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3 Rewald, op. cit., reproduces two of the Jongkinds, pp. 100-101, and the two Monets, p. 103.
5 D. S. MacColl, Nineteenth Century Art, Glasgow, Maclehose, 1902, p. 163.
8 Ibid., p. 303; and M. Aubert, Souvenirs du Salon de 1859, Paris, 1859.
9 [Salon catalogue], Paris, 1864.
10 [Salon catalogue], Paris, 1865.
12 Perry, op. cit., p. 120.
13 Ibid., p. 121.
15 Perry, op. cit., p. 121.
16 C. Janin, L’Étoffe, Paris, March 10, 1892.
20 In L’Opinion, June 1, 1912. See Geffroy, op. cit., p. 247.
21 Venturi, op. cit., p. 419.
25 Gimpel, op. cit.
26 Gimpel, op. cit.
27 The 42-foot composition acquired by The Museum of Modern Art in 1959 is plainly a variant of that opposite the entrance door in the first of the two oval rooms in the Orangerie, and it is also made up of three panels approximately 14 feet in width.
28 Gimpel, op. cit.
29 Gillet, op. cit., p. 104.
30 Ibid., p. 96. The strange coloration of Monet’s Japanese Footbridge canvases painted between 1919 and 1922 can, it would appear, he explained thus: The earlier golden yellow versions show the change in his vision. Later, realizing that his eyes exaggerated yellow, he used less of it, but overcompensated. Green or warn-toned subjects therefore become, respectively, bluish or reddish.
31 Gimpel, op. cit., p. 96.

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Readings in Art History

18. GAUGUIN

AND PRIMITIVISM

Robert Goldwater

INTRODUCTION

During the latter half of the nineteenth century and the early years of the twentieth, an awakening to the riches of non-Western art turned many European artists toward these sources of inspiration in ways that differed appreciably from the exoticisms of the romantic era. If some residue of the old romantic mystery of alien cultures remained, what seemed now to matter more were the stylistic features of the arts of distant places and the ways in which these features could be adapted to the Western artist’s means. The consequences were mutations, of various kinds and degrees, in the styles of Western art. One manifestation of a new kind of exoticism developed after the end of Japanese isolationism in the 1850s. The discovery and increasing popularity of Japanese prints fostered by the mid-1860s a wave of japonisme that would sweep through European painting and design in the latter part of the century. In the early twentieth century, as artists became attracted to the sculptural arts of black Africa, the island cultures of the Pacific, and the pre-Columbian New World, sculptors like Brancusi, Lipchitz, and Henry Moore, and painters like Picasso—to cite only a few of the more obvious cases—assimilated various aspects of these “primitive” or exotic arts. The early twentieth-century expressionist movements—Les Fauves in France and Die Brücke and Der Blaue Reiter in Germany—were also aware of African and Oceanic art and some added children’s art to their repertoire of primitivisms.

In the preface to the revised edition (1967) of Primitivism in Modern Art, from which this selection is taken, Goldwater points out that his purpose is to show why and under what conditions the modern artist turned to primitive art for inspiration. At the same time he advances
a cautionary note by asserting that primitive art and modern art really have little in common, despite the formal linkages forged by modern artists, since the aesthetic forms and social functions of primitive art are quite different from those of art produced in the modern Western world.

In the case of Paul Gauguin the primitive and exotic elements were not only varied as to source but intricately layered in his art. His response to the Japanese print mingled with his assimilations of Southeast Asian, Persian, ancient Greek, and Egyptian sources in a personal and hybrid form of exoticism that subsumed as well a primitivism which was, roughly speaking, a composite of his yearning for a simple, elemental life and the quest for it in “primitive” locales: the peasant ambience of Brittany and the fancied Edenic paradise of the South Seas. Robert Goldwater’s essay deals with the anatomy of Gauguin’s primitivism, probing both its substance and its form and weighing the degree to which the artist was influenced by Oceanic art.


