

Paul Gauguin

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Source: *Bulletin of the Art Institute of Chicago (1907-1951)*, Vol. 43, No. 3 (Sep. 15, 1949), pp. 43-51

Published by: The Art Institute of Chicago

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4111888>

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# BULLETIN

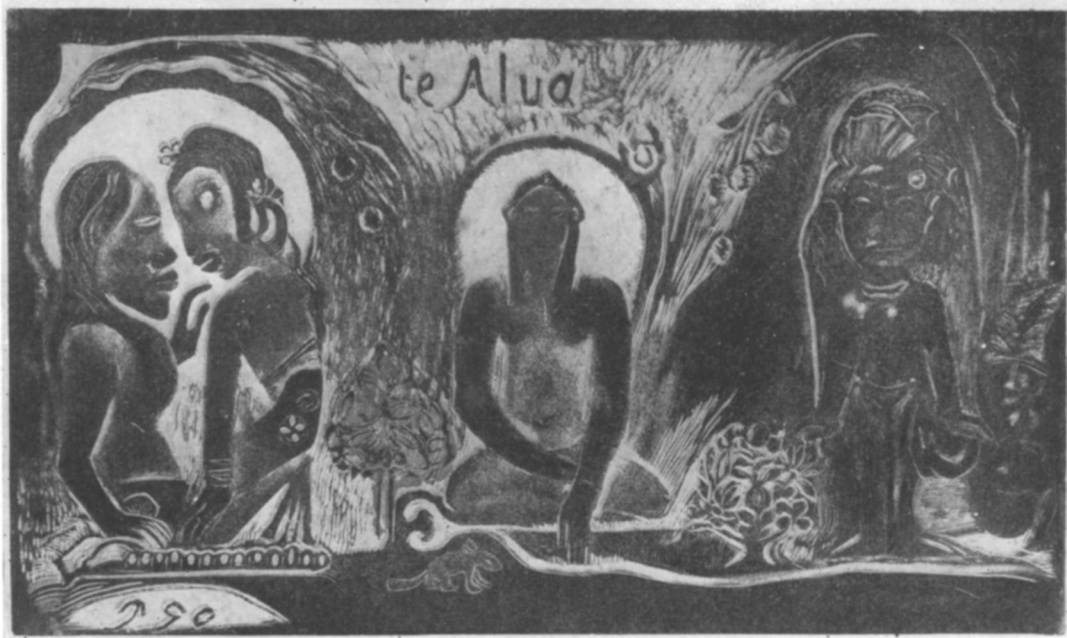
THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO



*Te Atua, The Gods. Woodcut in two colors from two states by Gauguin*

VOLUME XLIII, NUMBER 3

SEPTEMBER 15, 1949



*Te Atua, The Gods. Woodcut by Gauguin. Larger plate*

## PAUL GAUGUIN

Paul Gauguin's reputation is firmly established as one of the most prominent painters of the Post-Impressionist period in French art. His name has become synonymous with exotic, tropical subjects. He is the European who, fleeing from its overdeveloped culture and the complicity and artificiality of its life, sought simplicity by a desperate attempt to identify himself with the life of the Polynesian natives of Tahiti and the Marquesas Islands. Although the natives loved him, he remained to a degree as much an outsider of their society as he was an outsider of European society. The attempted transition from one kind of life to another was not easy for this restless, querulous Frenchman and indeed the attempt, in final analysis, probably cost him his life.

His sensitive, unstable nature was as unadapted to the economic and social intricacies of European life as it was to the low moral standards of a colonial bureaucracy with its disastrous effects on the natives for whose very existence he became a self-appointed, vigorous, yet hopelessly ineffective, crusader. He dreamed of a life in which he would be free of all economic worries, surrounded by almost godlike natives, where he could devote his energies entirely to being an artist. There he thought he could avoid the necessity of selling his work to a public which did not understand him, yet he still sought recognition in far away Europe. The colonial regime introduced many economic problems of European living into a land which, if left alone, would have been self

sufficient. Finding himself confronted with some of the same problems in the Pacific as he had in Europe, Gauguin's life ended on a note of bitter and complete frustration.

