Earthly Paradise

1888

Paul Gauguin (French, 1848–1903)
Emile Bernard (French, 1868–1941)

Painted pine and oak; 101 x 120 x 60.5 cm (39 3/4 x 47 1/4 x 23 7/8 in.)

Inscribed and dated: Paul Gauguin (bottom center); Emile Bernard (bottom center); 1888 (bottom left)

THROUGH PRIOR GIFT OF HENRY MORGAN, ANN C. MORGAN, MEYER WASSER, AND RUTH G. WASSER; RESTRICTED GIFT OF EDWARD M. BLAIR.

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This carved, painted cabinet, which resulted from the creative collaboration and competition between the Post-Impressionists Paul Gauguin and Emile Bernard, is a unique testament to the era’s reevaluation of easel painting. By August 1888, when the forty-one-year-old Gauguin joined the much younger Bernard in Pont-Aven, a village on the coast of Brittany, both artists were already experimenting with nonillusionistic space, flat areas of color, and heavy outlines inspired by earlier decorative traditions such as enamel work, mosaics, and stained glass windows. Not surprisingly, given that they desired to integrate art into everyday life, the pair decided to design a piece of furniture on which they could test out their new ideas. Gauguin, who had been sculpting in wood for over a decade, no doubt instigated the project, lending the younger artist tools and teaching him to carve. Bernard, for his part, was quick to catch on, using the carved line in the same way that he had used outlined and interlocking forms in his paintings. This style is known as cloisonnism, and Gauguin was also assimilating it into his own work.1

On first viewing, Earthly Paradise, a remarkable fusion of painting and sculpture, resembles the heavily carved and polychromed furniture of Brittany. However, its unconventional shape and proportions suggest that it is not a traditional Breton piece but rather an artist-designed work. Gauguin and Bernard carved and painted separate panels that were ultimately pieced together by a furniture maker. Sadly, no correspondence exists to elucidate the details of the cabinet’s genesis. The artists must have agreed upon the design, palette, and placement of all the panels, with Gauguin taking on at least three of the five. It is clear that Bernard carved the panel at left because the tightly stacked figures closely resemble the medievalizing woodcuts he began making a few months later.2 Three of the five panels include motifs—geese, goats, flowering trees, and men and women in traditional costume—that appear in their most important canvases from this same summer: Gauguin’s Vision after the Sermon (National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh) and Bernard’s Bretons in a Prairie (private collection, France). In the rightmost vertical panel, however, Gauguin signaled his other identity as a painter of the tropics with figures drawn from his trip to Martinique the previous year. It remains uncertain which artist created the bottom panel with the shallow figures of Adam and Eve, which no doubt gave the work its title.

Supplementing the museum’s rich collection of Gauguin’s paintings and works on paper, Earthly Paradise reveals another aspect of his practice and illuminates the role that he and his contemporaries played in reviving the decorative arts. It also reminds viewers of the serial nature of his collaborations: the cabinet would have been completed by October 21, 1888, when Gauguin left Pont Aven for the southern French town of Arles, where he began another competitive, highly productive relationship with Vincent van Gogh.

GLORIA GROOM

Earthly Paradise, pp. 64–65 1. The cabinet is probably the “sculpture” that Bernard’s sister Madelaine referred to in a letter she wrote him shortly after leaving Pont-Aven. See Belinda Thomson, Gauguin’s Vision, exh. cat. (National Galleries of Scotland, 2005), p. 59. It is unclear whether Bernard and Gauguin embarked on the cabinet as a personal exercise in painterly carving or whether it was a commissioned project. 2. Bernard’s choice of imagery is very close to motifs in the woodcuts he was working on at this time, and it was on the cabinet as a personal exercise in painterly carving or whether it was a commissioned project. 2. Bernard’s choice of imagery is very close to motifs in the woodcuts he was working on at this time, and it was on the cabinet as a personal exercise in painterly carving or whether it was a commissioned project.

Stilleben mit einem Vogel (transparent); see Ozenfant (above), p. 47. The formal similarities between the subject matter of Cahun’s Object and of this photograph of a scientific specimen—one of the “natural objects” included in the 1936 exhibition—are noteworthy. 8. I would like to thank Art Institute curator Stephanie D’Alessandro for sharing her research on this piece, and for providing guidance during the writing of this entry.

