PAUL GAUGUIN

(1848-1903)

THE LIFE OF PAUL GAUGUIN was so crammed with adventures of all kinds that even a matter-of-fact account can not decrease its dramatic interest. He was born in Paris in 1848, the year of the second French revolution; but when reaction took over again a little later, his father, a liberal journalist, had to go into exile. Paul Gauguin was three years old when his parents took him to Peru, the president of that country being a relative of his mother. The child’s father died on the voyage and his mother remained in Lima for only four years. Back in France the boy was raised in Orléans until, at seventeen, he went to sea as an apprentice in the merchant marine and sailed back and forth across the Atlantic Ocean between Rio and Le Havre. After the French defeat in 1871, and the death of his mother, he gave up the sea and took a position in a broker’s office in Paris.

For eleven years Gauguin followed a successful business career. In 1873 he married a young Danish girl, leading with her and their children a pleasant, comfortable life. Occasionally, on Sundays, he painted as an amateur, though he was ambitious enough to send a landscape to the Salon of 1876. But, unwilling to follow academic precepts, Gauguin soon began to haunt exhibitions and art galleries. His amazing instinct immediately attracted him to the then still scorned and ridiculed works of the Impressionists, whose canvases he not only admired but also bought. It was not long until he became acquainted with
Camille Pissarro, always easy to approach and ready to help beginners. Pissarro introduced him to Cézanne and Degas and arranged for Gauguin to show his timidly Impressionist paintings in the exhibitions of their group in 1880, '81, and '82. His body and soul now consecrated to painting, Gauguin no longer lived except during his hours of liberty from the office. Relying upon his modest savings and his lucky star, he suddenly decided in 1883 to abandon the bank and take up painting "every day." He moved with his wife and five children to Rouen, where Pissarro was then working, but soon found living there too expensive. Madame Gauguin was able to persuade him that an easier life awaited them in Denmark with her relatives. She hoped above all that the insistence of her family would induce her husband to resume his profitable business career. But the sojourn in Copenhagen turned out to be a complete failure. Gauguin was unsuccessful both as a representative for a commercial firm and as an artist. An exhibition of his work was forced to close after only five days.

Discouraged and penniless, Gauguin left his family in Copenhagen and returned to Paris in the summer of 1885. He obtained employment as a bill poster in Paris railway stations, but ill health forced him to stop work and spend several weeks in a hospital. Yet no misfortune, no poverty, could induce him to abandon his art. Early in 1886 he moved to the small village of Pont-Aven in Brittany, where he found peace, new subjects, and credit at the inn. When he returned to Paris late that same year, he met Vincent van Gogh who greatly admired him.

Overcome by an irresistible desire to escape, Gauguin resolved to leave for Martinique. First he landed in Panama and worked as a common laborer with the diggers of the Panama Canal, to earn his passage to the island. He immediately
fell in love with the exotic beauty of Martinique and infused his Impressionist work with some of its tropical colors. But unable to endure the climate, he obtained passage home as a sailor and returned sick and exhausted early in 1888 to France. Once more he went to live in Pont-Aven where he soon met a young friend of van Gogh's, Emile Bernard. Under his influence he now gradually broke away from Impressionism and adopted a bolder style, somewhat inspired by Japanese prints, with radical simplifications of drawing, brilliant, pure, bright colors, an ornamental character of composition, and willful flatness of planes—a style which he called Synthetism.

At the insistence of Vincent van Gogh, and with the financial help of Vincent's brother Theo, Gauguin left Pont-Aven in the fall of 1888 to join van Gogh in Arles. But their divergent temperaments and opinions soon caused the two friends to quarrel violently. Van Gogh suffered a nervous breakdown followed by an attack of insanity during which he threatened Gauguin's life. After van Gogh had been taken in a serious condition to a hospital, Gauguin left hurriedly for Paris, and thence again for Brittany.

Gauguin's new style attracted the attention of several young painters in Pont-Aven and he slowly gathered a small group of followers around him. Yet this modest success was not accompanied by any material benefits. The dreariness of his situation once more stirred in Gauguin the irresistible desire to seek out faraway lands, despite the failure of his trip to Martinique. At the end of 1890 he went back to Paris to prepare for a voyage to Tahiti, dreaming of an easy life under palm trees and a tropical sun. He organized a public auction of his paintings and with its not too overwhelming returns sailed in April 1891 for the remote French colony.