The selection that follows is from Primitivism in Modern Art, revised edition, by Robert Goldwater. Copyright 1938 and renewed 1966 by Robert Goldwater. Reprinted by permission of Random House, Inc.
In any study of the influences of the primitive in modern painting, Paul Gauguin obviously occupies an important place. His name, which has become synonymous with a geographical romanticism that has not yet lost its flavor, has been made a symbol for the throwing off of the stifling superfluities of the hothouse culture of Europe in favor of return to that more natural way of life of which Rousseau is the generally accepted advocate. In the first years of the twentieth century Gauguin was considered the typical bohemian-artist rejecter of bourgeois living and morality, with its stupid, encumbering artificialities; the typical simplifying artist, cutting both his life and his art to the bone in order that he might find and express reality. Not only did he become the symbol and the type but, by a shift familiar in the history of art, he came to be considered the originator of the movement he summarized: He became the “discoverer” of a primitivism which was simply the crutch of an ailing art; he was said to have begun a trend that achieved its final culmination in the “Negro review”; he was the “calm madman” embodying sanity. We have seen that such praise or such reproach cannot be laid at Gauguin’s door. He was not the first to feel the attraction of the provinces, either at home or overseas, and except for definite imitators, artists’ voyages after his time lessened rather than increased in extent. And the simplifications practiced by the artistic movement that succeeded him, whether the fauves in France or the expressionists in Germany, though they received an impetus from his life and from his painting, were hardly due to his influence alone. There is, however, no doubt that this influence was great, and for this reason, as well as for his later position as a symbol, it is important to determine the exact nature of Gauguin’s primitivism, and to analyze his art so that we may fix his position in the history of primitivist evolution.

Because of the identification of Gauguin’s life and his art, it is not merely permissible, but compulsory, to try to discover from his own writings his attitude toward the primitive. That Gauguin felt it was necessary to write about himself, to express himself through “private journals” written with an eye to the public as well as through his painting, indicates in itself that his relation to the
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primal world in which he had chosen to live was not simple and direct. The whole tone of Noa Noa and Avant et Après is one of self-conscious revolt against a watching world.² It is not simply that the comparisons between the barbarian life of his choice and civilization are always in favor of the former, nor that his complaints are those of the misunderstood artist. It would not be natural that he should write otherwise; Tahiti, in spite of all its difficulties, gave him a better reception than Paris. But each incident that he relates, whether it is about the South Seas or not, each point that he makes, is a kind of parable that contains in itself and explains all the wrongs of the insincere and complicated society that he had left, contrasting them with the simplicity and naturalness of the people of the South Seas. Thus his hatred of the church and its hypocrisies is concentrated in the story of the bishop and Thérèse, and his dislike of the provincial government with which he had such difficulty in the account of the administrator Ed. Petit.⁸ Each such story that he tells, whether it be of his exhibition in Copenhagen, closed on the morning of the first day, or of the Cabanel's in the museum at Montpellier, is proof of his own rightness and the infamy of an overcomplicated culture.⁴ It is nevertheless this civilization which sets his standard of judgment and to which all other modes of existence must be referred, so that it is impossible for him to describe his own life in Tahiti or that of the natives in the Marquesas without thinking of their tremendous distance from the European life that he has left. Such continual comparison means that Gauguin was dependent upon Paris for more than simply his livelihood, and that try as he might to assimilate himself to the native way of life, the center of his attention was still the artistic world of Paris. Yet Gauguin did not leave Paris merely to find a cheaper mode of living (although this was an important consideration), or he would not have gone to Tahiti after having been to Martinique, nor have gone back to Tahiti in 1895, leaving it in 1901 to spend the two last years of his life in the Marquesas.⁵ His was an exoticism which thought that happiness was elsewhere but which at the same time—and this is what is characteristic of his part in a new tendency—sought not the luxurious and the intricately exotic of the earlier nineteenth century, but the native and the simple.⁶

Because it judges on the basis of contrast rather than directly, such an attitude identifies as primitive any things sufficiently far removed from the kind or the style of object which it seeks to

avoid, even though they may differ greatly among themselves. This opposition point of view makes it possible, and in a sense even reasonable, for Gauguin to say,

Have before you always the Persians, the Cambodians, and a little of the Egyptian. The great error is the Greek, however beautiful it may be,

since these arts, however they may differ, all express themselves, as he says (using the vocabulary of the symbolist poets and critics), “parabolically” and “mysteriously,” deforming nature in order to achieve a symbolic, and consequently a meaningful, beauty.⁷ It did not clash with these opinions that he should counsel his daughter:

