded was a welcoming place, beautiful and innocent. There he would exchange a guilt-ridden Western morality for a new ethic based on the pleasure principle. For the first time his inner child would enjoy unsupervised play.

As a result, his art would become spiritually expansive in new ways and certainly exotic enough to appeal to the Parisian buyers who were ever on his mind.

His disappointment on arrival was profound. Tahiti was Europeanized, visually unspectacular (at least what he first saw of it) and expensive. Scant traces of indigenous religion remained; Christian missionaries had seen to that. But what could he do? Turn around and go back? Go back to what? So he stayed and set about creating the Tahiti he wanted in his art.

Nothing like this art had ever existed, anywhere, though it is entirely European. The great painting "Woman With a Mango" (**right**) is a classic Symbolist creation. The painting of a village scene titled "Delightful Day" channels ancient Greek sculpture (Gauguin had brought photographs of the Parthenon frieze with him) through Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, the French Symbolist. Cézanne, Degas and van Gogh are all present. To these he added references to Japanese prints and the Buddhist sculptures of Borobudur in Java, which he had seen casts of at the Universal Exposition in Paris.

Gauguin's subject was Tahitian culture, or his version of it. In several carved wooden sculptures like the fierce, luxe "Idol With a Shell," he emulated, however loosely, Oceanic prototypes, several of which are included in the Boston show, organized by George T. M. Shackelford of the Museum of Fine Arts and Claire Frèches-Thory of the Musée D'Orsay, in cooperation with the Réunion des Musées Nationaux in Paris.



These images turn up in paintings, too. "The Ancestors of Tehamana," (**top of page one**) assumed to be a portrait of Gauguin's teenage mistress, includes a wooden figure as well as hieroglyphics that Gauguin copied from an incised wooden panel from Easter Island.

For all these authenticating touches, Gauguin's Tahiti remains a fantasy, and not necessarily a benign one. It adheres to a European model of a primeval paradise: strange religions, half-nude inhabitants, luxuriant landscape. The French explorer Louis Antoine de Bougainville visited Tahiti in 1771 and named it New Cythera, after the island where Aphrodite was born. The Parthenon references in Gauguin's paintings extend the classical associations.

Gauguin presents Tahitians themselves as mute, becalmed beings in a timeless, vegetative world that had little likeness to the 19th-century reality of colonial control and cultural suppression, a reality Gauguin ended up vigorously protesting. Of course, he might have depicted all of that, but he didn't. He needed paradise; Parisian audiences expected paradise from him. A lot was riding on illusion.

But illusion and delusion make for persuasive art. I don't know any other modern Western painting that exudes as potent a visual tang as Gauguin's. Ochre, lavender, palm-leaf green and other fruit and spice colors seem to float in clouds through the galleries. Nut-brown bodies, almost always of women, connect one piece to the next in a kind of slow dance. And its rhythm culminates in Gauguin's largest surviving painting and self-described masterpiece, "Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?" (**right**)



This painting belongs to Boston, and it's a fascinating thing, at once an Orientalist hodgepodge and an image of moving originality, a work whose meaning seems to begin and end in mystery. On the surface it presents an Eden with many Eves and a single, androgynous Adam. Sexual desire, age and other facts of life that came with the fall are all here. But they seem unthreatening, part of a choreographed ceremony in which animals have an important part. Cats play, birds strut and preen, a dog sits alert as if listening for a call.

The scene might be taking place in a dense grove of trees or in a cave opening onto a landscape. This impression is augmented by the darkened Boston installation in which the large painting is surrounded by the several smaller but related paintings that accompanied it at its Paris debut in 1899. They are a rich, varied group, showing an artist still changing modes and styles. Two paintings on loan from the Hermitage in St. Petersburg come very close to abstraction.



Gauguin's *Vairumati* 1899

By this point Gauguin's life was itself changing. He would never see Europe again, though he had made certain Europe would see him. On a brief return there in 1893 he had created the book "Noa Noa," an illustrated, myth-making account of his Tahitian years. A manuscript version of it, filled with drawings and prints, is in the exhibition.

Gauguin's life in Tahiti ended in 1903. He had made many enemies there and come to hate its connections to Europe. So he sailed farther east, to the Marquesas. Again he was disappointed yet dauntless. Crippled with syphilis, he named his home House of Pleasure and carved a doorframe for it covered with erotic figures and the words "Be mysterious" and "Be in love." He died in that house.

As an artist, Gauguin had no direct disciples, but in other ways he had wide influence. The example he set of aesthetic adventuring has had many imitators. And he did his share to turn Oceania into an exploited outpost. The continuing effect of this is the subject of a lively show, aptly titled "Paradise Now? Contemporary Art From the Pacific," at the Asia Society in Manhattan. In it today's descendants of Pacific islanders get their turn to speak.

Of course, Gauguin never got to paradise. Elliott, the historian, suggested it was available only to those who made it their single-minded desire. Gauguin's desire was greedy and promiscuous. He wanted Eden plus everything else, including love, fame and art. Impossible. Instead, he did find some love, he did gain fame, and today in Boston we have his art.