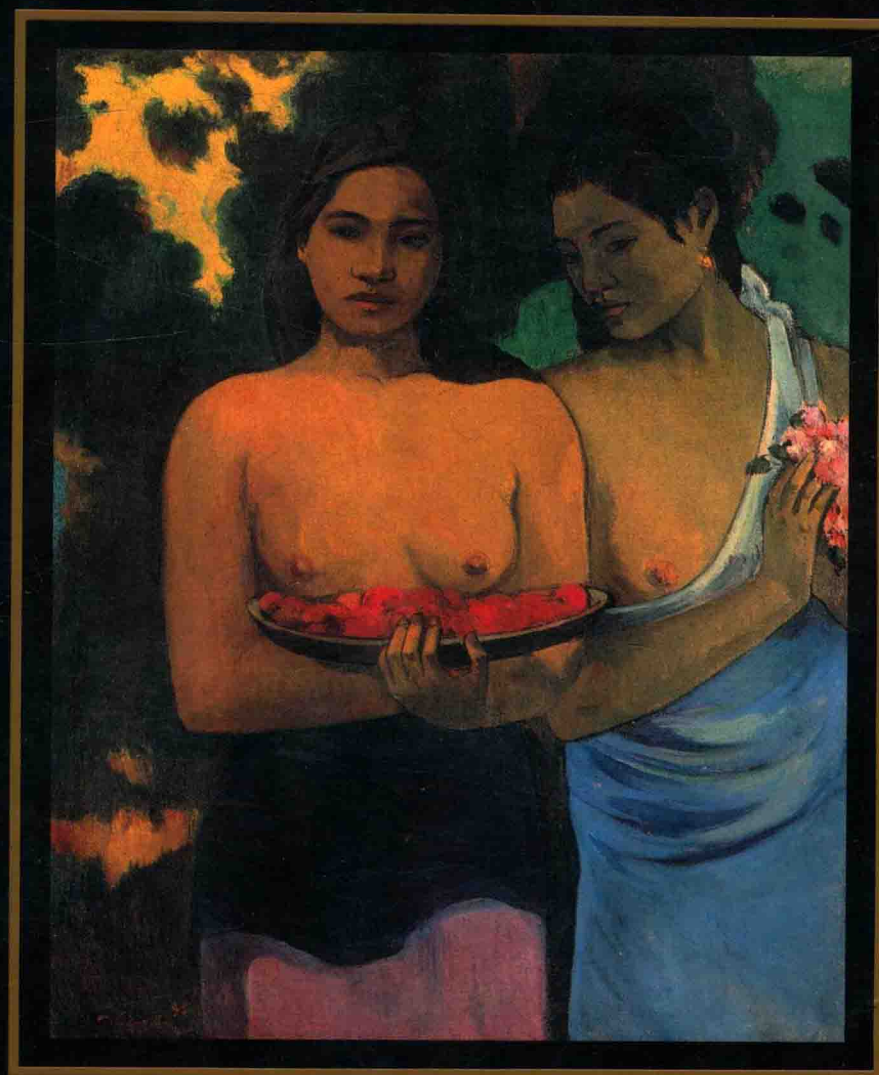


# GAUGUIN



ISABELLE CAHN

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ARCH CAPE PRESS  
NEW YORK

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# Paul Gauguin, the birth of a legend

"When will men understand the meaning of the word freedom – you know what I mean: the right to dare" (Gauguin to Daniel de Monfreid, October 1902).

In the loneliness of the Marquesas, already bent under the burdens of illness and poverty, Gauguin was declaring yet once again the principle that drove him relentlessly through his life and work, bringing him in the end to the final break of exile.

Even while he was still alive, Gauguin's independence and consequent isolation led to a legend, a legend that still survives, the legend of the misunderstood artist persecuted by society and condemned to exile. This myth has blurred all means of a true analysis of the man, putting Gauguin in an isolated position with respect to the men and artists of his time, and has made people confuse his aesthetic challenges for provocations against the established order. Far more words have been dedicated to the traveler and the adventurer than to the painter, the sculptor, the ceramist, the brilliant engraver. The *vahines* and the pink-sanded beaches of his paintings attract attention exactly as do the posters for holiday clubs displayed in our city streets. His work had a subtle smell of scandal and flesh that, by the end of the century, had allure for an industrial and colonial society by then without its own ideals. Far too often his art has been interpreted as an expression only of burning sensuality or of some exotic paradise, and its true meaning has been ignored: freedom, the freedom of the artist-creator.