You will always find nourishing milk in the primitive arts, but I doubt if you will find it in the arts of ripe civilizations.⁸

because for him the Persians and the Egyptians, not being in the classic tradition which had degenerated into a naturalistic arts, were “primitive.” Nor was Gauguin's occasional use of antique motifs (drawn from the extensive stock of photographs to which he so often referred) more than a superficial contradiction. He saw in the Parthenon frieze and the reliefs of the column of Trajan, from which he borrowed figure poses, a flat and stylized art opposed to the three-dimensional and naturalistic. He therefore could consider it “primitive” and symbolic, just as the critic Albert Aurier, in finding parallels to Gauguin's work, could put Egyptian, Greek, and primitive art together on the grounds that they were all equally “decorative.” Similarly Gauguin acquired a piece of Javanese carving and photographs of Cambodian sculpture, copied Aztec sculpture at the Exposition of 1889, praised the absence of values and perspective in Japanese art because this eliminates the possibility of taking refuge in the “illegibility” of “effects,” and wrote what are probably the first lines in appreciation of Marquesan art, describing the “unparalleled sense of decoration” and the “very advanced decorative art” of the people he was pleased to call “Maori.”⁹ It is characteristic of Gauguin that his consideration of the excellence of this art should immediately lead him to a violent denunciation of the petty officials who could not appreciate it, and that his thought should
then lead back, by way of the impudence of the officials' judgment in view of their downdness, to the "real elegance" of the Maori race, and particularly of Maori women.\textsuperscript{10}

Gauguin's identification of the barbarian in art and the barbarian in living is important for our understanding of the development of primitivism, since in its subsequent evolution these two factors are separated.\textsuperscript{11} Their union in Gauguin's mind and the symbolic value of the former for the latter, may be inferred from Gauguin's reply to Strindberg's letter declining to write a preface for the exhibition of February, 1895.\textsuperscript{12} In his refusal, which he said was forced upon him because he did not understand Gauguin's art, Strindberg characterizes Gauguin as "the savage, who hates a whimpering civilization, a sort of Titan, who, jealous of the Creator, in his leisure hours makes his own little creation, the child who takes his toys to pieces so as to make others from them. . . ."\textsuperscript{13} Gauguin answers that what he had wished to realize was a revolt,

a shock between your civilization and my barbarianism. Civilization from which you suffer, barbarianism which has been a rejuvenation for me. Before the Eve of my choice whom I have painted in the forms and the harmonies of another world, your memories have evoked a painful past. The Eve of your civilized conception nearly always makes you, and makes us, misogyist; the ancient Eve, who frightens you in my studio, might some day smile at you less bitterly. This world, which could perhaps not rediscover a Cuvier, nor a botanist, would be a Paradise that I would have merely sketched. And from the sketch to the completion of the dream it is far. What matter! Is not a glimpse of happiness a foretaste of nirvana.\textsuperscript{14}

It is true that Gauguin is talking here in a metaphor, but it accurately describes his attitude toward the "barbarian" (a word which he preferred to "primitive," perhaps because it renders more precisely his active opposition to the "civilized"), and suggests the atmosphere which pervades his pictures, because in them he uses the same metaphor recurrently.\textsuperscript{15} Gauguin approved Achille Delaroche's description of him as a painter of primitive natures, one who "loves them and possesses their simplicity, their suggestions of the hieratic, their somewhat awkward and angular naïveté."\textsuperscript{16} Nevertheless his primitives still have something of 	extit{ luxe barbare} about them, a heritage of the entire exoticism of the nineteenth century, not quite so easily or wholeheartedly forgotten or suppressed.\textsuperscript{17} He said of himself that he had two natures, the Indian and the sensitive; and he whistled to keep up his courage: "The sensitive has disappeared, which allows the Indian to proceed straight and firmly."\textsuperscript{18} With these considerations in mind we may finally turn to the sentence which is often taken to sum up Gauguin's whole aesthetic:

I have gone far back, farther back than the horses of the Parthenon . . . as far back as the Dada of my babyhood, the good rockinghorse.\textsuperscript{19}

A whole aesthetic may indeed be there, but it is not the aesthetic of Gauguin.

