



An Unexpected Gauguin Discovery

Author(s): Mark Roskill

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An Unexpected Gauguin Discovery*

IN 1948 the Museum of Fine Arts acquired by bequest from John T. Spaulding a well-known Gauguin, *Still Life with Flowers and Fruit* of 1894 (Fig. 1).¹ Now, sixteen years later, Gauguin's preliminary drawing for this picture has come to light in the Museum's files (Fig. 2).² The story of how it came to be there is of special interest in its own right. It also explains why, for almost thirty years, the identity of this drawing remained unrecognized.

In the early summer of 1894, while staying at Pont-Aven on the west coast of Brittany, Gauguin paid a visit to nearby Concarneau with his mistress of the time, Annah the Javanese. The sight of the two together provoked some sailors into throwing stones at them, according to Gauguin's later account.³ A brawl ensued, and Gauguin was badly injured in the course of it. He broke his leg, had to be carried back to Pont-Aven, and remained in bed for some time afterwards. During this period of convalescence and limited activity, he was happy to receive frequent visits from a man called Gustave Loiseau. Loiseau, an artist himself,⁴ was exposed in the course of these visits to the painting Gauguin was currently working on, namely, the Boston *Still Life*.⁵ Indeed, he paid so much attention to this canvas that Gauguin eventually gave it to him.⁶ It is actually Loiseau's later telling of this story which definitively establishes the date of the *Still Life*.⁷ And, as we shall see, Gauguin must also have given his friend the preliminary study for the picture.

Loiseau held onto the *Still Life* for a great many years. By April 1921 the Parisian dealer Durand-Ruel had taken it over,⁸ and the following year he sold it to Spaulding, thereby bringing it to rest in Boston.⁹ Then in 1935 Loiseau died. The contents of his atelier came up for auction at the Hôtel Drouot in April 1936, and Durand-Ruel reenters the story at this point, since one of his firm's many acquisitions from the sale was the drawing published here.¹⁰ What happened subsequently was this. Recognizing the connection between the drawing and the painting, and deeming that Spaulding would be pleased to have the former, purely for interest's sake, Durand-Ruel arranged for his New York branch to send it to the collector with the compliments of the house. In May 1936 the gift was duly made.¹¹ But why just for interest's sake? The answer is that, because the drawing had figured amongst the contents of Loiseau's atelier, Durand-Ruel had assumed it to be by Loiseau's own

* I am most grateful to Mrs. Angelica Rudenstine of the Department of Paintings at the Boston Museum, who assisted me in the discovery, and has subsequently helped me to gather the material for this article.