Gauguin traversed the currents of aesthetics of his time, going from Impressionism to Symbolism without ever falling prisoner to any trend, unceasingly striving to find his personal expression. Degas perceived his nature clearly: "Mind you... Gauguin is a lean wolf, but he wears no collar" (Gauguin to André Fontainas, March 1899). The wolf of fables that roams woods without restraint, that is always in search of new horizons.

His contemporaries looked with skepticism on the efficiency of such emancipation. They preferred the artistic adventures of cafés or ateliers and were only too eager to exchange the paint-smudged rags of a dauber for a redingote and top hat. "One can paint so well at the Batignolles!" exclaimed Renoir. Gauguin instead committed himself entirely to his quest for authenticity, which drove him from Vaugirard to Tahiti, fleeing the dying world of contemporary official painting and the new generations of artistic clubs. Many painters and poets praised the marvels of getting away, the splendors of faraway landscapes, and the inexhaustible sources of inspiration in the East. But only a few risked real adventure, or quickly returned to savor it in small doses within the salons of Paris. In the footsteps of Delacroix and the lovers of antiquities, Gauguin might have crossed the Mediterranean or made the classic journey through Italy or Spain. But he felt the pulse of the violent current of his complex nature in which were mingled the warm and restless blood of the Borgia d'Aragon of his maternal lineage and the lighter imprint of his father, a Republican journalist disappointed in his efforts, who died too soon. His infancy spent in Lima had definitely marked him with the stamp of the exotic, leaving in him the image of "the savage from Peru" and the longing for distant voyages. His awareness of belonging to a double world, one European and the other Indian, forced him to move unceasingly from one to the other of them in search of his identity.

By the middle of the 1870s, Gauguin had started his first artistic fights in the Parisian *melée*. The press then arose against a small group of rebels whom the journalists variously termed "the intransigents," "the impressionables," and even "the impressionists," the last being the name created by Louis Leroy that ultimately stuck. These artistic snipers protested against the academic aesthetics and their official manifestations. They had gathered in a cooperative organization in order to arrange private exhibitions outside the official Salon in which were displayed the anecdotal paintings and illusionistic artifices of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts. In their paintings, the Impressionists expressed a world of ephemeral emotions and perceptions that came from the observation of nature and



present-day life: streets full of people, country parties, scenes of rest and relaxation, gardens. They loved above all to depict the colors of the atmosphere, which they transformed into little strokes of color placed side by side but never mixed together in order to simulate the vibrations of light. At the Café Guerbois and then at the Nouvelle-Athènes, Monet, Renoir, Degas, Pissarro, Zola, and Duranty gathered around Manet, who was considered the leader of the movement although he never presented his works with the rest of the group. The discussions about the new aesthetics advanced at a fair pace. "Nothing was more interesting than these conversations in which opinions constantly clashed," Monet recalled. "Our minds were stimulated, we were all dedicated to disinterested, sincere research, and we had reserves of enthusiasm by which we were supported for weeks, until we were able to give a definite form to the idea. We came out each time more hardened, our will more firm, our thoughts more bright and clear."

When Gauguin joined them in 1879 the atmosphere was no longer so positively bright. Zola blamed the Impressionists for not trying to force their movement into the very heart of the Salon, accusing especially Degas of protecting his reputation by isolation and of creating a clan around himself. "Monsieur Degas has never been one of the persons pestered by the official Salons. He was accepted and even rather well presented. As his artistic temperament is delicate, and he never imposes himself authoritatively, people have passed in front of his paintings without noticing them. Obviously the painter was annoyed and realized that it probably would turn to his advantage to exhibit with a small group, which would allow visitors to notice and consider his refined, accurately completed paintings. Actually, from the moment he ceased being lost in the crowd of the Salons, everybody recognized him, and a group of ardent admirers formed around him." Such factions endangered the unity of the circle. Renoir, Cézanne, and Sisley refused to join the fourth Impressionist exhibition at the very moment Gauguin, invited at the last moment by Degas and Pissarro, presented his works for the first time.

The artistic world of Paris was then in full effervescence. Far from subsiding, the revolution started by the Impressionists had led to two opposing currents of aesthetics: Neoimpressionism and Symbolism. The first, considered a form of dissension with Impressionism, undertook research into colors with the aim of creating them scientifically. These experiments were based on the work of contemporary chemists and physicists: Chevreul, Helmholtz, and Rood. Following the theory of optical mixture, the Neoimpressionists applied colors on the canvas as separate little dots so the eye would then assemble them from a distance. Seurat's *Sunday at the Grande Jatte* (1884), presented at the Impressionist exhibition in 1886, was the first manifesto of the new aesthetics based on the separation of colors, the law of complementary elements, the scientific study of proportions and lines. Pissarro at first joined this movement, but Gauguin did not trust it. He felt closer to the plastic forms of Cézanne, who built up his paintings through masses of color.