The most direct and obvious influence of primitive art upon the work of Gauguin is to be found in a certain number of his sculptures and woodcuts, in which he makes use of decorative motifs common in the wood and bone carving of the Marquesas. Marquesan decoration is found chiefly on ornamental club heads and stilt foot rests and, on a smaller scale, on fan handles, ear plugs and diadems. It is almost wholly made up of the squat, semi-seated figure (the ancestral "tiki" which may be sacred or secular), and of stylizations of the face or separate features of the face—derived originally from "tiki" representations—the pattern most often used being the outline of the two eyes, with the lines of the nose and prominent nostrils between. Such motifs are to be found in ten of the sculptures published by Gray and half a dozen of the woodcuts catalogued by Guérin.\textsuperscript{20} In Number 28, 	extit{Nave Nave Fenua}, for example, the band which borders the picture at the left consists of such Marquesan stylizations of the face, and these are used again in Number 44, identified as the figure of a Tahitian idol. In Number 50, a lithograph of the painting 	extit{Manao Tupapau}, Gauguin uses the Marquesan form of nostrils and mouth below his initials in the upper left corner.

The restricted number of these direct copyings from the art of the South Seas almost certainly cannot be explained by the fact that Gauguin did not go to the Marquesas until 1901, only two years before his death.\textsuperscript{21} It is true that Tahiti, the island of his earlier residence, is comparatively poor in indigenous art and produces almost no wood or stone sculpture and little decorative carving. The influence from this source was obviously negligible,
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and Avant et Après, which we have quoted above in praise of the
Marquesan sense of decoration, was written after 1901. But, as
Gray remarks, Marquesan objects were as accessible in Tahiti as
in the Marquesas themselves, and Gauguin showed that he was
familiar with Easter Island script as early as 1893. Therefore it
is not surprising that the work that employs the most extensive
repertory of Polynesian motifs was probably done about 1895
(Fig. 50). It is a carved cylinder showing a Crucifixion: a Christ
of Marquesan features, with bodily proportions and rendering
derived from Easter Island statuettes and set against Easter
Island ideograms. Above the figure of Christ are designs adapted
from one form of Marquesan war-club decoration, but with one
of the tiny heads set into the tiki eyes turned in profile.

It is characteristic that Gauguin was sympathetic to the surface,
or at most the relief aspects of Marquesan art. He must have
encountered its massive stone sculpture but it apparently held
little attraction for him. Thus it was only the flat and decorative
aspects of the “primitive” (whether Mediterranean, Asian, or
Oceanic) that were accessible to Gauguin and whose individual
motifs he assimilated. We shall see from an analysis of his paint-
ings that this restriction to the decorative is not accidental, and
we can conclude that even had he had a greater opportunity to
study the art of Polynesia, the grace and pre-Raphaelite simplicity
which were an integral part of Gauguin’s conception of the
primitive would not have permitted the assimilation of any of its
intense and angular forms.

It is also typical of Gauguin that having traveled half across
the world he should still have been more generally influenced,
though in a less precise and accurate way, by an art that was even
then removed from him and that had nothing to do with the
simple life he had sought out. The Indonesian deities sitting
crossed-legged on their stelae (which he must have seen in Paris
museums, and which he had known since at least 1889 in photo-
graphs of Borobudur which he took with him to Tahiti) seem to
have made a real impression on him. The sitting posture of the
Indonesian deities is of course also that of Polynesians and thus
it correctly appears in Gauguin’s paintings in which natives are
portrayed. That memories of Indian figures were also still at work
in Gauguin’s mind is seen most clearly in several of the sculptured
pieces, where motifs of definite Indian iconography are repeated.
The figure in Idole à la Perle, for example, touches her right hand

50. A. (Left) Paul Gauguin,
Christ on the Cross, c. 1896,
Woodcut (The Metropolitan
Museum of Art, Harris Brisbane
Dick Fund, 1929)
B. (Above) Polynesia, Mar-
quesas Islands, late 19th-century
chief’s staff, Carved hardwood,
55” long x 6½” wide (The
Brooklyn Museum, Gift of Apple-
ton Sturgis)
C. (Below) Marquesas warrior’s
headband (University Museum,
University of Pennsylvania)
to the ground and lays the other palm up in her lap, in typical Buddhist gestures. The votary figure on the two cylinders of Hina comes from the Borobudur photographs and sways in Eastern fashion, while the Tahitian goddess herself—one of Gauguin’s favorites—also derives from Indonesian art, modified by a certain stiffness, rather than from the hard angular bodies of Polynesian sculpture.²⁴