Paul Gauguin was born in Paris in 1848 on June 7. Biographically his life may roughly be reviewed in four principal periods. The first, his formative years when, after having established himself as a successful stockbroker, he decided at the comparatively late age of thirty-two or three to enter upon an artist's career. He spent much of this time in Normandy and the Bretagne. Some of his earliest memories were of Peru where he stayed with his mother when he was a child and these memories encouraged, perhaps, his innate restlessness. He decided to go to Martinique, a French possession on the East coast of the Americas. In April, 1887, he left France and after several months of intensive work, stimulated by the novelty of his surroundings, returned to Paris towards the end of the same year. Although ill, he then spent a short period during which he was completely happy. His early work, leaning at first towards that of the Impressionists, began to show a radical departure from the then dominating school of French painting. Relying less and less on effects of light and problems of changing forms due to changing light, he became more engrossed in the immediate relationship of one form to another, in the pattern of a painted surface. This interest led him quite naturally to experiments with the creation of three dimensional forms.

Among the group of artists whom he joined at Pont Aven in Brittany was a ceramist. Gauguin applied himself to various ceramic techniques and, while the results were anything but satisfactory in themselves, they had a lasting influence on him. They led him more and more to express himself through large simplified forms which, by their generalization, took on the meaning of a language of symbols.

Another more powerful influence was the crude but humanly moving religious sculpture which was scattered throughout the Bretagne. It was the remainder of a Romanesque folk art which still held its spell over the sturdy seafaring people of that semi-isolated peninsula. As church sculpture and particularly as ancient wayside shrines these simplified hardy pieces of carved stone made a deep impression on Gauguin in his formative years. Much later, during his second and final stay in Tahiti, the Breton "Calvary" was to appear repeatedly in his paintings and prints.

In these unsophisticated surroundings, away from Paris, a group of artists formed a new movement in French art, known as the School of Pont Aven, or as the "Symbolists". Having become a leader of this school, Gauguin wanted to bring a new message to the artistic circles of Paris. Attempts at exhibitions in official Salons chiefly failed and the critics attacked him mercilessly. Gauguin's small savings were soon consumed and his wife returned to her native Denmark together with his children. Poverty stricken and discouraged, his mind turned to the life of those natives who were beyond the orbit of European culture. In April, 1891, he left for Tahiti where he lived and worked until September, 1893.

This first Tahitian trip initiated the second and clearly decisive period in Gauguin's life. The lessons he had learned in Brittany, the symbolic tendencies developed in his art, fell upon fruitful and stimulating ground in the new tropical surroundings of Tahiti. He felt that at last he had found an environment and mode of existence that would lead him away from the intricate European life to a new and simple one. He seemed to practice what the great eighteenth century French philosopher, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, had preached a century before.