Turning away from naturalism and scientific positivism, Gauguin departed from the idea of art as a representation of the physical world. "The future belongs to a subjective world," Redon had prophetically exclaimed on coming out of the fifth Impressionist show. When Van Gogh arrived in Paris in 1886, impatient to finally know this revolutionary way of painting, it was too late. As Van Gogh wrote his sister Wil (June-July, 1888), "One hears so much about Impressionists, one expects so much and... when one sees them for the first time, one is very disappointed, one thinks their pictures are bad, botched up, badly painted, badly sketched, with unpleasant colors." Zola gave the deathblow to the movement by publishing in 1886 a new volume of the *Rougon-Macquart*, *L'Oeuvre*, telling the story of an unsuccessful Impressionist painter who ended up a suicide. Gauguin broke definitely with this aesthetic trend by leaving Paris.

Like many of his contemporaries oppressed by the modern world, he believed he would find the essential values of life that were necessary to his art outside the turmoil of the city. After giving up the material and spiritual solutions offered by modern society, he turned to the world of ideas, striving to express in his paintings the essence of things and their esoteric affinities. Baudelaire had opened the way for poetry, Delacroix, the master of the romantic generations, for painting. As Gauguin wrote (*Diverses Choses*, quoted by Cachin in *Gauguin*), "It is surprising that Delacroix, so preoccupied about color, considers color a physical law and an imitation of nature. Color! This deep, mysterious language,



the language of dreams. And so I can perceive in his works the traces of a fight between his nature inclined to dreams and the flatness of the painting of his time. And in spite of himself, his instinct rebels. Often in many places he tramples on these natural laws and unbridles his imagination."

This aspiration to an ideal poetic world was supported by the artists of the Symbolist movement, which was born in Europe around the middle of the century. The dreams of Odilon Redon, the fantastic visions of Gustave Moreau, and the allegories of Puvis de Chavannes expressed the same taste for the fantastic and the mysterious and an inclination toward interiority. For literature, Symbolism was born officially in France in 1886, the same year of the last Impressionist show, when Jean Moréas published a "manifesto" in the columns of *Figaro*, proclaiming that the aim of art was to "dress an idea with a tangible form." Since 1884, in Rue de Rome, poets, painters, and writers had met on Tuesdays in Mallarmé's Salon, which had become the temple of the new school. Following Verlaine's example, who had set poetry free from rhymes and regular meter, Mallarmé committed himself to the most audacious experiments in writing, trying to radiate pure ideas through the music of words: "Abolished bauble of resounding inanity... At once the musical seventh of sparkles" (Mallarmé, *Sonnet*).

Far from the Parisian circles, in the solitude of Brittany, Gauguin carried on instinctively his search for a complete art that expressed a synthesis of forms and ideas through a correspondence of painting, music, and literature. As Gauguin wrote (letter to Schuffenecker, August 1888), "How many beautiful thoughts it is possible to stimulate thanks to form and color. How down-to-earth are these artists with their trompe l'oeil of the natural details. We are the only ones rowing on board the *Flying Dutchman* with all our imperfections of fantasists. How much more tangible infinity appears to us in front of something indefinite. Musicians rejoice through their ears, but through our insatiable, excited eyes we savor endless pleasures."

The first manifestation of these new aesthetics launched by Gauguin took place at the Volpini café during the Universal Exhibition of 1889. He had arranged an exhibition for a small group of friends, Emile Bernard, Emile Schuffenecker, Paul Sérusier, Charles Laval - "a group of impressionists and synthesists," as the poster declared. The city of Paris was then awash with thousands of attractions, including the Eiffel Tower, which attracted enormous crowds, with its three-hundred-meter height symbolizing the triumph of iron and of the art of engineering. The Volpini exhibition went almost unnoticed, except, that is, for a few young artists - Maurice Denis, Pierre Bonnard, Edouard Vuillard, the heart of the future Nabis group - who discovered for the first time the works of Gauguin. Sérusier had been painting in the autumn, under Gauguin's direction, a small landscape of woods, directly and synthetically transcribing the considered subject into smooth, flat colors. Denis recorded the experience: "How do you see this tree? Gauguin had asked... do you like it green? Paint it green, then, the most beautiful green of your palette. And would you prefer this shadow blue? Don't be afraid to paint it as blue as possible." The final work, *Paysage du Bois d'Amour*, brought to Paris from Pont-Aven, became a talisman, a revelation of art as the plastic transposition of a received impression. One year later, Maurice Denis published his famous pictorial manifesto: "Remember that a painting - before becoming a war-horse, the naked body of a woman, or any other subject - is essentially a flat surface covered by colors assembled in some order." This formula had been directly inspired by the works of Gauguin and his pupils at Pont-Aven.

