

# Gauguin: Maker of Myth - Seminars 1 & 2

## *Background Notes*

Bernard Courtis - 11 & 18 November 2010

**WAHG**

## Concise biography Paul Gauguin, 1848-1903

Paul Gauguin's post-impressionist style profoundly affected the course of modern European painting. In contrast to the impressionists, he emphasized the symbolic content of his subjects and used broad, flat areas of colour and dark lines to separate objects.

Gauguin spent his early childhood in Peru and was a merchant seaman before becoming a stockbroker. He began painting as an amateur around 1873, making such rapid progress that he exhibited at the Salon three years later. Gauguin, who collected and exhibited impressionist paintings, also collaborated with Camille Pissarro and Paul Cézanne.

Gauguin began painting full time after he lost his job as a stockbroker in about 1882 during an economic downturn. He showed canvases in the last four impressionist exhibitions, subsequently developing his unique style during visits to Pont-Aven in Brittany (1886-1890). In 1888 he worked briefly with Vincent van Gogh in Arles, but they parted ways after an argument.

Searching for an unspoiled life, Gauguin left France for Tahiti. He was disappointed to find the natives had already had much contact with westerners, but was nevertheless inspired by what remained of traditional Polynesian culture. It was only after his death that substantial public recognition of his talent came with an exhibition of his work in Paris in 1906.

### A suggested way of examining Gauguin's works

When studying Gauguin's paintings examine them critically for example are they/do they

- Aesthetically pleasing?
- Naturalistic?
- Well executed and drawn?
- Conceptually new for their time?
- Illustrate new methods of conveying thought?
- Illustrate Gauguin's abandonment of imitative art for expressiveness?
- Convey Gauguin's personality?
- Foster Gauguin's myths

## Gauguin's Art - A summary

He was a leading French Post Impressionist artist, painter, sculptor, printmaker, ceramist and writer. A proponent of wood engraving and woodcuts as art forms. His development of a conceptual method of representation with his abandonment *imitative* art for *expressiveness* through *colour* was an important development in the history of 20th-century art.

Gauguin made use of Impressionist methods. But he did not share their view of the world, or their emphasis on dynamic flux. Impressionism liked to set its images adrift in a shimmering sea of light. Gauguin, by contrast, highlights static detail. From the 1880's Gauguin no longer used line and colour to replicate an actual scene, as he had as an Impressionist, but rather explored the capacity of those pictorial means, that is line and colour, to induce a particular feeling in the viewer. Furthermore he rejected the lessons of perspective space that had been developed in Western art since the Renaissance and boldly eliminated subtle gradations of colour, thereby dispensing with the two most characteristic principles of post-Renaissance painting.

*I should like to keep as much distance as possible from the creation of illusions,"* said Gauguin, in explanation of the coolly analytic gaze he directed to what lay beneath the surface of things.

His art was a narrative of his pursuit of achieving an art that reflected his dual personality and his attempt to find and depict a primitive nature in women. Furthermore he tirelessly reminds us of his work, sculpting his own myth; the subject of his own art.

Yet was he an innovator? *Émile Bernard was painting like Gauguin before Gauguin himself.*

**Images overleaf:**

***Spirit of the Dead Watching* 1892 (upper)**

***Vision After the Sermon, Jacob Wrestling with the Angel* 1888;  
National Gallery of Scotland (lower)**





## Paul Gauguin 1848-1903

### A Chronology (Based on Ingo F Walther' work)

**1848** On 7 June Eugene Henri Paul Gauguin is born in Paris, the son of Clovis Gauguin, a Republican editor and his wife Aline Marie Chazal.

**1849** After Louis Napoleon comes to power, the family immigrates to Peru. Gauguin's father dies on the way. The Mother and children stay with relatives in Lima, Peru.

**1855** Mother and son return to Uncle Isidore's in Orleans.

**1859** Paul goes to the Petit Seminaire, a boarding grammar school in Orleans, where he receives his schooling until 1865.

**1862** Returns to Paris.

**1865** Paul goes to sea as a ship's boy on the Luzitano, voyaging between Le Havre and Rio de Janeiro.

**1866** A thirteen-month voyage round the world as second lieutenant on the merchant ship Chili. Death of his mother.

**1868** Joins the French navy.

**1871** Able-bodied seaman aboard a corvette, the Jérôme, Napoléon during the Franco-Prussian War. After the war Gauguin works as a broker's agent at Bertin's in Paris, and meets Claude-Emi le Schuffenecker. First drawings.