Living in the jungle of Tahiti, Gauguin set out to work feverishly, his imagination tremendously stimulated by his lovely and peaceful surroundings. His will to simplify forms as well as his arbitrary use of colors, combined with his literary aspirations, gave his work its decorative stamp. Thus the novelty of his art consisted not only in Gauguin's subjects, but also in his conception of these subjects, in his efforts to reconcile the barbarous character of Maori idols with the highly developed sensitivity of a European artist.
After the first few months in Tahiti, Gauguin’s enthusiasm was once more supplanted by bitter resignation; hunger and poverty again became his daily guests. He fell ill and spat such alarming quantities of blood that he thought the end must be near. Finally, in desperation, he begged to be taken home. The French government repatriated him in the summer of 1893. In Paris unexpected news awaited the painter: an uncle in Orléans had left him a small legacy and Gauguin was able to spend money liberally, if only for a short while. He held a comprehensive exhibition which met with little success, rented a large studio where he lived with an Indonesian girl, gave receptions, and undertook some short trips, including one to Copenhagen. He spent the summer of 1894 once more in Pont-Aven, accompanied by his young mistress. Some slighting remarks addressed to the strange couple involved him in a brawl with several sailors during which his ankle was broken. While he was laid up at the inn, the girl rushed to Paris and emptied his studio of everything except his “worthless” canvases.

During his sleepless nights Gauguin now again abandoned himself to his favorite dream: life in the tropics. In spite of his harassing experiences, of hunger and illness suffered in the South Seas, he decided to return there, this time forever. Disposing of everything he owned at public auction (though he had to buy back most of his pictures so as not to let them go for ridiculous prices), Gauguin got ready to leave in the spring of 1895.

The fate that awaited Gauguin in Tahiti was by no means more pleasant than the one he had met there before. He worked only between trips to the hospital, accumulated debts, was grief-stricken at the news of the death of his favorite child. Eventually in 1898 he went to hide himself in the mountains and attempted suicide. But the overdose of poison he had taken resulted merely in violent vomiting. Discouraged and sick, he returned to his hut; even death did not want him. Meanwhile in Paris the dealer Ambroise Vollard began to take some interest in Gauguin’s work, exhibited his paintings and offered him a contract which at least guaranteed him the bare essentials of his frugal life. But now the painter began to quarrel with the colonial administration until, after several more sojourns at the hospital, he sold his belongings in 1901 and left Tahiti for the nearby island of Hiva-Hoa.

Gauguin began to think of returning once more to France when his health improved and he was able to paint more frequently. However, he still suffered from heart trouble and from eczema of his wounded foot. Whenever he could not paint he wrote his memoirs as well as acid letters to various local officials, one of whom brought suit against him. In January 1903, a cyclone destroyed his hut; in March he was condemned to several weeks in prison and found himself without means to go to Tahiti for an appeal. Yet no appeal was necessary. The threat of imprisonment released him to death. Gauguin expired on May 8, 1903, lonely and heartbroken, far from his country, his family, his friends. But ever since, his paintings have asserted his powerful presence throughout the civilized world.
In 1888, after Gauguin had definitely abandoned his Impressionist style and had adopted his Synthetist form of expression, he painted several important canvases which were to affirm his new concepts. The picture opposite is one of these. It exemplifies Gauguin's newly developed theory that the impression of nature must be wedded to the aesthetic sentiment which chooses, arranges, simplifies, and synthesizes: the painter ought not to rest until he has given birth to the child of his imagination . . . begotten in a union of his mind with reality.

From Brittany, where he painted The Yellow Christ—inspired by the crude stone crucifixes to be found on the waysides—Gauguin wrote to a friend: "Don't copy nature too much. Art is an abstraction; derive this abstraction from nature while dreaming in front of it, but think more of creating than of the actual result." Indeed, Gauguin now even spoke of his intention to "paint like children," yet—far from the true primitiveness that expressed itself so touchingly in the works of the douanier Rousseau—Gauguin's approach to his subjects was a highly reasoned one, a conscious attempt to simplify forms and colors for the benefit of a more striking expression. He now felt free to use the elements of nature as best suited his purpose, and in The Yellow Christ this purpose was, as he himself said, to convey the "great rustic and superstitious simplicity" which struck him among the peasant folk of Brittany. To achieve this aim of creating a pictorial equivalent of primitive religious feelings, Gauguin endeavored to reduce all forms to their essential outlines, to use pure colors, to avoid shadows as far as possible (because they represent a realistic approach), and to renounce modeling to a great extent. Thus he attained in this work a strange eloquence, a mixture of crudeness and subtlety that seems to point the way to all the art movements that were subsequently to break away even more radically from the representation of nature.
IT IS DOUBTFUL WHETHER GAUGUIN was really a man of deep religious feeling; his life was certainly not governed by any consideration for what the faithful call sin. Yet he has painted a few pictures in which he endeavored successfully to express religious sentiments. In Brittany he had been greatly impressed by the profoundly superstitious Catholicism of the peasants and fishermen, and particularly of the womenfolk. Added to this, there was the strong religious fervor of his young friend Emile Bernard. It was certainly the combination of these elements which led Gauguin to paint in 1888-89 several pictures of biblical or religious subjects, of which his The Yellow Christ (page 9) was one.

