

MAJOR EXHIBITION EXPLORES PAUL GAUGUIN'S EXPERIMENTAL WORKS ON PAPER IN CONTEXT WITH HIS MAJOR PAINTINGS AND SCULPTURES AT THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

Gauguin: Metamorphoses

March 8–June 8, 2014

The International Council of The Museum of Modern Art Exhibition Gallery, sixth floor

NEW YORK, February 5, 2014—*Gauguin: Metamorphoses* is the first major monographic exhibition on Paul Gauguin (French, 1848–1903) ever presented at MoMA, and the first major exhibition to focus particularly on the artist's rare and extraordinary prints and transfer drawings and their relationship to his paintings and his sculptures. Approximately 160 works, including some 130 works on paper and a critical selection of some 30 related paintings and sculptures, are on view from March 8 through June 8, 2014, in The International Council of The Museum of Modern Art Special Exhibition Gallery. Featuring loans from many different collections—national and international, public and private—the exhibition offers an extraordinary opportunity to see these works brought together. Many have rarely if ever been shown in the United States.

Gauguin: Metamorphoses is organized by Starr Figura, Curator, with Lotte Johnson, Curatorial Assistant, Department of Drawings and Prints, The Museum of Modern Art.

More than any other major artist of his generation, Paul Gauguin drew inspiration from working across mediums. Though most often celebrated as a pioneer of modernist painting, at various moments Gauguin was also intensely engaged with wood carving, ceramics, lithography, woodcut, monotype, and transfer drawing—all mediums that ignited his creativity. Gauguin, who had no formal artistic training, led a peripatetic life, settling for extended periods in different regions of the world—including, most famously, Tahiti. His search for a culture unspoiled by European mores and constraints paralleled his eagerness to work with unfamiliar techniques in order to create entirely new types of artworks.

This exhibition focuses on these less well-known but arguably even more innovative aspects of Gauguin's practice, especially the rare and extraordinary prints he created in several discrete bursts of activity from 1889 until his death in 1903. These remarkable works on paper reflect Gauguin's experiments with a range of mediums, from radically "primitive" woodcuts to jewel-like watercolor monotypes and large, evocative transfer drawings that rank among the great masterpieces in the history of the graphic arts.

Gauguin's creative process often involved repeating and recombining key motifs from one image to another, allowing them to evolve and metamorphose over time and across mediums. Of all the mediums to which Gauguin applied himself, it was printmaking—which always involves transferring and multiplying images—that served as the greatest catalyst in this process of

transformation. Gauguin embraced the subtly textured surfaces, nuanced colors, and accidental markings that resulted from the unusual processes that he devised, for they projected a darkly mysterious and dreamlike vision of life in the South Pacific, where he spent most of the final 12 years of his life. Through printmaking, Gauguin often sought to bridge the distinctions between mediums. His woodcuts, for example, reflect the sculptural gouging of his carved wood sculptures; his monotypes and transfer drawings combine drawing with printmaking.

In order to highlight the cross-fertilizing relationships among works across mediums in Gauguin's oeuvre, *Gauguin: Metamorphoses* is organized, roughly chronologically, into a number of extended groupings of related works.

Zincographs: The Volpini Suite

In 1889, at the age of 41 and having only just reached stylistic maturity, Gauguin made his first prints at the request of his dealer, Theo van Gogh. Named after the Café Volpini in Paris, where the prints were available to view, this suite of 11 zincographs, all of which are included in the exhibition, signals Gauguin's boldly unorthodox and provocative choices. Creating his compositions on zinc plates rather than the traditional limestone slabs used for lithography, he experimented with unconventionally shaped compositions, details that extend beyond the picture borders, and evocative textural passages. He printed them on vibrant yellow paper more commonly associated with commercial posters.

Seven of the 11 Volpini compositions reinterpret paintings and ceramics inspired by Gauguin's recent trips to Brittany, Arles, and Martinique. Three of these highly inventive ceramics, which Gauguin created between 1886 and 1888, are shown alongside the Volpini Suite in the exhibition. *Cup Decorated with the Figure of a Bathing Girl* (1887–88) and *Vase with the Figure of a Girl Bathing under the Trees* (c. 1887–88) both explore the figure of a bather, whose crouching pose is reprised in the related zincograph. The painterly textures and glowing colors that Gauguin was able to develop in the process of firing and glazing are also evident in *Vase Decorated with Breton Scenes* (1886–87), which features a group of young women wearing the region's distinctive traditional clothing. In the related zincograph, he simplified and abstracted the figures to stark black lines and washes.

