

Two Woodcuts by Paul Gauguin

Author(s): Carl O. Schniewind and Paul Gauguin

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TWO WOODCUTS BY PAUL GAUGUIN

TWO important and highly significant woodcuts by Paul Gauguin have recently been added to the Art Institute's print collection. They not only show that he was a master of wood-block printing but offer an opportunity to speculate on his reasons for modifying his technique completely in the later printings. The woodcuts are known by the Tahitian titles *Noa Noa*¹ and *Te Faruru*,² and represent the first and second states respectively of a number of consecutive states.

In a series of large compositions Gauguin experimented in the treatment of hard, dense boxwood blocks, the wood engraver's classic material. The wood engraver incised his *white* lines into the block with the metal engraver's instrument, the burin. Because of the hardness of the material, he had comparatively little freedom in engraving the block. A certain amount of stiffness and regularity was inevitable in this combination of hard wood and burin. Gauguin attempted a totally different approach: instead of engraving or digging deep lines into the block he scratched a fine weave of delicate lines into the surface with a sharp needle or burin point. Essentially he used a sort of drypoint technique throughout the block which he combined with deeply incised lines and surfaces wherever he sought sharp contrasts of light and shade. The printing of these fine "drypoint" lines proved to be most difficult since they were apt to become clogged up almost entirely in the process of inking the block. Exceptional care in inking and printing might have overcome this difficulty. These large woodblocks were to be used for a book or album and therefore to be printed in an edition of a certain size. He may well have feared a complete failure of the planned edition because the routine wood-engraving printer might not

only lack skill but also the understanding of the artist's intentions. Every one of the blocks of this set was completely reworked with a narrow wood sculptor's gouge. With this instrument the delicate "drypoint" linework was almost entirely covered with heavy white flicks or crosshatchings. An attempt to print the reworked blocks in color with the help of stencils was made by Gauguin's painter friend, Louis Roy. When comparing Roy's impressions with his own, Gauguin, who had printed some in color and touched others with water color, must have been disappointed. It is likely that the reworking of the blocks which entirely changed their aspect was the reason for his abandonment of the projected publication.

When Gauguin's son, Pola, undertook to print an edition of one hundred impressions of the blocks in 1921, he took particular care to print as much of Gauguin's fine work as remained after the reworking.

CARL O. SCHNIEWIND



NOA NOA, WOODCUT, BY PAUL GAUGUIN (FRENCH, 1848-1903). AT THE LEFT, FIRST STATE, AT THE RIGHT, SECTION OF FINAL STATE. PURCHASED FROM THE PRINT AND DRAWING CLUB FUND.

¹ Sheet 14 x 8 inches (35.6 x 20.3 cm.). Block cut in Tahiti in 1893; printed in Paris in 1894. Purchased from the Print and Drawing Club Fund.

² Sheet 14 x 8 inches (35.6 x 20.3 cm.). Block cut in Tahiti in 1893; printed in Paris in 1894. Purchased from the Joseph Brooks Fair Fund.