His reputation as leader of a school now well established, Gauguin planned to create an atelier with his disciples far from Paris in order to live and work sheltered from the artistic battles and from poverty. Van Gogh, Emile Bernard, Paul Sérusier, and Charles Laval were ready to follow him to his "atelier in the tropics." His experience as a sailor had given his manners a certain rudeness that made him unpleasant to some but was much appreciated by those drawn to a bohemian life. Something in between a Robinson Crusoe and a Jean Valjean, he knew how to steer the fragile boat of the artistic galley. His straightforward way of simplifying things had surprised Van Gogh: "Gauguin interests me very much as a man" - he confessed to Emile Bernard - "very much indeed. I have been thinking for a long time that in our dirty work of painters we really need people with the hands and guts of a workman. We need more natural tastes, more loving and tender characters, than those decadent and weary Parisians along the boulevards. Here, no doubt, we find ourselves in front of a virgin creature, with the instincts of a wild animal."



This pure and wild temperament saved Gauguin from the hindrances of success. He soon guessed the sterility of a literary art, the direction toward which his Symbolist friends wanted to draw him. As he wrote in a letter to Daniel de Monfreid, "You know my ideas about all these false ideas of Symbolist literature or the like in painting. So it is pointless to repeat it, and anyway we agree on this subject – and also on posterity – because a good work will last for ever, and no critical-literary lucubration will ever change anything in it. Perhaps with too much pride I praise myself for not going astray into some of these side streets where the flattering press would have liked to draw me, as they did with others, Denis, for example, perhaps also Redon. And I used to smile to myself, though annoyed, when I read the many critics that had not understood me."

During the winter of 1890-91, Gauguin had become a point of reference for the Parisian avant-garde. He attended the artistic and social dinners of the Restaurant Côte d'Or, the social meetings of the Café Voltaire and the Brasserie Gangloff, where the Symbolist writers and artists, the Nabis, sometimes Rodin and Carrière, used to meet. Soon tired of the decadent, confined, and pessimistic atmosphere of this coffee-shop chatter, he did not wait long to fly from the city, as he felt invested with a redeeming artistic mission to which he had to sacrifice all. His Symbolist friends were uncertain between admiration and disbelief, mixed feelings that Mallarmé marvelously expressed in his last address to the painter before his departure: "Gentlemen, to get right to the point, let's drink to Paul Gauguin's return, but not without admiration for this superb temperament that at the moment of his triumph chooses exile in order to fortify himself through contact with distances and with himself."

After hesitating between Martinique, Tonkin, and Madagascar, Gauguin opted for Tahiti. The island had become a French colony in 1880, the year Pierre Loti had published a series of stories in *Rarahu* about a Polynesian idyll that made his contemporaries dream. Haunted by these marvelous images, Gauguin (in a letter to Willumsen) described before his departure the pleasures of his future life in a hallucinating tale: "There, at least, under a winterless sky, on a ground of marvelous fecundity, Tahitians need only raise their arms to pick their nourishment. So they never work. While in Europe men and women attain the fulfillment of their needs only after hard, relentless work, while they writhe among the convulsions of cold and hunger, prey to poverty, Tahitians, instead, happy inhabitants of the unknown paradises of Oceania, know only the sweetness of life. To live, to them, means to sing and to love."

Gauguin left Europe elated with enthusiasm, making true the dreams of Mallarmé, who stayed behind, shivering in Paris. His lines from *Brise Marine* accompanied Gauguin's first steps into legend: "My flesh is sad, alas, and I have read all the books. Oh, to flee! To flee away down there! I feel that birds are intoxicated, living between the unknown foam and the sky!"

After Gauguin had gone, the artistic world of Paris continued living with the feverish syncopated rhythm of events. Seurat died suddenly in 1891 at thirty-two years of age, leaving as a testament to his Neoimpressionist friends only a few paintings. The Impressionists were then living their glorious moments in France and in the United States, where the art dealer Durand-Ruel led an active and profitable policy of exhibitions, confirming Gauguin's prediction that "they are tomorrow's official painters." While Gauguin lived peacefully in the district of Mataiea, Paris was upset by a series of anarchic attacks, a cholera epidemic, and the scandal of the Panama Canal Company. These troubled times were the triumph of exoticism and mysticism. Le Sar Peladan, a very odd magician, founder of an association of Rosicrucians, held, with great hubbub, several mystical-Catholic artistic shows. Neoimpressionists and Nabis presented their works at Le Barc de Boutteville, a painting gallery. In April 1892, Van Gogh's first retrospective took place in that gallery, with six works by the artist who had died two years earlier. There it was also possible to see works by Lautrec, Pissarro, Redon, and even Gauguin, who, of course, was not in Paris at the time.