I. PAUL GAUGUIN, *Still Life with Flowers and Fruit*, oil on canvas.
Bequest of John T. Spaulding. 48.546

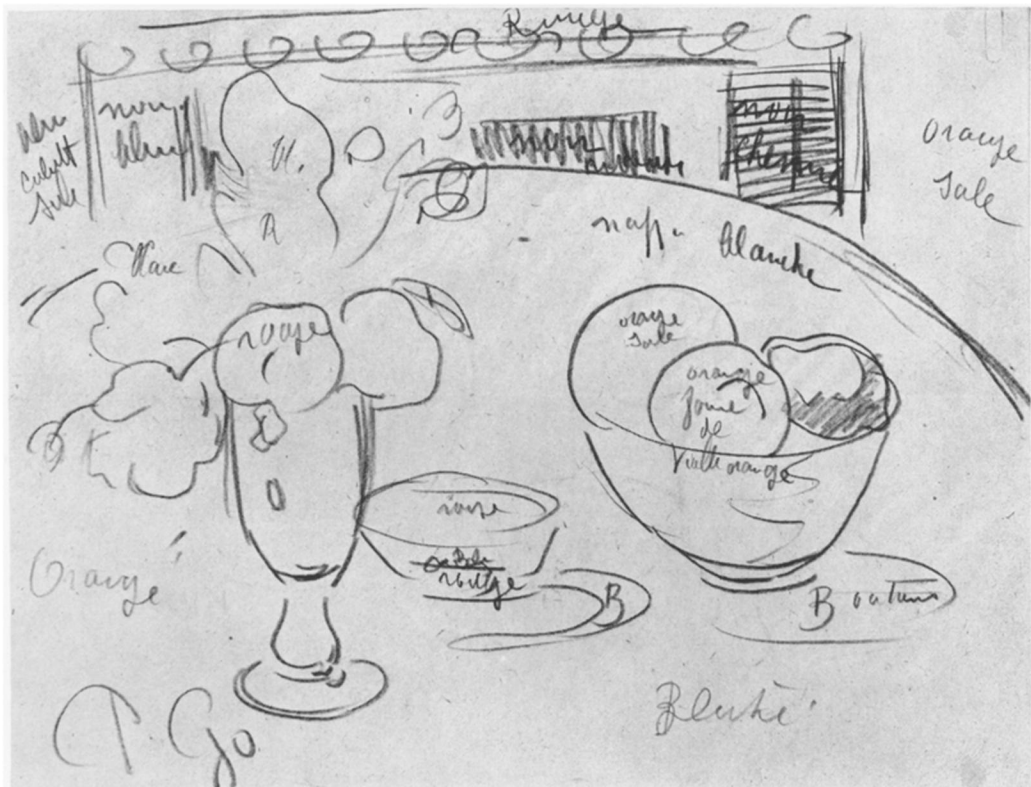
hand; that is, he had taken it for a sketch *after* the Gauguin, with color notes included, simply as a record of the work still in process.¹²

In 1935 Gauguin drawings were, as yet, of no great commercial value, and there had been very little study of what they were like in character or in style.¹³ A mistake of this kind is therefore understandable. Be that as it may, the drawing was tucked away for many years to come, and never reexamined with any eye to its true origin or authorship. Spaulding naturally assumed that the Durand-Ruel identification was correct. So he kept the drawing folded in the envelope in which he had received it.¹⁴ And when at his death in 1948 the painting itself passed to the Museum, this envelope came too, as one of the related documentary papers.

In March of this year, an interest in these same papers led the present writer to look critically at the drawing. Why, after all, should Loiseau have made such a copy? Its true author was immediately plain. In the first place it is signed 'P.Go' at the lower left, the abbreviated, 'synthetist' signature frequently used by Gauguin from about 1888 onwards.¹⁵ Then again the handwriting one sees in the color notes is unmistakably Gauguin's – large, curvaceous, and often difficult to read (particularly in a case like this, where the artist was writing notes to himself of a rapid, skeletal kind).¹⁶ And finally, there is the question of style. Just as one would expect with Gauguin, the composition is blocked out almost exclusively in terms of outlying contour. When one compares the sketch with the painting, section by section, one finds, quite typically, that the first stage of creation centered primarily on the definition of shape and contoural rhythm. What mattered at this point was the rhythmic relation between straight line and curve, or between one still-life object and the next.