After Martinique. Gauguin's colors became

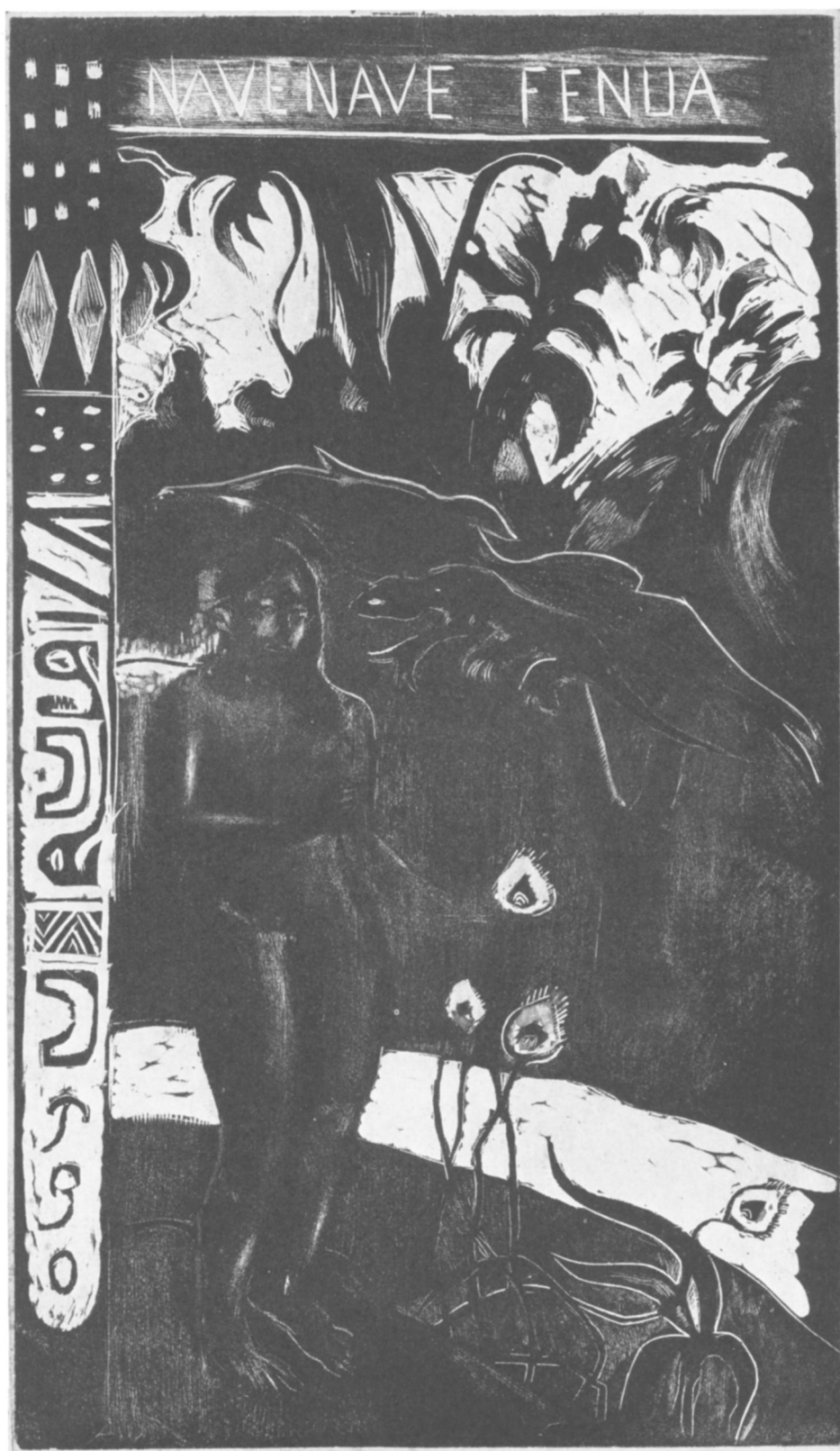
Published quarterly September 15, November 15, February 1, April 1, by The Art Institute of Chicago at 1009 Sloan Street, Crawfordsville, Indiana. Correspondence pertaining to subscription may be sent to 1009 Sloan Street, Crawfordsville, Indiana, or to the Chicago Office at Adams Street and Michigan Avenue. Entered as second class matter January 17, 1918, at the Post Office at Crawfordsville, Indiana, under the Act of August 24, 1912. Acceptance for mailing at special rate of postage provided for in section 1103, Act of October 3, 1917, authorized on June 28, 1918. Subscription for the *Bulletin* included in the membership fee: otherwise \$1.00 per year. Volume XLIII, Number 3.



*Mahana Atua, Nourishment for the Gods. Woodcut by Gauguin*



*Mahana No Atua, The Day of the Gods. Oil painting by Gauguin*



*Nave Nave Fenua, Wonderful Earth. Woodcut by Gauguin*

richer, warmer, but in Tahiti his whole style underwent a radical change. Subject matter, composition and color were altered completely. The lessons learned from the simple peasant art of Brittany were transformed into what seemed a Tahitian idiom to the European. The artist increasingly devoted his time to carving simple images in wood, probably inspired by Tahitian crafts. On his return from Tahiti in September, 1893, he became greatly preoccupied with printing from wood. This was the beginning of a technique in which he produced some of his best work. The immediate reason may have been a fractured bone in his foot; he became embroiled in a street affair with two sailors in Brittany and there was a brawl. Gauguin was laid up for some time and during his convalescence, it seems, he began his woodcuts. He cut a series of twelve wood blocks, all of the same size and all of Tahitian subjects, many with Tahitian titles. Not too conversant with print techniques, the making of woodcuts caused him considerable trouble. Until this time his only printed work consisted of two etchings (coached by artists of the Pont Aven group) and a series of eleven zincographs (lithographs on zinc).