Though our chief concern is with his painting, we have purposely approached Gauguin’s art through his wood blocks and his wood sculpture. The use of these media is in itself significant, permitting as they do the production of direct and immediate effects by simple means. The woodcut particularly—working through extreme contrasts of large areas of light and dark, and necessarily doing away with any delicacy of line or refinement of modeling—is especially suited to the simplifying artist (or more exactly, one kind of simplifying artist), and we shall find it coming into prominence again among the German expressionists, who had much in common with Gauguin in their attitude toward the primitive. In the woodcuts, those characteristics that appear in Gauguin’s painting in diluted form and mixed with the other ingredients of a more complicated method, are present in an obvious concentration.

In the paintings, his major form of this expression, his attitude toward the primitive is basically no different, although the elements derived from South Sea art count less and there is almost no direct transcription of Polynesian motifs. The various figures which are meant to portray Polynesian gods represent not only the gods themselves, but Gauguin’s idea of the manner in which the natives wished to render them. The deity in The Day of the God (1894), for example, has that mixture of Polynesian and Indian traits which we have already noted in the cylinder with Hina, and which Gauguin will use once again in the background figure of Whence Do We Come . . . (1897–98). The posture and headdress of the god are anything but native. The goddess Hina appears again in the background of The Parrots (1902), with the same gestures, and a similar figure appears in the self-portrait of 1898 in the upper right corner.²⁵ But the figure which occurs the most frequently, and which was apparently of most importance to Gauguin, is one seated in profile on a low stool, with its hands in its lap. The features of the face, with its flat nose and continuous line of forehead, nose, and lips, square chin and large long ear, are Gauguin’s way of typifying and generalizing the Polynesian facial characteristics, and he often gives them a more naturalistic rendering, as in the attendant figure in The Nativity (1898). While the result bears some relation to the Marquesan stylization, it is apparent that Gauguin evolved the type himself. In Marquesan sculpture the generalization is achieved through geometrizing and angularizing the original contours so that the form is never that of an individual, much less a copy of a living person.²⁶ With Gauguin, however, while there has been a smoothing and reduction of the contours in order to bring them within the oval of the head, an intensity of individual character remains, borne out by the curved forms of the rest of the body. He has nevertheless given his idols a symbolic distance and thus produced the brooding, terrifying quality by which he meant to convey the atmosphere of primitive religion. Good examples of this magical figure are to be found in Sacred Mountain (1892), Arearea (1892) and Hina Maruru (1893), where the mystery is emphasized by the profile position of the figure staring into space. It reappears in the ancestral presence in the Spirit of the Dead Watching (1892)—however calculated or (as Gauguin would have us believe) spontaneous its introduction was. The same effect of hovering, unplaceable, awful spirits, which was one element in Gauguin’s notion of the primitive, is also present in The Moon and the Earth (1893), in the much more tangibly rendered, enormous, dark half-figure rising from nowhere in the background; and in the Poèmes Barbares (1896), where it is conveyed by the little crouching figure with bright staring eyes seated on a table in the left foreground.²⁷ To be sure, this conception of primitive religion has little to do with the rather cheerful mythology of the Society Islands, but this only emphasizes the eclectic nature of Gauguin’s ideas and the degree to which he came to Oceania with established preconceptions of the primitive.²⁸

There is another side to Gauguin’s rendering of the primitive, perhaps as far removed from the truth as his “barbaric” interpretation, yet directly opposed to it. On the one hand he wished to bring out the exotic and the mysterious, and so expatiated upon the personal freedom that was possible among the children of nature in contrast to the “civilized” restrictions of society, the family, and the church, institutionalized and hypocritical. This is one of the constant themes of his writings. On the other hand he interprets many Polynesian scenes in Christian terms, transform-
those moral and religious concepts from which Gauguin derived his subject matter, his expression of feeling, and his belief in the powers of creative action. His search for the primitive and his love for the simple life and the “natural” led him to Tahiti, where he lived as a savage, and to the exotic places he saw in his travels. His art, often called “primitivism,” is characterized by its simplicity, directness, and emotional intensity. It reflects his belief in the superiority of non-European cultures and his desire to escape from the corruption of European civilization.

