

Earthly Paradise

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# 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 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 47 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 23 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> 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,  
2007.247

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.<sup>1</sup>

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.<sup>2</sup> 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.

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3. For more on this collection, see Janusz A. Ostrowski, "Karol Lanckoronski (1848–1933)—Polish Connoisseur and Friend of Art," *Studies in Ancient Art and Civilization* 6 (1993), esp. pp. 60–64; Laurie Stein, appendix A, Apr. 25 and Sept. 19, 2008, curatorial files, Department of Medieval to Modern European Painting and Sculpture.

#### **Earthy Paradise, pp. 64–65**

1. The cabinet is probably the "sculpture" that Bernard's sister Madeline 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 he who taught Gauguin lithography. Both men repeated similar subjects in the zincographs they exhibited at the Café Volpini on the grounds of the 1889 Universal Exposition in Paris, where their work influenced the next generation of artists, including the Nabis.

#### **Frog-Man (Le Grenouillard), pp. 66–67**

1. Philippe Thiébaud "A propos d'un groupe cérmiqueu de Jean Carriès: *Le Grenouillard*," *La revue du Louvre*, (1982), p. 126 nn. 57–58.

2. Jean-Joseph Carriès, as quoted and translated in Charles Janoray, *Symbolism and the Grotesque: The Fantastical Creatures of Carriès and Ringel d'Illyzach and Other Artists* (Charles Janoray, 2006), p. 4.

#### **Still Life Filled with Space, pp. 68–69**

1. Amédée Ozenfant and Charles-Édouard Jeanneret, *Après le cubisme* (Édition des Commentaires, 1918), p. 11; English translation from Carol S. Eliel, *L'Esprit nouveau: Purism in Paris, 1918–1925*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles County Museum of Art/Abrams, 2001), p. 132.

2. Ozenfant and Jeanneret (note 1), p. 59; English translation from Eliel (note 1), p. 165. Although Le Corbusier contended that his first painting was *La Cheminée* (1918; Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris), a work informed by the Purist aesthetic, he executed a few earlier paintings and watercolors that were largely informed by the work of Paul Cézanne as well as by Cubism, Fauvism, Art Nouveau, and even German Expressionism. See Françoise Ducros, "From Art Nouveau to Purism: Le Corbusier and Painting," in *Le Corbusier Before Le Corbusier: Applied Arts, Architecture, Painting, Photography 1907–1922*, ed. Stanislaus von Moos and Arthur Rüegg, exh. cat. (Yale University Press/Bard Graduate Center/Langmatt Museum, 2002), p. 133.

3. Le Corbusier was so involved with his collaborations with Ozenfant between 1918 and 1922 that he did not build anything, and one of the few architectural projects he did execute between 1922 and 1925 was a studio residence for Ozenfant; Eliel (note 1), pp. 22–23.

4. Naima Jornod and Jean-Pierre Jornod include a second title for the work, *Nature morte limpide* (*Transparent*

*Still Life*); see *Le Corbusier (Charles Edouard Jeanneret): Catalogue raisonné de l'oeuvre peint*, vol. 1 (Skira, 2005), cat. 43, pp. 387–88.

5. Eliel (note 1), p. 25.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 54.

#### **Object, pp. 70–71**

1. Since Cahun's work was rediscovered in the 1980s, it has been the subject of much scholarship, including François Leperlier, *Claude Cahun, l'écart et la métamorphose* (Jean-Michel Place, 1992); Louise Downie, ed., *Don't Kiss Me: The Art of Claude Cahun and Marcel Moore* (Tate Publishing/Jersey Heritage Trust, 2006); and Gen Doy, *Claude Cahun: A Sensual Politics of Photography* (I. B. Tauris, 2007).

2. Cahun's theatrical self-portraits have often been heralded as precursors to the work of recent photographers including Nan Goldin and Cindy Sherman. Cahun also experimented with other artistic media, often in collaboration with her lifelong partner Suzanne Malherbe (known as Marcel Moore). Born in Nantes, Cahun settled in Paris with Moore in the early 1920s. In 1938 they relocated to the island of Jersey, where, after the outbreak of World War II and the invasion of German troops, they engaged in—and were arrested for—anti-war activities.