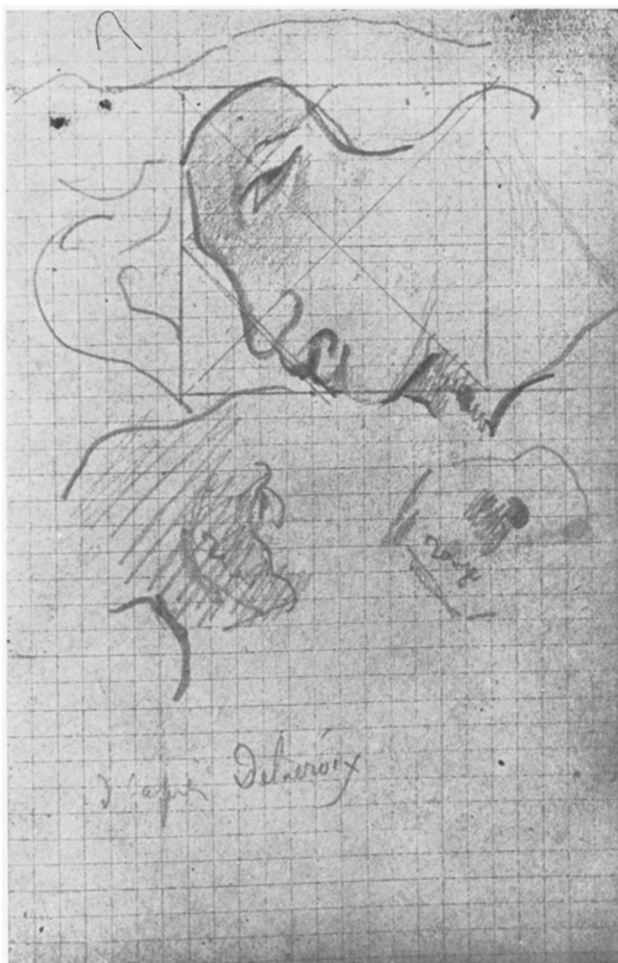
Gauguin was not yet interested in distinguishing between a flower and a leaf, or in differentiating one bloom from another in terms of volume or internal character. It was only when he turned to executing the *Still Life* on canvas – with the preliminary drawing as his compositional guide – that he entered into such elaborations and subtleties of internal treatment as appear, for example, inside the blooms or inside the glass vase. Furthermore, there is in the drawing very little use of the crayon to indicate shading. In the very few places where such ‘shading’ does occur, it is of a loose and rapid kind, not at all the sort of regular and systematic stroke-arrangement that suggests a concern for exact and careful modeling. Where the artist of the drawing did shade, it was to indicate a special depth of color, rather than gradations of darkness or the development of volume in the round. The function of his color notes was, in fact, to bypass local values and the specifics of light and shade in favor of a basic, overlying scheme of contrasts and harmonies. And, in the case of the shadows cast by the two bowls, it was enough for him to set down the essential contours of the shadow-areas, along with the basic color that he wanted inside these contours. This is exactly what one would expect of an artist whose actual paintings are characterized by large and bounded areas of highly concentrated color. All in all, therefore, there can be no doubt that the drawing does indeed represent Gauguin’s own study towards his *Still Life*.

2. PAUL GAUGUIN, *Still Life with Flowers and Fruit*, black crayon.
Bequest of John T. Spaulding. 48.1366



The discovery has a threefold value. First, it has provided the Museum's Department of Prints and Drawings with the first Gauguin drawing in its collection. Secondly, it gives a valuable indication of the way in which Gauguin worked when he was preparing a painting of this kind.¹⁷ And thirdly, there are very few, if any, studies by Gauguin that can be dated as precisely and definitively to the artist's last stay in Brittany, that of 1894.¹⁸ Important, therefore, is the way in which it pinpoints the character of Gauguin's draughtmanship at that time. He was drawing, one can now say, in a broader and looser style than he had earlier.¹⁹ Contours tend to be elliptical, and the whole technique more scraggy (as in the fringe at the top here, and similarly in the smaller flowers). Gauguin thinks now in terms of larger, and more preponderant, formal entities. The full rotundity of the fruits, and the full geometry of the vase, are formulated only in the final painting. In the drawing, it is enough that Gauguin should map out for each constituent image those

3. PAUL GAUGUIN, Sketch after Delacroix *Femmes d'Alger* (inscribed "d'après Delacroix"). Here dated ca. 1894. From an unpublished notebook in the Louvre (Album Walter, Cabinet des Dessins, RF 30.564, f.46 v.). Reproduced Courtesy of Cabinet des Dessins, Musée du Louvre.



sections of contour which are most crucial in terms of rhythm and placing. There is no longer so explicit an attention to the rhythmic continuity between one such section and the next, or to the merger between any one curve and its neighbors. Very few of the straight lines and curves, indeed, are elaborated or extended to the point where they fully complete themselves. This is true, for instance, of the arc of the tabletop, a major chord in the design. In the drawing, as compared to the painting, the fall of this arc to the left is only sketchily adumbrated. The stimulus of Gauguin's work in ceramics is especially evident in the shape he gives to the shadow of the central bowl. For this, if one casts it into three dimensions, is just the kind of shape one gets when one rolls out a piece of clay.²⁰

In sum, one has a key illustration here of the way in which Gauguin drew from nature towards 1895: his unfastidious verve in the use of line, his increased brio in the command of essentials (both reminiscent of Manet's later sketches). Last but not least, it is a pleasurable accident that such a discovery can still turn up in the most unexpected of places.