When he came back to the city in 1893, the artistic scene had again entirely changed. He renewed old times with his Symbolist friends, surprisingly appearing at some of Mallarmé's Tuesdays. "Alongside Redon's silence, I think we can still hear Gauguin's deep, hoarse voice. In between two of his voyages to Tahiti, he attended several times our Tuesday parties. He sat down heavily with his massive body. His chest was covered with a sailor's jersey; with his rough face, his sun-tanned complexion, his enormous

hands, he gave an impression of force and brutality that contrasted with Mallarmé's exquisite manners and extremely sophisticated figure. Gauguin looked like the master of a small coaster, Mallarmé like the master of a fine sail boat that had known no other adventures than those one can meet sailing up and down river on the Seine, whereas Gauguin had coasted the faraway coasts washed by the Polynesian seas" (Henry Regnier, *Nos Rencontres*, 1931).

The works Gauguin brought back from Tahiti were shocking to conservatives and the avant-garde environment and remained misunderstood. The exhibition organized by Durand-Ruel in his gallery in 1893 was a failure, as was the auction sale of his works at the Hotel Drouot in 1895. Disappointed by the ingratitude and incomprehension of the public, of connoisseurs, of critics, and of his relatives, the artist had no choice but to flee still farther away, plunging deeper and deeper into his lonely peace. Only the unknown had for him the incandescence of lava from which flaming images could flare up: "I have dreamt of a green night with dazzling snows, of a kiss rising slowly toward the eyes of the sea, of the flowing of prodigious lymphs, and the yellow and blue awaking of the singing phosphorescences" (Rimbaud, *Le Bateau Ivre*).



*Painters in front of the Gloanec Inn at Pont-Aven, 1879*



# The right to dare

Paul Gauguin was born on June 7, 1848, a year between two revolutions, with the advent of the Second Republic; the year that saw the breakup of the ideals of human fraternity and social democracy. His father, Clovis Gauguin, was the political editor of the Republican newspaper *Le National*. The conservative reaction that followed the failure of the Republic forced him to leave France with his wife, Aline, his little son, Paul, and his elder daughter, Fernande, two years old, for a distant destination: Peru. He was never to reach that mythic country, for he died cruelly during the crossing of the sinister waters of the Gulf of Port-Famine. Peru was the promised land for the Gauguin family, the country of the mythical ancestors of Aline Chazal. Her mother maintained she was the natural daughter of a Spanish gentleman, a viceroy of Peru. On arriving in Lima, the young widow and her two children took refuge with their great-uncle Don Pio de Tristan y Moscoso. In the large family house, Paul spent a happy childhood, cherished by everyone. The return to France, the land of his father, when he was six marked the end to his carefree life. He met with his first defeats at school and with his first flights: "I have always had an inclination toward these escapades," he wrote in the memories of his childhood, *Avant et Après*, "because in Orléans, when I was nine, I had the idea of hiding in the Bondy Forest with a handkerchief full of sand hanging from a stick that I carried on my shoulder." This "itch for the unknown" (an expression he used in a letter to Emile Bernard in August 1889) drew him to sign on with the navy, which he joined at seventeen years of age as a cadet officer, wandering for several years across the seas and oceans of the world. The end of the Franco-Prussian War coincided with the end of his military obligations and put an end to his voyages.

After his mother's death, his guardian, Gustave Arosa, a businessman, photographer, and collector of paintings, played a very active role in the establishment of the young man, who had just arrived in the capital city. Paris was at the time an active financial center, offering clever young men the possibility of easily finding a place in the world of business. Gustave Arosa flashed the advantages of this situation in the eyes of the young man in search of adventure. With the recommendation of his brother, a banker, he engaged his ward as a stock broker with the Bertin Bank. The first successes at the stock exchange transformed the inexperienced adolescent into a young bourgeois anxious to establish himself. A few months after meeting a young Danish girl visiting Paris, Mette Gad, he married her. The couple settled in a cosy little apartment in the ninth *arrondissement* of Paris, a fashionable district. A little boy was born the following year, the first child of