3. The 1936 exhibition catalogue lists only two objects by Cahun: *Un air de famille* and *Souris valseuses*. Descriptions of these works can be found in Doy (note 1), p. 124. The third untitled and uncatalogued piece—the one that is the subject of this entry—is visible in an installation photograph of the 1936 exhibition and was first identified as Cahun's in the 1986 Zabriskie Gallery exhibition catalogue, *1936 Surrealism*. See Steven Harris, *Surrealist Art and Thought in the 1930s: Art, Politics, and Psyche* (Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 163, 281 n. 44.

4. Some of the hair is human; the rest is either artificial or from an animal.

5. As detailed in Harris (note 3) pp. 168–73, this phrase unites two unrelated sources—the first a well-known slogan from France's left-wing Popular Front, and the second a line printed on Belgian currency. With this conflated text, Cahun referenced contemporary politics and pointed an accusatory finger at the supposed revolutionary leaders of France.

6. A *bilboquet* is a toy with a ball on a string attached to a cup or spike. Cahun's *Object* probably also references Georges Bataille's novel *Histoire de l'Oeil* (1928), which details the sexual exploits and perversions of two young lovers. Harris (note 3), among others, has identified these various iconographical sources. For a psychoanalytical reading of Cahun's *Object*, see Harris (note 3), pp. 163–73.

7. Claude Cahun, "Prenez garde aux objets domestiques," *Cahiers d'Art* 11 (1936), p. 46. This essay was included in a special issue of *Cahiers d'Art* that coincided with the 1936 *Surrealist Exposition of Objects*. For this English translation and a discussion of the essay, see Harris (note 3), pp. 160–63, 178–80. Cahun's article is interrupted by a full-page photograph (attributed to Willy Eggarter) of a

disembodied hand holding a large egg from the ostrich-like epiornis; see Cahun (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.

#### **Self-Portrait with Camera, pp. 72–73**

1. "Mr. Steichen's Pictures," *Photographic Art Journal* 2, 14 (London, Apr. 15, 1902), pp. 27–28.

2. Edward Steichen, "291," *Camera Work* 47 (Jan. 1915), p. 65.

#### **Satiric Dancer, pp. 74–75**

1. Sarah Greenough, "To Become a Virgin Again," in Sarah Greenough, Robert Gurbo, and Sarah Kennel, *André Kertész*, exh. cat. (National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., 2005), p. 67.

2. Paul Dermée, "Frère voyant [Brother Seeing-Eye]," 1927, published in *Photo-Kertész Exposition*, exh. cat. (Galerie Au Sacre du Printemps, 1928); repr. in French and English in *Stranger to Paris: Au Sacre du Printemps Galerie*, 1927 (Jane Corkin Gallery, 1992), p. 15 (translation modified).

3. Hermann Ungar, "Kleine Lügen: Dialog zwischen Eheleuten," *Die Dame* (Oct. 1927), p. 2. It is possible that the photograph, which Kertész dated to 1926, was created only in 1927, and perhaps even under the impulse of Ungar's text. Beóthy's sculpture is dated 1927 by his heirs; see [www.istvanbeothy.fr](http://www.istvanbeothy.fr) (site accessed July 2009). The sculptor repaid Kertész's interest with his own homage to the photographer, in an etching that is also dated 1927; see Greenough, Gurbo, and Kennel (note 1), p. 69. Brassai's widow also recalled in a conversation with David Travis that the photograph was from 1927; "A. K. From Paris to New York," 1984–85, exhibition files, box 5, folder marked "Xerox Images," Art Institute of Chicago Archives.

4. See, for example, annual price lists from 1976 and 1980 to 1982; "André Kertész," artist files, folder 2, Department of Photography.

#### **Study for "Let's Return the Country's Coal Debt" and Worker Men and Women: Everyone Vote in the Soviet Elections, pp. 76–77**

1. Maria Gough provides a detailed historical review of the theoretical debates that gave rise to Constructivism in 1920 and 1921; see *The Artist as Producer: Russian Constructivism in Revolution* (University of California Press, 2005).

2. Cited as paraphrase in Margarita Tupitsyn, *Gustav Klutskis and Valentina Kulagina: Photography and Montage after Constructivism* (International Center of Photography/Steidl, 2004), p. 37.

#### **Near Jackson, Mississippi, pp. 78–79**

1. Janet Malcolm, "Colór," *New Yorker* 53, 34 (Oct. 10, 1977), p. 107. Malcolm wrote that, in comparison to Photorealist paintings, artistic color photography looked "insignificant, dull, even tacky, on the wall." *Ibid.*, pp. 107–08.