The native Tahitians, in their simple, unadorned way of life, provided Gauguin with a source of inspiration. He was particularly drawn to their art, which he saw as more authentic and less influenced by European influences. Gauguin’s paintings of Tahitian scenes often depict the native Tahitians in a way that emphasizes their simplicity and naturalness. He sought to capture their essence, not their appearance, and to express their inner world through his art.

Gauguin believed that the true, uncorrupted state of nature was the source of genuine artistic expression. He sought to escape from the love of the material world and to find a more spiritual and aesthetic way of life. His paintings often reflect this desire, as he sought to create a world of beauty and transcendence.

The technique of Gauguin’s art is characterized by its simplicity and directness. He often used bold colors and simple forms, and his brushstrokes were loose and free. His paintings are often characterized by a sense of harmony and balance, and they often evoke a sense of mystery and wonder.

Gauguin’s art is a testament to his search for a more authentic and genuine form of expression. He sought to escape from the corruption of European civilization and to find a more natural and spiritual way of life. His paintings are a reflection of this desire, as he sought to create a world of beauty and transcendence.
religious monuments are rendered in even further reduction and
simplification than the originals, so that they become symbols of
religious symbols, and lose the expressive quality of the popular
originals. Yet if these pictures are closer to the spirit of the scenes
they portray (and by this we do not mean closer to the exact
rendering of a particular scene) than are the similar subjects of
Tahiti, it is because Gauguin was approaching the latter through
these Brittany pictures, and because the French provincial scenes
themselves were closer to that idea of the primitive Gauguin had
in his mind.

We have thus far not treated the purely formal elements of
Gauguin’s art directly, because the influence—even if not the
assimilation—of the primitive and his attitude toward it are more
obvious in the subject matter of his pictures. Nor need we
discuss here the thorny question of the creation of the synthetist
style in the years 1888–89. Gauguin’s method of painting was
more primitivizing than primitive, both in the form that he at-
temted to achieve and in the interpretation of this form. In his
use of broad areas of color applied flatly and in strong contrast
with one another, he was influenced, as we have mentioned, by
Japanese prints and by the images d’Epinal; they lead in the direc-
tion of simplification and a return to the fundamental elements
of painting.31 These influences are of course more evident during
the Brittany period, when synthetist methods of flat planes and
strong contours are boldly employed, and light tones predominate,
then in the later work, where there is less obvious stylization.
Even here, however, Gauguin did not really assimilate the “pri-
mative” factors, but substituted a smooth line and rhythmic un-
dulating composition for the angularities and jagged sequences
of these arts and close color harmonies for their strong contrasts.
Already in this early work, where he was not really dealing with
the primitive at all, he insisted, as Maurice Denis said, “on putting
grace into everything.”32 The same may be said of the lack of
perspective and the reduction of the picture to a single plane, of
which theoreticians have made so much; Gauguin achieves rather
a succession of planes set up parallel to the picture surface and
with spaces in between, much as a stage set might be arranged
and without the construction of any real spatial volume.33 There
is a more generally significant connection with the work of Puvis
de Chavannes than the occasional borrowing of single figures.34
The similarities, both of pictorial arrangement and iconographical

ideals, with a painter whose most obvious quality is an idyllic
sweetness are important to note, similarities which become
strikingly apparent in the romantic transformation of Gauguin’s
effort at pictorial simplification by the members of the “School
of Pont-Aven, particularly in the art of Maurice Denis and Emile
Bernard.