a family of five. During this period of prosperity, when the stock-exchange business offered him some comfort, Gauguin started a collection of paintings. Gustave Arosa, who owned works by Courbet, Delacroix, Tassaert, Corot, Jongkind, and Pissarro, initiated the young man in modern art. Following his advice, Gauguin bought some works from Pissarro at a time when that artist's works were still much criticized, and he started shyly to show Pissarro his own works, for in his spare time Gauguin painted landscapes after the style of the Barbizon School. One of his paintings, *Woods at Viroflay (Seine et Oise)*, had even been accepted at the Salon of 1876. A Sunday painter and art connoisseur, he divided his time between the stock exchange and painting, visiting ateliers, exhibitions, and art dealers. Mette, his humorless, economical wife, watched rather anxiously as Impressionist paintings accumulated on the walls of her apartment: Renoir, Sisley, Pissarro, Cézanne, Mary Cassatt. The atelier occupied a more and more important place in each of the couple's successive apartments. A few family portraits testify to the relative prosperity of those years when Gauguin had not yet definitely opted for painting: his beautiful blond children, often asleep, his model wife, sewing or playing the piano within a bourgeois interior – these idyllic images remained forever impressed on the artist's memory, coming back to him during his hours of despair and solitude. When he declared proudly his new profession of "painter artist" on the birth certificate of his last son, Paul-Rollon, in December 1883, dark clouds had already started to gather on the horizon of his life. He had the foreboding, though without entirely realizing the meaning of it, of the fight that was going to demand of him all sacrifices: the fight for art.

Following that natural inclination that drives man to destroy what he has adored, Gauguin rejected the works of his Impressionist period when he later discussed his production after 1886. However, Impressionism was his artistic cradle. His godfathers had the names of Degas and Pissarro. From 1879 to 1886, Gauguin took part in all the exhibitions of the group. He attended the meetings of the Café de la Nouvelle-Athènes, often following passionately the aesthetic discussions of the new school.

The first somewhat sentimental portraits of his relatives, the conventional still lifes, and the landscapes inspired by Corot were followed by more ambitious paintings made in the open air. At first, Gauguin worked at Pontoise and Osny at the side of Pissarro, his "dear professor," as he called him affectionately in his letters. His first pictures sketched on the new motif studied the changing effects of light, each stroke capturing an instant of emotion. It is possible to notice the same light palette and the same





Paul Gauguin in 1894

vibrant hand in his town landscapes, such as the vegetable gardens and small houses at Vaugirard, a new district of the capital still a little countrylike, where Gauguin had settled with his family in 1877. As a beginner, he was deeply influenced by Manet and Degas. As he related in *Avant et Après*: "I also remember Manet: he was another one never to be embarrassed by anyone. Once he told me on looking at one of my pictures (I was a beginner) that it was quite good, and I answered, full of respect for the master, 'Oh, I am only an amateur.' At the time I worked as a stock broker and studied art at night and on holidays. 'Of course not,' Manet said, 'amateurs are only those who paint bad pictures.' That sounded sweet to me." Supported by these encouragements, Gauguin continued to follow the voice of naturalism. He presented at the sixth Impressionist exhibition a large work, *Nude Study*, influenced by Degas, and it was greeted by the critic Huysmans as a realistic masterpiece. Huysmans admired the plastic representation of the body and the choice of the subject, which was deliberately trivial: a naked woman, sitting on a bed, mending a garment. "It is a girl of our time, a girl that does not sit for the gallery, who is neither lascivious nor affected, who is quietly occupied in mending her little rags. But her flesh is glowing; it is no longer that flat, smooth skin with no freckles, no spots, no pores, that skin uniformly immersed in a bath of rose water and smoothed

out by all painters with a tepid iron; it is a skin that shows the red blood and under which the nerves leap. What reality in all these parts of her body, in her slightly heavy belly that falls a little onto her thighs, in the wrinkles under her drooping throat, her eyes circled with mascara, in the juncture of her knees, a little bony, in her protruding fist holding her shirt! I am glad to acclaim a painter who has felt, like myself, an unconquerable distaste for dummies with small rose-colored breasts, with slim, firm bellies, dummies flattened by a so-called good taste, sketched according to rules learnt in copying plaster models."

The Impressionists took their subjects from modern life, and Manet, Degas, and Forain had a predilection for café scenes or Parisian performances. The café-concert inspired Gauguin for a sculptured medallion with the portrait of a *chanteuse* from Montmartre, Valerie Roumi. This sculpture, accomplished with plaster and polychrome wood, recalled Degas, in particular his little wax ballerina dressed with a real tutu. The sculptor Bouillot, Gauguin's house owner at Vaugirard, had initiated Gauguin to modeling and cutting marble. His first busts resembled the intimist portraits of the 18th century, after Houdon. Gauguin went on practicing sculpture until the end of his life, but this endeavor, unfortunately, did not permit him to earn his living. "You are making a remarkable mistake if you believe that it is possible to earn money with sculptures in wood," he wrote Pissarro in November 1882. "Apart from a few very rare exceptions, there aren't many rich people who would like to pay for an original work."