MARK ROSKILL
Department of Fine Arts
Harvard University

NOTES

1. *Acc. No. 48.546*. Oil on canvas on composition board, 16½ x 24½ in.
2. *Acc. No. 48.1366*. Black crayon on very thin paper, 9½ x 12¾ in. In perfect condition, apart from the two axial creases caused by the fact that it was carefully folded in four when it was first put into the envelope in which it was found.
3. Letter to William Molard of May 1894: *Lettres de Gauguin à Sa Femme et à Ses Amis*, ed. M. Malingue, Paris, (2nd ed.) 1946, letter CL, p. 258.
4. Born in Paris in 1865, he went north to paint at Pont-Aven in 1890/91, and it was then that he first met Gauguin (along with Bernard and Maufra). He must have kept in with the Pont-Aven group during the next few years. In 1895, however, he joined up with Impressionists (for the basic outline of his career, see Edouard-Joseph, *Dictionnaire Biographique des Artistes Contemporains, 1910-1930*, II, Paris, 1931, p. 401). From then on he made a practice of returning to all the major sites painted by the Impressionists, and recapitulating more or less exactly the themes and subjects of Monet, Sisley and Pissarro. His style and technique after 1900 derive fairly directly and consistently from Pissarro's work of the
5. 1890's. There is a canvas of his in the Rouen Museum, *Mortain sous La Neige*. Tothos of London held an exhibition of his work in 1962 (see M. Amaya, *Apollo*, LXXVI, May 1962, pp. 216-7), the Hammer Galleries of New York showed twenty-four of his canvases in January-February 1963 (pamphlet, with list of paintings and many small reproductions), and Durand-Ruel have just recently shown a large selection of works from their holdings (November-December 1963). Oddly enough, therefore, one can speak of a revived interest in Loiseau's own work right at this moment.
6. It was a general practice of Gauguin's to do still lifes as a fill-in, whenever physical disability or lack of ideas kept him from working at his fullest imaginative pitch. See especially his letter of April 1899 (*Lettres de Gauguin à Georges-Daniel de Monfried*, ed. V. Segalen, Paris, 1920, Letter III, p. 244): . . . "Quand je vais pouvoir repeindre, si je n'ai plus d'imagination je ferai quelques études de fleurs: Bref c'est pour moi un grand plaisir et j'en ai besoin, ma vie est si triste avec cette maladie qui annule toutes mes forces."
7. Letter of G. Loiseau to Durand-Ruel, dated April 15, 1921: . . . "Cette toile [i.e., the *Still Life*] m'a été donnée par

Gauguin à Pont-Aven en 1894./Cette nature morte a du être faite dans son lit, car il avait eu une jambe cassée quelque temps avant dans une bagarre avec des marins pêcheurs de Concarneau [a confirmation of Gauguin's own story as to how he came to be laid up]./J'allais le voir souvent et voyant que cette nature morte attirait mon regard à chaque visite, il finit par me dire 'cela vous intéresse, Loiseau?' 'Oui, lui dis-je, je trouve cette nature morte étrange et pourtant elle m'attire.'/ 'Je vous la donne, emportez-la, Loiseau.'/Voilà comment j'ai en ma possession depuis 27 ans une chose que je n'aurais pas cru aimer tant à la fin."

Durand-Ruel gave this letter to Spaulding when he bought the picture, and it is now in the files of the Department of Paintings.