During his first sojourn in Tahiti the artist was inspired to paint yet another religious canvas, reproduced opposite. Whereas he subsequently set out to grasp the character of the native beliefs, as in his The Spirit of the Dead Watches (page 15), and although South Sea idols soon became an important element of his pictorial language, in Ia Orana Maria he used the tropical setting for a biblical scene. It is a strange attempt to infuse the luxuriance of a Tahitian background with the mysticism of the faith in which he himself had been raised. As such this painting strikes an absolutely unique note in Gauguin's work.

Early in 1892 Gauguin wrote to a friend: "I have painted a canvas: an angel with yellow wings who points out to two Tahitian women the figures of Mary and Jesus, also Tahitians. Nudes dressed in pareos, a kind of flowered cotton which is wrapped as one likes around the waist. In the background somber mountains and flowering trees. A dark purple road and an emerald green foreground. To the left some bananas. I am rather satisfied with it."

Indeed, Gauguin always considered this painting among his best and insisted that it be included in the various shows of his works held during his lifetime. It has all the tenderness of genuine religious emotion, combined with the exotic elements that had drawn Gauguin to the tropical island: the beauty of its women, the splendor of its vegetation, and the mysticism of the natives.
Once he had abandoned Impressionism, Gauguin painted very few pure landscapes as he had done before under Pissarro’s guidance. It would seem that in Tahiti the natives attracted him almost more than the beautiful scenery, or at least that he seldom contemplated this scenery without simultaneously evoking its inhabitants who, in his mind, were an inseparable part of it. Their strange customs, their nimble bodies, their colorful raiment deeply stirred his imagination. Yet every now and then he let himself be impregnated with the mystic charm of a tropical landscape such as this, where he studied nature almost without thinking of its inhabitants: the lone native and the black animal hardly interfere with the majesty of the scene—they even appear to accentuate its solitude.

No longer bound by the rigorous requirements of his Synthetism developed in Brittany, Gauguin’s style has somewhat mellowed: lines and curves have become more gracious, the flat areas have acquired softness through slight variations of tones, and the coloration itself has lost its strong accents. But his composition nevertheless draws on the same elements: simplified forms and large expanses of uniform planes, tied together by a rhythmic design.

Either because of the peace which at last had pervaded Gauguin’s soul or because of the untroubled beauty of the fields and mountains extending in front of his lonely hut, the artist found here an appropriate expression for the calm and luxuriance which had lured him to the South Seas.
Painted 1892

THE SPIRIT OF THE DEAD WATCHES
(MANAO TUPAPAU)

Collection General A. Conger Goodyear, New York

(28½” x 36½”)

With the exception of a large composition painted before his attempted suicide, Gauguin has furnished for no other of his paintings as precise an analysis of his intentions as for Manao Tupapau. In various letters and diary notes the artist has explained how the preoccupation with ethnological problems, with the symbolism of colors, and certain literary concepts participated in the genesis of this canvas:

"I painted the nude of a girl. In that position, a trifle can make it indecent. And yet I wanted her that way, the lines and the action interested me. Our girls would be embarrassed to be surprised in that position; the women here not at all. I gave her face a somewhat frightened expression (the fright must be pretended, if not explained, and this within the character of the person—a Maori). These people are very much afraid of the spirit of the dead. I had to explain her fears with as little literary means as possible. To achieve this, the general harmony is somber, sad, frightening, sounding to the eye like a death knell: violet, dark blue, and orange-yellow. I made the linen greenish yellow, because the linen of these savages is different from ours; thus it brings on and suggests the factitious light. The Maori woman never lies down in the dark, and yet I did not want any effect of lamplight—it's common. The yellow which connects the orange-yellow and the brown completes the musical accord. There are some flowers in the background but, being imagined, they must not be real. I made them resemble sparks. The Maoris believe that the phosphorescences of the light are the spirits of the dead. Finally, I made the ghost look very simply like a small, harmless woman, because the girl cannot but see the dead themselves bound to the spirit of the dead.