These obstacles, far from discouraging him, stimulated him in his plastic research. After his working hours, he went to the atelier of the sculptor Aubé, his neighbor in Rue des Fourneaux, in order to observe him model the earth with the tip of his spatulas or mold plaster. In his own atelier, Gauguin started to model clay. This pliable matter, docile under the pressure of the fingers and the caresses of the palms, offered him an intense, primitive pleasure. This first shaping of objects recalled to his mind the memories of the Peruvian potters of his infancy who, unaware of the existence of lathes, shaped their pots with the primitive "colombine" system. Gauguin had not forgotten the collection of pots brought by his mother from Lima and destroyed in the fire of their house during the Franco-Prussian War in 1871. In July 1889 he wrote, "Ceramics are not something futile. Since the most ancient times, with the American Indians, this art has constantly been favored. God made man with a little mud. With a little mud man can make metals, precious stones, with a little mud and a little genius!" Gauguin's first-known ceramics are generally dated to 1886. What were these first attempts like? Ornamental works, small statues or pots decorated with figurines after Aubé, or already real sculptures, like the pots visible in the background of the *Woman with Chignon* or in the *Still Life with Laval's Profile*. These ceramics, with their full volumes and open forms that vaguely recall the body of a woman, witness the expertise attained by Gauguin in the art of modeling.

In painting, his first steps toward his own personal style



came more slowly. He began in his own way only in 1886, after having broken with the Impressionists. Mette took her husband's new vocation badly. She left France with the children in October 1884 and took refuge with her family in Copenhagen. Gauguin followed her to Denmark, where he worked as an agent dealing in tarpaulins and similar material. This exile was the most bitter of all. He returned to Paris in June 1885, where he lived in the direst poverty until winter. With the first warm days he left the city and its worries.

Picking up his pilgrim's stick, like the wandering Jew whose shadow had for a long time haunted his childish imagination inclined to dreams and flights, Gauguin directed his steps to the west in the month of July 1886. He had put together the sum that was necessary to make the journey by borrowing money from his friends, estimating at the lowest possible level the small amount that was indispensable to live for some time protected from need and to concentrate himself entirely on his art. Pont-Aven, a town in Finistere between Quimperle and Concarneau had been suggested to him. It was home to a small colony of artists, mostly American painters. On arriving, Gauguin settled at the Gloanec boarding house. "It is the real hut of the boheme, and life is even less expensive than in hotels. The plaster on the walls is decorated also here with works of art, and in the mornings and evenings it is possible to see, sitting around a table in the street, dressed in the simple bourgeois fashion of the town, artists whose names it is not necessary to print but whose works are often known all over the world," wrote Henry Blackburn. Gauguin retreated repeatedly to this attractive oasis, traveling untiringly back and forth from Pont-Aven and le Pouldu, a little village at a few kilometers' distance, to the seaside. These quiet, desolate lands, exploited for generations by obstinate, enduring farmers, offered him permanently the picturesque scene of their still living traditions. These men and women who lived at the end of the world, with their timeless gestures, ignored totally the turmoil and corruption of modern life. Their universe was reduced to the shadow of their belltower and to their ancestral beliefs. During three months, Gauguin went on accumulating sketches over sketches, working with the crayon or the pastel at studies of country girls, shepherds, landscapes, or animals: geese, cows, rams. He reconsidered his sketches from his atelier to create paintings with country subjects or to decorate with Breton figurines the stone vases made when he returned to Paris in the atelier of the ceramist Chaplet.

Thanks to his countenance of a mature-looking man and to the renown he had earned in the capital at the side of the Impressionists, Gauguin exerted immediately a remarkable authority on the young painters of Pont-Aven. A few weeks after his arrival, on August 15, 1886, he wrote to his wife, "Here at Pont-Aven I lay down the law. All the artists fear and love me, not one of them resists my ideas." Among them were young Emile Bernard and Charles Laval, one of Bonnat's pupils who became his friend and disciple and whom he dragged, hardly a year later, into his tropical adventures.