7. Cf. the preceding note. This primary piece of evidence that the picture dates from 1894 is important, since at least two other datings have been put forward in the literature. Thus, the picture was dated 1893 when it was shown in New York in 1929 (Museum of Modern Art, *First Loan Exhibition*, November 1929, cat. no. 52). This erroneous date was then repeated in a number of later (and presumably dependent) catalogue entries: New York, Wildenstein Gallery, *Paul Gauguin*, March 20–April 18, 1936, cat. no. 27; Cambridge, Fogg Art Museum, *Paul Gauguin*, May 1–21, 1936, cat. no. 25; Santa Barbara, Museum of Art, *Fruit and Flowers in Painting*, August 12–September 14, 1958, cat. no. 38. Cf. also the date 1893 given by Charles Estienne, *Gauguin*, Geneva, 1953, p. 81. Again, M. Malingue dated the picture to 1886 (*Gauguin*, Paris, 1948, p. 106), but without giving any reason for doing so.
8. Cf. the letter of April 15, 1921, quoted in fn. 6. It begins: "Comme vous me le demandez [i.e., by way of obtaining a pedigree for the picture], je vous donne l'origine de la 'Nature Morte' de Gauguin."
9. The records of the Department of Paintings supply this date for the purchase by Spaulding.
10. I owe my knowledge of this sale (which took place on April 27; there was no catalogue printed) to a letter from M. Charles Durand-Ruel in answer to a query of mine.
11. Letter of May 11, 1936 from Edwin C. Holston (representative of Durand-Ruel in New York) to Spaulding: "... Loiseau died last year and among his effects was Loiseau's own sketch, which we enclose, of the Gauguin Still Life, with his color notes that was evidently made before the picture came into his possession./We have just received it from Paris and shall be pleased to have you accept it with our compliments as the sketch may add a little interest to the story." This letter also is in the files of the Department of Paintings.
12. See fn. 10. It is certainly quite possible that Gauguin gave Loiseau the drawing first, before the painting was completely finished, and only later decided to give him the painting itself.
13. It would appear that Gauguin drawings were already being forged quite early in this century. And a few of the genuine drawings had been reproduced in early books about the artist or early publications of his writings – but always in an incidental and unsystematic way. The first book to reproduce a sizable selection of drawings seems to have been Rewald's of 1938 (*J. Rewald, Gauguin*, Paris–London–New York, 1938), and the first exhibition to include a sizable group of them seems to have been the Paris exhibition of 1942 (*Gauguin – Aquarelles, Monotypes, Dessins – Tahiti, 1891–93*. Galerie Marcel Guiot, Paris, May–June 1942). But the first publication devoted exclusively to Gauguin's drawings came only six years ago (*J. Rewald, Gauguin Drawings*, New York–London, 1958).
14. A note in Spaulding's hand on the outside of the envelope corresponds to what he had been told by Holston: "Drawing made by Gustave Loiseau with color notes of my 'Still Life' painting by Gauguin which was given to Loiseau by Gauguin after he had painted it in Pont Aven Brittany." And the very condition of the drawing (see fn. 2) suggests that it cannot have been handled very much, or often withdrawn from the envelope, during the years in question.
15. The earliest painting signed in this way would seem to be *Portrait of Mme. Roulin* from the very end of 1888, now in the City Art Museum, St. Louis. The practice of signing letters 'P.Go' is likewise traceable back to the very end of 1888, and

becomes rather frequent during 1889: *Lettres*, ed. Malingue, LXXIV (dated November 13, 1888); LXXVII (actually of April 1889); LXXXIII; LXXXVI–VII. Ceramics are another matter; it is there that the practice evidently originated, perhaps as early as 1885.

It is interesting that the letter to Molard of May 1894 which must have been roughly contemporary with the *Still Life* drawing (see fn. 3) is itself signed in this way.

16. My reading of the color notes is as follows (with queries to indicate uncertainties): top left, “bleu cobalt sale”/“noir bleu”/“blanc”; top right, “Rouge” / “noir —” (second word illegible)/“noir chenué”/“orange sale”/(below) “nappe blanche”; lower left, “orange”/“rouge”; center, “rouge”/“B” (i.e., bleu)/“or (i.e., orange) sale”(?)/“rouge”/“B” (i.e., bleu); lower right, “orange sale”/“orange”/“jaune(?) de vieille orange”/“B (i.e., bleu) nature”(?)/“Bleuté”(?).