Woodcuts: The Noa Noa Suite and The Vollard Suite

A large portion of the exhibition is devoted to the groundbreaking series of works known as the Noa Noa suite (1893–94)—Gauguin's first woodcuts. Depicting Tahitian scenes, these 10 woodcuts portray a grand life cycle encompassing primordial origins, everyday life, love, fear, religion, and death. Most of the compositions are related to paintings and sculptures that Gauguin particularly prized. For example, in the woodcut *Nave nave fenua (Delightful Land)*, he developed the motif of a Tahitian Eve from his earlier painting *Te nave nave fenua (The Delightful Land)* (1892), rendering it more stylized and abstract, and reprised the subject in a watercolor monotype, in

which his Eve appears as an evanescent, sensual figure. All of these related works will be on view in the exhibition, along with a full-scale charcoal and pastel study for the painting and a small wood sculpture devoted to the same subject.

The Noa Noa woodcuts mark a turning point in the history of printmaking, ushering in the modern era with their distinctly rough and “primitive” aesthetic. Gauguin approached his wood printing blocks as a natural extension of the sculptural carving of his wood reliefs and sculptures, and he experimented with a range of unusual effects in the inking and printing of each impression. In order to highlight the relationship between sculpture and printmaking in his work, the exhibition includes several of the woodblocks that Gauguin used to print the Noa Noa series, alongside related wood sculptures and reliefs. The exhibition also includes several variant impressions printed from each block, each of which represents a new experiment.

In 1898–99, having returned to Tahiti for the second and final time, Gauguin created a second major series of woodcuts known as the Vollard Suite, after the Paris-based dealer, Ambroise Vollard, to whom Gauguin sent the edition for sale. The complete series of 14 prints are on view in the exhibition. Most reprise figures and themes from Gauguin’s paintings and sculptures made in Brittany, Arles, and Tahiti—serving as a condensed retrospective of his career. When placed side by side, works from this suite create a series of vignettes similar to his monumental paintings of the time, such as *Faa iheihe (Tahitian Pastoral)* (1898), which is also included in the exhibition.

Watercolor Monotypes

In 1894, around the time he was creating the Noa Noa woodcuts, Gauguin made another body of unusual printed works: his watercolor monotypes. Monotypes were traditionally made with oil- or water-based paint on a metal or glass surface and transferred to paper via rubbing or on a printing press. Gauguin’s exact methods are not known, but it is believed that he either made direct counterproofs of his watercolor, pastel, or gouache drawings on damp paper, or used watercolor on glass to copy existing drawings or watercolors and then pulled an impression on paper. Many of Gauguin’s monotypes are related to his paintings, sculptures, or woodcuts, while others seem to be independent studies or sketches. The watercolor transfer process resulted in images that are distinctly ethereal, suggesting ghostly afterimages, faded mementos, or beautiful scenes viewed through the watery veil of memory.

Featured in the exhibition is one of the few surviving drawings that he may have used in this process, *Tahitian Girl in a Pink Pareu* (1894), along with two of the three known monotypes of the same of the same image.

Oil Transfer Drawings

Gauguin invented the oil transfer drawing technique in 1899, and it represents a grand culmination of his use of printmaking to develop an aesthetic of mystery, indeterminacy, and suggestion. A hybrid of a drawing and a print, each transfer drawing is a two-sided work with a pencil drawing on the verso and the transfer drawing on the recto. In Gauguin's words, "First you roll out printer's ink on a sheet of paper of any sort; then lay a second sheet on top of it and draw whatever pleases you." The pressure from the pencil caused the ink from the bottom sheet to adhere to the underside of the top sheet. When the top sheet was lifted away, the drawing had been transferred, in reverse, to its underside; this transferred image was the final work of art. Using this transfer process, Gauguin transformed a traditional and usually legible pencil drawing into a dark and mysterious print.

Gauguin's transfer drawings, dating c. 1899 to 1903, range from small, sketch-like examples to large, finished compositions. The exhibition includes several monumental, double-sided transfer drawings; three of these, each titled *Tahitian Woman with Evil Spirit* (c. 1900), is shown alongside a remarkable related wood sculpture, *Head with Horns* (1895–97), reflecting Gauguin's preoccupation with the recurring theme of a Tahitian woman haunted by a mysterious spirit.

SPONSORSHIP:

The exhibition is supported by BNP Paribas, Sue and Edgar Wachenheim III, Anna Marie and Robert F. Shapiro, and by Denise LeFrak in memory of Ethel LeFrak.