"The title, Manao Tupapau, has two meanings, either 'she thinks of the spirit of the dead,' or 'the spirit of the dead remembers her.'

"To sum it up: the musical part, undulating horizontal lines, harmonies of orange and blue brought together by yellows and purples which are lighted by greenish sparks; the literary part, the spirit of a living soul united with the spirit of the dead. Day and night."
AMONG THE MANY NOTES ON HIS LIFE and his works which Gauguin jotted down in the loneliness of his hut in Tahiti, there is a passage that seems to have been written almost specifically for this painting, though it treats his exotic art in general:

"In order to explain my Tahitian art, since it is held to be incomprehensible: as I want to suggest an exuberant and wild nature and a tropical sun which sets on fire everything around it, I have to give my figures an appropriate frame. It really is open air life, although intimate; in the thickets and the shaded brooks, those whispering women in an immense palace decorated by nature itself with all the riches that Tahiti holds. Hence these fabulous colors and this fiery yet softened and silent air.

"But all this does not exist!

"Yes, it exists as the equivalent of the grandeur and profundity of this mystery of Tahiti, when it must be expressed on a canvas of three square feet.

"She is very subtle and very clever in her naïveté, the Tahitian Eve. The enigma hidden at the bottom of her childlike eyes remains incommunicable. Like Eve’s, her body is still that of an animal, but her head progressed with evolution, the mind developed subtlety, love impressed the ironical smile upon her lips, and naïvely she searches in her memory for the why of present times. Enigmatically she looks at you.

"All this is intangible they say.

"This may well be so."
Painted 1893

THE MOON AND THE EARTH
(HINA TE FATOU)

Museum of Modern Art, New York

(44 1/2" x 24")

Towards the end of his life Gauguin endeavored, in a letter to a Parisian art critic, to explain the origin of paintings such as this one—paintings based not so much on scenes observed as on a peculiar mixture of things seen and imagined.

"Are not," Gauguin asked, "these repetitions of tones, these monotonous color harmonies (in the musical sense) analogous to oriental chants sung in a shrill voice to the accompaniment of pulsating notes which intensify them by contrast? Beethoven uses them frequently (as I understand it) in the Sonata Pathétique, for example . . . Color, which is vibration just as music is, is able to attain what is most universal, yet at the same time most elusive in nature: its inner force.

"Here near my cabin, in complete silence, amid the intoxicating perfumes of nature, I dream of violent harmonies. A delight enhanced by I know not what sacred horror I divine in the infinite. An aroma of long-vanished joy that I breathe in the present. Animal figures rigid as statues, with something indescribably solemn and religious in the rhythm of their pose, in their strange immobility. In eyes that dream, the troubled surface of an unfathomable enigma.

"Night is here. All is at rest. My eyes close in order to see without actually understanding the dream that flees before me in infinite space; and I experience the languorous sensation produced by the mournful procession of my hopes . . . And all this sings with sadness in my soul and in my design while I paint and dream at the same time with no tangible allegory within my reach . . . I have tried to interpret my vision in an appropriate décor without recourse to literary means and with all the simplicity the medium permits."

And Gauguin went on to quote the words which Mallarmé had once uttered while standing before one of his Tahitian paintings: "It is amazing that one can put so much mystery in so much brilliance."
Painted 1898

THE WHITE HORSE

The Louvre, Paris

(55½" x 35¼")

This painting illustrates particularly well the peculiar fashion in which Gauguin combined the flat pattern and asymmetrical composition of Japanese prints with an execution derived from the Impressionists and a palette rich in exotic colors and contrasts. He painted this work with vivid brush strokes (occasionally using a palette knife), applied on a coarse canvas, the rough texture of which adds to its mysterious savagery.

The diagonal branches of the tree—a device frequently used by the Japanese—provide the arabesque that pulls together the various large planes of more or less uniform colors: the dark blue expanse of water with its intense orange accents, and the large green spots of ground. Against these flat areas which give the landscape an abstract character, appear the horses and their riders treated in a three-dimensional way, with shadows carefully modeling their forms. The lone white horse in the foreground is actually of a greenish-grey tone, due to the reflections of the leaves which protect it from the sun. A flash of purer white is dramatically provided by the radiance of the flower in the lower right corner. Yet contrasts of colors, of lines, and of forms are well integrated in a composition that leads the eye from that single white note to the curved lines of the horse and across the meandering branches into an undefined distance.

