Recto: Portrait of Charles Laval and Other Sketches, 1887
Verso: Figure Studies from Martinique, 1887
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Paul Gauguin's fascination with exotic cultures preceded his decision to pursue a career as an artist and probably originated in early-childhood memories of living in Lima, Peru. At the age of seventeen, he enlisted in the French merchant marines and spent the next three years traveling the world, visiting ports from Rio de Janeiro to the Arctic Circle. In his early twenties, Gauguin briefly experienced the more settled life of a stockbroker in Paris, marrying and starting a family. Self-taught, he began painting and drawing as a form of recreation, making many intimate studies of his wife and their children. At this time, he initiated a lifelong practice of sketching as a means of penetrating the character of a subject.

When the stock market collapsed in January 1882, Gauguin found himself unemployed. Although freer to pursue his art, he was unable to support his wife and children, who took refuge with her relatives in Copenhagen. By the summer of 1886, desperate to live economically, he journeyed to Brittany to join the artist’s colony at Pont-Aven, where he befriended the painter Charles Laval. His many drawings and sketchbook pages from this period explore the distinctive costumes and traditions of this poor and isolated region of France. In the spring of 1887, Gauguin and Laval left France in search of warmer and more exotic climes; Gauguin wrote that he hoped to “live like a savage.” The two artists worked briefly in Panama before traveling to Martinique, where they stayed in a cabin outside St. Pierre. From there Gauguin wrote to a friend back in Paris, “Currently I am making sketch after sketch [of the Martinique islanders] in order to penetrate their character; later I’ll have them pose.”

This spirited sheet in the Regenstein Collection is part of a now-dismantled sketchbook that Gauguin used during his stay in Martinique. The recto bears a portrait in profile of his companion, Laval, along with sketches of a palm tree, figures, and a dog. The verso is filled with head and figure studies of the local population and reveals Gauguin’s practice of occasionally embellishing his quick sketches with watercolor. Abbreviated notations such as these—along with larger, more carefully executed studies—functioned as an image bank upon which the artist later drew when making paintings, carvings, and ceramics. Gauguin’s stay in Martinique in 1887 was short-lived, and he was back in Paris by mid-November. Yet the experience of this artistic sojourn in a “primitive” island culture and his participation in a “savage” existence—words Gauguin used—proved critical to the subsequent development of his art. As his career unfolded, Gauguin sought refuge and inspiration from a succession of journeys away from Paris, to Brittany, Arles, Tahiti, and the Marquesas Islands. Shaping his iconography from the indigenous cultures he encountered, just as he often fashioned his art through the use of nontraditional media and techniques, he worked to free himself from what he considered to be the strictures of modern European civilization.
CAT. NO. 37, recto.
31. JEAN BAPTISTE CAMILLE COROT, The Abbot Jouveau, Curate of Coubron, 1875, pp. 72-73

32. GUSTAVE MOREAU, Portrait of Eugène Lacheurig, 1852, pp. 74-75

33. GUSTAVE MOREAU, Hercules and the Lernean Hydra, c. 1876, pp. 76-77

34. PIERRE AUGUSTE RENOIR, Workers’ Daughters on the Outer Boulevard, 1877/78, pp. 78-79

35. PIERRE AUGUSTE RENOIR, On the Terrace of a Hotel in Bordighera: The Painter Jean Martin Reviews His Bill, 1881, pp. 80-81

36. GEORGES PIERRE SEURAT, Study of Trees, 1884, pp. 82-83

37. PAUL GAUGUIN, Recto: Portrait of Charles Laval and Other Sketches, 1887: verso: Figure Studies from Martinique, 1887, pp. 84-85

38. HENRI EDMOND CROSS, Three Men, Half-length (“Trois Hommes en buste”), 1895/1900, pp. 86-87

39. WALTER RICHARD SICKERT, Recto: The Old Bedfords, c. 1894; verso: The Gallery of the Old Bedford, c. 1894, pp. 88-89

40. JOAN MIRO, The Kerosene Lamp, 1924, pp. 90-91