It cannot be our purpose here to discuss how far Gauguin ap-
proved the theoretical doctrines of the symbolist school, or to
what extent he was their originator. They found their justification
in his painting if not in his words. The theories themselves, as
developed by Aurier, Sérisier, and Maurice Denis, differ among
themselves, those of Aurier and Sérisier tending toward the
metaphysical and mystical, while those of Denis are more purely
formal in character.35 They have in common, however, that they
seek to return to the essential elements of art, to rid art of its
anecdotal, documentary character and to make it a reflection of
the important truths of the universe. Even Gauguin, though he is
said not to have liked the theorizing tendencies of his disciples,
wished to cease working through the eye, and instead to “seek at
the mysterious center of the universe.”36 Aurier, in more high-
flown language, desired to “reclaim the right to dream, the right
to the pasturages of the sky, the right to take flight toward the
denied stars of absolute truth.”37 The “subjective deformation”
of which Denis speaks, is an attempt to rid art of the personal
character of “nature seen through a temperament,” by means of
“the theory of equivalence of the symbol” thus making a picture
the plastic reproduction of the emotion caused by a particular
scene in nature, so that by the common symbol the same emotion
might be produced in the spectator.38 Such ideas, they held, only
seemed new because art had been lead astray by an unimaginative
naturalism; in fact they “are at the bottom of the doctrines
of art of all ages, and there is no true art which is not symbolist.”
For this reason “the innovators of 1890 wished to ignore all the
learned epochs, and to prefer the naïve truths of the savage to
the ‘acquired ones’ of the civilized.”39

Maurice Denis has pointed out that synthetism, which only be-
came symbolism in contact with poetry, was not at first a mystic
movement although it implied a correspondence “between exterior
forms and subjective states.”40 If however, to synthetize meant “to
simplify in the sense of rendering intelligible,” it is strange that
the painters should have had any contact at all with poets who

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were following the opposite course. Neither the ideal of Verlaine "pas la couleur, rien que la nuance," nor Mallarmé’s preference for white and his wish finally to get rid of limiting words entirely had anything formally in common with the broad, flat, undifferentiated colors separated by a sharp dividing line and the bright hues that were the goal of the painters. The two groups were, nevertheless, allied in this: both attempted to enter directly into the essence of things and to express them with as little intervening formal material as possible. Charles Chassé has indicated the emphasis of painters and poets on intuition, and has shown the parallel of Gauguin’s eulogy of the savage and Veillet-Griffin’s exaltation of the intuitive responses of illiterate conscripts. Mallarmé went even further than Gauguin, since, not content with interpretation through a symbol, he wished to do away with this also, leaving nothing but the white page, evocative of all because it contained nothing. If artists formally so far apart could recognize this affinity to the point of friendship and discussion, we are not mistaken in recognizing in the desire to return to the ultimate bases of experience one of the main elements of the art of the “School of Pont-Aven.” We have already discussed the largely romantic form—a romanticism partly historic and partly geographic—that the expression of this desire takes in the painting of Gauguin. There is no need to consider in detail the work of the other members of the group, except to point out that aspects of Gauguin’s art become clearer in their work. Thus Sérusier continued the “early Christian” elements of Gauguin, adding, however, a romantic medievalism of the kind that used early French spelling; and Bernard carried on the master’s provincialism in subject matter and the colors of the Brittany period.

NOTES

1 Cf. Max Del, Die neue Melodie: sechs Vorträge (Leipzig: Seemann, 1921), pp. 138-139. "So entdeckte er die ‘Exotik.’ Und in der Gefolge zog nun alles daraus, was Gegenwart gegen das differenzierte Erleben des fi de siècle bieten konnte."

2 Paul Gauguin, Avant et Après (Paris: Crès, 1923); and Noa Noa (Paris: Crès, 1929).


9 Gauguin, Intimate Journals, p. 75. “And I shall maintain that for me the Maoris are not Malaysians, Papuans, or Negroes.” Gauguin’s contention that the Marquesans and the Maoris are of the same race has been supported by recent ethnology. See Ralph Linton, Ethnology of Polynesia and Micronesia (Chicago: Field Museum, 1926), pp. 12, 16.

I0 Gauguin, ibid., p. 69.

11 See below, Chaps. V and VI.

12 The letter and reply were, together, used as a preface to the exhibition, held at the Hotel Drouot, February 18, 1895. They are quoted by Jean de Rotrenchamp, Paul Gauguin (Paris: Druet, 1906), pp. 131-134.


14 Rotrenchamp, loc. cit.

15 See also Gauguin’s dedication of the Intimate Journals. “Moved by an unconscious sentiment born of solitude and savagery—idle tales of a naughty child.” The union of savagery and childhood is characteristic.