In his woodcuts, however, Gauguin created something that was quite unique. The simple, dramatic and mystic compositions expressed his deep compassion for the Tahitian natives. Their primitive religious philosophy, the haunting, terrifying spirits which come to them during the mysterious tropical nights and their impersonal, cruel gods were interpreted by Gauguin with profound understanding, though he was an outsider. This new subject matter demanded a new kind of technique to which Gauguin refers with conscious pride. No one but he himself was able to print these blocks. Only a very few impressions were taken by the artist. Aside from several printed colors he added slight touches of color by hand until he achieved a perfect harmony of printed color and color wash. He evidently expected that once such a proof was created as a sample, a skillful printer could repeat the effects in

large quantity. In addition to the set of twelve woodcuts mentioned above he made, before returning to Tahiti, eleven others, varying in size. Although one is quite large, the others are smaller and, on the whole, less ambitious in concept, but all of them show an extraordinary concentration of Gauguin's talent. He experimented continuously with the surface texture of the wood, with various methods of applying ink to the block and with the application of varying pressure in pulling the proofs. Thus he compiled a small group of impressions which are absolutely unique in the history of printmaking. Before leaving for Tahiti in 1895 he entrusted twenty-one of the most precious proofs of this series, together with a number of paintings and drawings, to a friend, Francesco Durrio, a Spanish ceramist who lived in Paris. Around 1931, long after Gauguin's death, this collection was sold to a Swiss collector. The group remained in Switzerland until recently, when the Art Institute was able to acquire the entire lot of prints for the Buckingham Collection. All but two woodcuts of the period between the two Tahitian trips are represented in the Durrio group. They were shown publicly only once during all these years—in a comprehensive retrospective exhibition of Gauguin's work at Basle in 1931.

Before the artist returned to Tahiti most of the twelve blocks were reprinted in color by an inexperienced painter-friend, Louis Roy. The results were completely unsatisfactory and they are but a shadow of the artist's own impressions. A second attempt to reprint them, possibly with more understanding, was made by the artist's son, Pola Gauguin. These were issued in Copenhagen in 1921. Realizing that only his father could produce the intricate color effects he aimed to achieve, Pola Gauguin's edition is in black and white only. The compositions print clearly and are without the disturbing heavy color areas added by Louis Roy through a stencil process.

Disappointed by the inert, disinterested reaction to his passionate representation of a world of unspoiled, natural freedom, Gauguin de-





*Te Po, The Great Night. Woodcut by Gauguin*

*L'Univers est crée, The Creation of the Universe. Woodcut by Gauguin*







*Tahitian Idol. Woodcut by Gauguin*

cided to withdraw from the society which so little understood his thinking and his art. The third phase of his life ended with his return to Tahiti in 1895, and the fourth and final epoch of his life began and finally ended in total misery and desperation. He died in 1903.

During these last eight years Gauguin painted, carved and produced a new kind of monotype and also made woodcuts. In the latter he abandoned color entirely. This may have been due partly to the disappointment he experienced in trying to have his blocks printed in color after the first Tahitian trip or to the difficulty of obtaining proper materials to realize his ambitious plans. In many of these late woodcuts, however, he attained a greatness of conception which he hardly surpassed in any other technique. He generalized more and more; every figure, tree or animal

took on symbolic significance. Having learned to express himself in symbols, various compositions will be found to contain the same symbol or character—as in Egyptian writing, for instance. They are interchangeable with the changing meaning of a composition. This is not due to a lack of imagination; it is the logical sequence of an art that has sought to find a common denominator for one and the same human situation, although it may occur in changing surroundings.

Gauguin returned to Tahiti with his health completely undermined. The misery of his existence in France followed him to the land of his dreams. In the colonial authorities he saw incorporated all of the evil which had made him suffer and which persecuted him throughout his life in his native country. He began to publish a little news sheet, the purpose of which was to expose the cynical corruption of the governing authorities of the islands. He called it "*Le Sourire*". To print it he used a primitive mimeographing machine and each number showed the title with a new woodcut headpiece.

Becoming more and more embroiled with the authorities, he left Tahiti for one of the nearby islands of the Marquesas group. Physically he was in hopeless shape. His eyesight had become affected. This is revealed in his latest woodcuts. The symbols of his invention, so clear cut in his earlier work, appear confused, unsharp; the compositions as a whole show gradual disintegration.

He died alone, unattended, completely exhausted mentally and physically. The tragedy of his life seemed to follow him even after death. Some of his best works, his woodcuts, are so few and rare that very few people may ever come to realize his true stature.

The acquisition of the woodcuts by the Art Institute will make them available to many people who otherwise might never have seen them. Perhaps it will reveal that Gauguin, who was one of the greatest painters at the turn of the century, was also one of the greatest graphic artists of all time.

CARL O. SCHNIEWIND

*Noa, Noa, Enraptured. Woodcut by Gauguin. First state, printed on parchment*



*Noa, Noa, Enraptured. Woodcut by Gauguin. Second state, printed in color*