Gauguin’s inclusion of these color notes raises the question of whether this is in fact a preliminary drawing, or whether it could be a drawing *after* the painting. Absolute certainty is impossible here, but there are good arguments to support its identification as a preparatory sketch. One may assume that the studies included in Gauguin’s notebooks are all preliminary, in the sense that they were either sketched from life, or represent first ideas towards paintings (which sometimes came into being and sometimes did not). Granted this, one can compare the Boston drawing with two of the studies which Gauguin made at Arles in 1888, both of which contain similar color notes: *Le Carnet de Paul Gauguin*, ed. R. Huyghe, Paris, 1952, p. 37, study of a chair; p. 65, study for a section of a landscape. Similarly, in the notebook Gauguin used on his first trip to Tahiti (*Carnet de Tahiti*, ed. B.

Dorival, Paris, 1954) there are four landscape studies with accompanying color notes; see ff. 24r, 45r, 55r, 76v. Many of Gauguin’s larger and more finished drawings on independent sheets are more problematic in the sense that they could be after the corresponding paintings. See, for instance, the drawings of Breton girls grouped together and discussed by M. Bodelsen, “The Missing Link in Gauguin’s Cloisonism,” *Gazette des Beaux Arts*, LIII,

May–June 1959, pp. 329–44; *Gauguin’s Ceramics*, London, 1964, pp. 26ff., 165–7. M. Bodelsen classes all of these as preliminary drawings of 1886, but I am doubtful about his assumption. One moves to somewhat firmer ground in the case of a group of water colors which are, in my view, all of 1889 and all dependent on the corresponding treatments in oil: Rewald, *Gauguin Drawings*, London–New York, 1958, Nos. 16–17, 18, 20, 21. All of these sheets seem to represent preliminary steps towards etchings, some of which were executed and some not (see Rewald’s notes for the corresponding etchings and oils). One can provisionally say on the basis of these water colors that, when Gauguin worked from a painting which already existed, he tended to adhere very closely to the figuration which he had established in the painting, and also to simplify, in a reductive way, the organization of shapes and contours which he had evolved there. This is not the case in the Boston drawing. A comparison between the latter and Gauguin’s preparatory pencil study for the *Yellow Christ* (Rewald No. 19) is much more suggestive in terms of the rapid, inventive way in which Gauguin adjusts the individual parts to one another. Such comparisons seem to reinforce the argument that the *Still Life* drawing was indeed preliminary.

17. In the painting, the mantel fringe at the top is brought forward and the vase of flowers is moved slightly to the right, so that it is now seen absolutely frontally instead of in slight profile. The result of these changes is that the general space of the picture is flattened much further. For instance, the sense of intervening space and atmosphere one had in the relationship between flowers and fringe in the drawing is now stringently eliminated.
18. Rewald, *Gauguin Drawings*, Pl. 89, illustrates a drawing of *Two Breton Women Harvesting* and dates it to 1889–90 or 1894. He favors the latter date, however, on the basis of the study of children found on the back of the same sheet; and comparison with the present drawing tends to support this view. There is in the Louvre a small, unpublished notebook of Gauguin’s (Album Walters, RF 30.564) with many sketches in it which I was

- already inclined to date to 1894; here too the *Still Life* drawing tends to support such a dating, since technique and style are often closely similar. (Cf. Fig. 3.)
19. A particularly useful body of comparative material, from five to six years earlier in Gauguin's career, is to be found in the notebook published by Huyghe (*Le Carnet de Paul Gauguin*, Paris, 1952). This notebook contains a number of studies from life which undoubtedly served as the basis for current paintings of Gauguin's. One half of it was used at Arles in the closing months of 1888; the other half, contrary to Huyghe's assertion, represents studies made in Brittany the following year (and possibly 1890 as well). The notebook which Gauguin used on his first trip to Tahiti (*P. Gauguin-Carnet de Tahiti*, ed. B. Dorival, Paris, 1954) provides an intermediate stylistic term between the 1888-9 studies and the *Still Life* drawing.
 20. Gauguin did in fact sculpt his ceramics in this particular way. See M. Bodelsen, *Gauguin Ceramics in Danish Collections*, Copenhagen, 1960, p. 6: "[The jugs] are not thrown on a potter's wheel, but made up of bands of clay in the so-called 'coiling' technique."