16 Ibid., p. 31.

17 Tschann, op. cit., passim.


19 Gauguin, Intimate Journals, p. 22. We must here emphasize the distinction, which we will attempt to make throughout, between the artist’s expressed attitude to the primitive and that actually to be found in his painting.

20 Christopher Gray, Sculpture and Ceramics of Paul Gauguin (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1963), Catalogue Nos. 96, 98, 103, 104, 105, 117, 122, 125, 140, 145. Guérin, op. cit. In addition to those mentioned in the text, there are the following: No. 18, showing a Marquesan stylized face on a log (?) in the upper left corner; No. 30, showing, to the right, a figure like that in the Allen Brooks collection, and, to the left, seated figures like those on the cylinder in the Monfried
Robert Coldwater

collection; No. 84, with three heads showing Marquesan influence but less stylized than these. No. 63 shows a Buddha with one hand in the gesture of meditation, the other that of calling the earth to witness.

April, 1901. He went to the island of Dominique. The change was occasioned by an influenza epidemic, and by the fact that life was said to be much cheaper in the Marquesas than it had become in Tahiti. Charles Kuntzler, Guuguin (Paris: H. Floury, 1934), p. 126.

In the collection of Daniel de Monfried. The reverse also contains a copy of an Easter Island statuette. This combination fits in with the interpretation we have given of the paintings. Robert Rey, "Les Bois Sculptés de Paul Guuguin," Art et Décoration, 111 (1928), pp. 57-84. Gray, op. cit., p. 69, Catalogue No. 125. The print made from the Crucifixion is not published by Guuguin. The distinction between sculpture made as such, and that done as a block from which to print is not always clear.


Gray, op. cit., Catalogue Nos. 94, 95, 96; and Dorival, op. cit., figs. 20.

Apparently Guuguin used the figure he had made as a model, rather than inserting it from memory.

That this stylization is not due to any lack of ability to create naturalistically may be seen from the statue in red tuff now in the Trocadéro Museum.

Figures such as these occur nowhere in Polynesian art. Guuguin's explanation of the Spirit of the Dead Watching (in his Notes éparses), was probably suggested by Poe's analysis of The Raven.


For an analysis of Rousseau's conception of the "state of nature" see A.O. Lovejoy, "The Supposed Primitivism of Rousseau's Discourse on Inequality," Modern Philology, XX I (1923), pp. 165-186. Lovejoy shows that Rousseau advocated what was to him a third, rather than a primeval stage of development.


Guuguin, Intimate Journals, p. 162:

When I am in doubt about my spelling my handwriting becomes illegible. How many people use this stratagem in painting—when the drawing and color embarrass them. In Japanese art there are no values. Well, all the better!

Cf. The Sunflowers, in which there is a copy of Puvis' Hope. The side ways sitting posture, with, however, the full width of the shoulders shown, that Puvis uses in his Normandy (1893) and his Magdelene (1877) is used by Guuguin in The Queen of the Ardilis and Te Moteo; the latter has an Egyptian origin. Cf. Dorival, op. cit.


Quoted in Denis, op. cit., p. 268.

Aurier, loc. cit.

Denis, op. cit., p. 267. The phrase to which Denis objects was first used by Zola in an article on Courbet and Proudhon: "Une oeuvre d'art est un coin de la création vu à travers un tempérament." Émile Zola, Mes Haines (Paris: Charpentier, 1913), p. 24.

Denis, op. cit., p. 271. Cf. Matisse's desire to do away with the "acquired means."


we have seen; grace is an integral part of Guuguin's conception of the primitive. Chassé, op. cit., p. 88.

See for example The Day of the God, where there are three such planes; and Breton Girl and Breton Children where there is a lack of middle ground such as is found in quatrocento portraits.

Cf. The Sunflowers, in which there is a copy of Puvis' Hope. The sideways sitting posture, with, however, the full width of the shoulders shown, that Puvis uses in his Normandy (1893) and his Magdelene (1877) is used by Guuguin in The Queen of the Ardilis and Te Moteo; the latter has an Egyptian origin. Cf. Dorival, op. cit.


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