Gauguin gave the painting to his devoted friend Daniel de Monfreid who bequeathed it to the Louvre.
Painted 1902

**THE CALL (L'APPEL)**

_The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of Hanna Fund_

(51½” x 35½”)

Whenever he detached himself somewhat from his literary inspirations and his dreams, Gauguin conceived paintings which seem based more closely on his observation of the daily life in the tropical islands. _Whispered Words_ (page 17) is one of these canvases, depicting Tahitian women against their everyday background, and _The Call_ is yet another. Here the artist makes less frequent use of ornamental elements and flat patterns, such as appear in more imaginary works like _The Moon and the Earth_ (page 19) or _The White Horse_ (page 21). Instead he strives for a more naturalistic representation, using small brush strokes which model forms and indicate textures, and his color harmonies are softer. He avoids the sharp contrasts which he favors elsewhere when he wants to create a dreamlike atmosphere. What the composition loses in mystery it gains in quiet grandeur and peace.

This painting shows two native women among trees on the banks of a small river, and behind them a crouching nude figure in a position that transforms her body into a solid plastic block. Gauguin has represented this same figure in various other paintings and prints. Vertical lines, stressed by the standing women and the trees at left and right, are balanced by the horizontal stream and the expanse of the pink bank in the foreground, the green slope beyond the water. The crouching woman constitutes a resting point where verticals and horizontals meet. The compact mass of her body provides a perfect balance for the composition, while the dark spot of stones and flowers at the bottom of the canvas finds an echo in dark green leaves set against the somber sky at the top. Thus a complete harmony is achieved, a harmony not only of colors and lines, but also of subject and representation. Forgetting his worries and sufferings, the artist has found here a happy expression of the nature and the people he so deeply loved.
On the cover

TAHITIAN WOMEN WITH RED MANGOS (1899)
Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (W. C. Osborn Collection)
(37" x 28")

Throughout the nineteenth century, French painters had striven to discover new types of feminine beauty or even—in some cases—of ugliness. Ingres established the cold perfection of virginal nudes, while Delacroix proclaimed the enticing loveliness of oriental odalisques. Courbet chose the carnal flamboyance of heavy-set models, whereas Gustave Moreau adored the fragile grace of jewel bedecked maidens, and Puis de Chavannes paid homage to the classical beauty of Arcadian women. At the same time Renoir rediscovered the voluptuous charm of buxom girls like those whom Rubens had depicted, and Seurat, on the other hand, painted his slim models with no trace of sensuality. Degas preferred the angular and not yet fully developed bodies of young dancers whom he represented without any flattery, and Lautrec went even further, selecting his models among prostitutes whom he painted with a cruel insistence on their depravity. But Gauguin dreamed of exotic loveliness and went all the way to the South Seas, attracted by an entirely different type of beauty, chaste and yet sensuous, dark bodies full of promises, large eyes full of mysteries. Here at last he found Eve in a paradise untroubled by the presence of a snake, not knowing the meaning of sin, and holding a basket of those red mango flowers that seem to enhance the delicate pink of her nipples.

In the text (page 5)

STILL LIFE WITH FLOWERS (1891)
Collection Edward G. Robinson, Beverly Hills, California
(37½" x 24½")

Together with landscapes, still lifes had played an important role in Gauguin’s early years as a painter. They were favorite subjects especially during rainy days or in the winter months when work outside was impossible. But in Tahiti the artist apparently was less tempted by them. However, he succumbed from time to time to the enchantment of sparkling bouquets rich in shapes and colors unknown to the European gardener. He assembled these exotic flowers in earthen pots which he had made himself, and delighted in depicting their freshness and glory. If there is still an echo of Cézanne’s influence (Cézanne frequently assembled his still lifes on a chest similar to the one that appears on Gauguin’s canvas), there is also in the richness of the coloration a hint of Redon’s magic pastels of flowers. But while Redon often invented the forms of the lovely blossoms which he brought together so skillfully, Gauguin endeavored to remain close to nature which offered him such enticing models. Here he could use color freely and establish lively contrasts which seemed governed by sheer hazard, though his bouquets were arranged with loving care.

In the upper left corner of this painting appears in the background the image of Gauguin’s Dutch friend Meyer de Haan, whom he had known in Brittany and had originally hoped to take with him to Tahiti. Though de Haan did not make the journey, his fascinating and ugly features haunted Gauguin across the oceans.

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