After a few months of Parisian chaos, of artistic hindrances, and fights with his Impressionist and Postimpressionist friends, Gauguin was again taken by that irresistible need to flee: "I cannot go on living here this frustrating, weakening life, and I want to make any attempt in order to clear my conscience," he wrote to his wife, around the middle of March 1887. He remembered a small island in the Pacific not far from Panama, Tobago, which he had seen during the peregrinations of his youth. He wanted to go there and live like a savage off fish and fruit. Ultimately, he had to give up the island, reached in April 1887, because no land was available at a reasonable price. Trying to make his dream come true, he turned to the other side of the isthmus, to Martinique. To earn money for the journey he got a job with the Panama Canal Company, while Laval painted portraits for the high society of Colon. On arriving at Martinique, the two artists started to work enthusiastically, charmed by the landscape and the grace of the island's inhabitants. "The natives offer the most wonderfully picturesque images that anyone could desire. There is enough to observe and paint, following an entirely new, undiscovered path, for several generations of artists," Laval wrote to Ferdinand Loyer de Puigandeu, in July 1887. Martinique worked a true metamorphosis on Gauguin's painting. His stroke was still impressionistic, but his colors exploded into a range of vivid hues, emerald, coral red, ultramarine, announcing the future Tahitian palette. Among the many subjects that were displayed before his eyes, Gauguin was especially fascinated by the profiles and gestures of the women. "What I like most," he wrote to his friend the painter Schuffenecker, "are their silhouettes, and each day there is a continuous coming and going of brown women covered with glitter full of color, with their everchanging graceful movements. At the moment I am limiting myself to making one sketch after another in order to penetrate their character, and then later I will have them sit for me. Even when they carry heavy weights on their heads, they chat uninterruptedly, their gestures are very particular, and their hands play an important role in full harmony with the swinging of their thighs."

This idyllic situation ended dramatically. Deprivations, suffering, and sickness forced Gauguin to return to France, though without extinguishing his dream of a tropical Eden. Vincent Van Gogh and his brother Theo, an art dealer, were fascinated by his works from Martinique, with their burning colors that, to their eyes, surpassed his works from Brittany.

A few months after his return to France, Gauguin left to restore his health at Pont-Aven and le Pouldu. This second visit to Brittany marked a fundamental turning point in his research in the field of painting. His impressionist technique underwent a metamorphosis under the effects of a simplification of forms and colors, relieving the composition from the expression of depth and volume. He was gradually drawing near the famous synthetic formula for form and color that found its complete expression in *The Vision after the Sermon* in 1888: zones of pure color placed side by side and delimited by a large space forming





*Paul Gauguin seated with other guests of the Gloanec Inn at Pont-Aven*

a clear border. This formal liberation went together with a new representation of space and the subject. In *The Vision* the painter presented on the same plane a real subject – some Bretons and their vicar – and an imaginary scene – a landscape and the vision caused by the sermon on Jacob's struggle with the angel. As Gauguin wrote to Van Gogh in September 1888, "To me, in this painting, the landscape and the fight exist only in the imagination of the people praying after the sermon. This is why there is a contrast between the natural people and the fight in its unnatural disproportionate landscape." Like primitive painters, Gauguin placed side by side in the same space the natural and the supernatural, adding a dreamlike spiritual dimension to reality. He had changed over from a descriptive naturalistic way of painting to a symbolic art. In the summer he painted several open-air scenes with people: bathers, fighting young men, farmers in the fields or on the banks of the Aven River. Gauguin detached himself from the realism of the subject by abolishing depth and anecdotal stories. "Primitive" arts, medieval sculpture, popular pottery, Japanese prints all offered him plastic references from which he unceasingly absorbed a more naive – less learned – expression of reality. The

intentional deformation of some parts of the bodies of his subjects – feet, for example – the simplification of forms, the use of uniform colors, circled by a border, were the characteristics of his new style.

Still working at Pont-Aven surrounded by a few disciples, Gauguin was preparing the project for an association of artists. After some hesitation, he answered favorably an invitation from Van Gogh to come stay with him in Arles and sign an agreement with Theo for the sale of his paintings. On October 21, 1888, he started south, arriving in the sleeping town early in the morning after two days of travel. To seal their agreement, Vincent had had the idea of an exchange of portraits. The self-portrait sent by Gauguin showed the artist against the light, the deeply marked lines of his face reflecting the violent impulses of his character. Its title, *Les Misérables*, symbolized the artist's situation, as he explained to Van Gogh in a letter from October 1888: "The mask of a badly dressed outlaw, as powerful as Jean Valjean, with his interior nobility and sweetness. His boiling blood inundates his face, and the tonalities of fire that circle his eyes symbolize the flaming lava that burns our souls as painters. The outline of eyes and nose resembling the flowers of a Persian carpet