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PUBLICATION:

Gauguin: Metamorphoses is accompanied by a fully illustrated catalogue by Starr Figura, with essays by Elizabeth Childs, Hal Foster, and Erika Mosier, and contributions by Lotte Johnson, that explores the place of printmaking within the artist's wide-ranging practice. An introductory essay by Figura considers the significance of Gauguin's innovative printmaking and the relationship between Gauguin's prints, monotypes, and transfer drawings and his paintings and sculptures. Childs writes on Gauguin's radical wood sculptures and their pivotal place in his wide-ranging practice. Foster addresses Gauguin's "primitivism" and its aesthetic and cultural implications. Finally, Mosier offers a conservator's insights into Gauguin's unusual printmaking techniques. *Gauguin: Metamorphoses* is published by The Museum of Modern Art and available at MoMA stores and online at MoMAstore.com. 248 pages; 222 color illustrations. Hardcover, \$60. Distributed to the trade by ARTBOOK|D.A.P. in the United States and Canada. Distributed outside the United States and Canada by Thames & Hudson.

PAUL GAUGUIN: IN SEARCH OF MODERNISM'S ORIGINS

In conjunction with the exhibition, two public lectures will be given by Gauguin experts exploring his creative process, his peripatetic travels, and new interpretations of his place in art history.

Paradise Lost: Gauguin and the Melancholy Logic of Reproduction

Tuesday, March 18, 7:00 p.m.

Theater 3

With Alastair Wright, University Lecturer and Tutorial Fellow, St John's College, University of Oxford, and Chair, Editorial Group, Oxford Art Journal

From the moment he arrived in Tahiti, Gauguin bemoaned the destruction of the island's original culture by French colonialism. Like many Western visitors to Polynesia in the later 19th century, he came to believe that the South Seas paradise of which he had dreamed was by now lost. This lecture will examine the roots of this melancholy view of Polynesia and explore how it is reflected in Gauguin's extended exploration of reproductive techniques following his first Tahitian trip.

Sauvageries: Gauguin, and the Strategies of Primitivist Sculpture

Tuesday, March 25, 7:00 p.m.

Theater 3

With Elizabeth Childs, Etta and Mark Steinberg Professor of Modern Art and Chair, Department of Art History and Archaeology, Washington University St Louis

However much painting remained at the heart of Gauguin's artistic enterprise, a key element in his avant-garde aesthetic was his use of wood—in sculptures, in relief panels, and in woodblock printmaking. He used sculpture to help fashion his artistic identity, both in how he presented his Tahitian works in exhibition in Paris, and in how he decorated his home and studio environments in Polynesia. This lecture examines the central role of sculpture in Gauguin's project of modernist primitivism, considering not just the relationship of his forms to indigenous Oceanic typologies, but also how, during his Polynesian career, his creation of sculpture facilitated his physical and material engagement with the non-European world.

Tickets (\$15; \$10 members and corporate members; \$5 students, seniors and staff of other museums) can be purchased online or at the information desk, the Film desk after 4:00 p.m., or at the Education and Research Building reception desk on the day of the program.

AUDIO TOUR:

The audio tour accompanying the exhibition features commentaries by exhibition curator Starr Figura, along with MoMA conservator Erika Mosier. The audio is available at the Museum on the MoMA Audio+ mobile guide, and is also available at MoMA.org/audio and MoMA.org/m, for download through MoMA.org/mobile, and as a podcast on iTunes. MoMA Audio+ is sponsored by Bloomberg.

WEBSITE:

The exhibition is accompanied by a website highlighting the artist's themes, techniques, and three major print series. It features images of selected works from the exhibition, as well as comparative images, and interactive slide shows (also available within the exhibition) that explicate Gauguin's unusual techniques in both woodcut and oil transfer drawing. The site launches on March 8, at MoMA.org/gauguin.

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For downloadable high-resolution images, register at MoMA.org/press.

Public Information:

The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, NY 10019, (212) 708-9400, MoMA.org. Hours: Saturday through Thursday, 10:30 a.m.–5:30 p.m. Friday, 10:30 a.m.–8:00 p.m. Museum Admission: \$25 adults; \$18 seniors, 65 years and over with I.D.; \$14 full-time students with current I.D. Free, members and children 16 and under. (Includes admittance to Museum galleries and film programs). Free admission during Uniqlo Free Friday Nights: Fridays, 4:00 p.m.–8:00 p.m. MoMA.org: No service charge for tickets ordered on MoMA.org. Tickets purchased online may be printed out and presented at the Museum without waiting in line. (Includes admittance to Museum galleries and film programs). Film and After Hours Program Admission: \$12 adults; \$10 seniors, 65 years and over with I.D.; \$8 full-time students with current I.D. The price of an After Hours Program Admission ticket may be applied toward the price of a Museum admission ticket or MoMA Membership within 30 days.