**1872** Gauguin and Schuffenecker together study painting and visit the Louvre

**1873** November: Gauguin marries a Danish governess, Mette Sophie Gad.

**1874** Visits Pissarro and meets other impressionists, and collects their paintings. Studies painting at the *Académie Colarossi*, Paris. Son Emil born.

**1876** Daughter Aline born. Exhibits at the Salon for the first time.

**1879** Son Clovis born. Spends summer painting with Pissarro in Pontoise. His bank and stock exchange deals provide a comfortable income and he continues to buy paintings. Exhibits at the fourth impressionists' show.

**1880** Rents a studio in the Vaugirard quarter, Paris. He exhibits with the Impressionists and the independents.

**1881** Painting with Pissarro and Cézanne. *Suzanne Sewing* is well received. Son Jean Reno born.

**1882** Exhibits at the seventh Impressionist show.

**1883** Quits his stock exchange job. Break with Cézanne. Spends the summer painting with Pissarro in Osny  
Birth of fifth child, Pola.

**1884** Moves to Rouen, but then in October financial straits force him to move to Mette's parents in Copenhagen  
Unsuccessful attempt to be a sailcloth salesman.

**1885** Exhibition in Copenhagen is a failure. Falls out with his in-laws and returns to Paris, taking Clovis. Mette stays in Denmark with the other children. 6

**1886** Working as bill poster. Puts Clovis in a Pension and goes to Pont-Aven in Brittany. Returns to Paris where he meets Theo and Vincent van Gogh and Degas. Dreams of travelling to the Tropics

**1887** Mette visits him in Paris

**1887** In April he and fellow painter Laval travel to Panama and then Martinique. Both fall ill. Back in Paris and moves in with Schuffeneckers. Theo van Gogh buys some paintings and ceramic works.

**1888** February to October with Bernard, Laval and Meyer de Haan in Brittany. Break with impressionism. With Bernard founds "synthetic Symbolism". Paints *Vision after the Sermon*. Solo exhibition at Theo van Gogh's gallery. Late autumn stays with Vincent van Gogh at Arles. Following their misunderstandings he returns to Paris.

**1889** Exhibits twelve paintings with *Les vingt* in Brussels. Schuffenecker arranges a show at the Café Volpin. Goes back to Pont-Aven and influences young painters such as S6rusier, Denis and Bonnard

**1890** In Paris until June. Plans to emigrate. Second stay in Le Pouldu. Acquaintance with the Café Voltaire Symbolists: Monfreid, Redon, Mallarme. Organizes an auction of his paintings to finance his emigration.

**1891** Sells thirty paintings at the Hotel Drouot for 9,860 francs. Quarrel with Bernard. Bids farewell to his family in Copenhagen and friends in Paris and on 4 April takes ship to Tahiti, where he arrives on 28 June. Starts on his auto biographical *Noa Noa*.

**1892** Has serious illness. He is never the less productive and sends seven paintings to Paris.

**1893** Eye disease, loneliness and financial distress oblige him to return to Paris early. Uncle Isidore's legacy alleviates his situation. Rents studio in Rue Vercingetorix. Living with Anna the Java nese

**1894** Farewell visit to Copenhagen.

April to December with Anna in Brittany. Breaks his ankle in a brawl with sailors.

**1895** Second, unsuccessful auction at the Hotel Drouot. 3 April takes ship for Tahiti a second time.

**1896** Builds himself a live-in studio at Punaania. Plagued by illness, depression and financial worries, but still paints.

**1897** Daughter, Aline dies. Definitive break with Mette. Serious illness: Gauguin's health has been ruined by alcohol and syphilis. *Noa Noa* published. Paints *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* 2

**1898.** Attempts suicide; hospitalized in Papeete. Takes a mundane job, until money arrives from Monfreid in Paris.

**1899** Editing two satirical journals. His lover Pau'ura gives birth to a son, Emile.

**1900** Vollard, a Parisian dealer, offers Gauguin a contract and buys pictures; Improvement in his financial position but again hospitalized. Son Clovis dies. 21

**1901** In the autumn, sells his Tahiti house and moves to Atuana on the island of Dominique in the Marquesas. Builds his 'House of Pleasure' on a Catholic Mission's land.

**1902** Quarrels with the church and colonial administration in Atuana. Heart disease and syphilis set him longing for France. His 'friend' Monfreid in Paris advises against returning since it would destroy the myth of the *South Seas painter*.

**1903** The refractory Gauguin is sentenced to three months in prison and fined 1,000 francs. He has neither the energy nor the money to defend himself. Before he can begin his sentence he dies on 3 May, aged 54, at his home in Atuana. Polynesia