Challenging the Myths Surrounding Paul Gauguin’s “Little Marvels”

ABSTRACT

Most conservators have at one time or another been regaled with alluring tales of an artist’s “muted palette,” the “golden” patina imparted to prints and drawings by their underlying sheet tone, accumulated grime or discoloration, or the importance ascribed to a particular paper’s “idiosyncratic undulations” or “enhanced texture.” In these romanticized accounts, the effects of aging are recast as conscious artistic choices bolstered by theoretical aesthetic underpinnings that ignore evidence that is often to the contrary. It is far more likely that these beloved works may well have appeared brighter, whiter, flatter, and stain free when they left the artist’s hands.

Sometimes canonized art historical descriptions can take on mythic proportions and propagate misinterpretation simply because they do not take into consideration the current understanding of an artist’s materials and techniques, their inherent aging, or the outright damage sustained by works of art. Only in recent decades has there been a new effort in art historical scholarship to situate artworks within the continuum of time and space, and to consider their physical properties as organic and inorganic materials that alter with age, light exposure, and, intended or not, mishandling. Several graphic works within Paul Gauguin’s production have been misread in the past. However, when the artist’s biography, influences, motives, and materials are examined holistically, a new dimension can emerge that adds to the understanding of the artworks and the aesthetic motivations that underlie their production.

At the Art Institute of Chicago, research was carried out over four years for a scholarly, online, and interactive catalog of the museum’s formidable holdings of nine paintings, a ceramic, and more than 200 graphic works. A variety of analytical techniques were used from the most rudimentary, such as transmitted light, raking light, UV, and infrared examinations, to the most sophisticated, such as scanning XRF to locate and identify various pigments, FTIR and surface-enhanced Raman spectroscopy (SERS) to identify dyes, and gas chromatography mass spectroscopy (GC-MS) to identify binders in the inks and paints, as well as photometric stereo for surface shape studies carried out in collaboration with scientists at Northwestern University (Cossairt et al. 2015). By focusing specifically on the artist’s complex practice, the understanding of a restless, innovative spirit, known among friends and foes alike as a tinkerer, a bricoleur, or a jack-of-all-trades, who integrated the making of ceramics, woodblock prints, wood-carved furniture, decorative objects, and friezes into his practice, side by side with painting, has been furthered.

THE NOA NOA SUITE PRINTS

When Gauguin returned from his first voyage to Tahiti in 1893, he took a small studio in Paris, where he painted the walls and windows bright chrome yellow, and there, in addition to painting in oils, he printed woodblock matrices by hand without a press to produce his famed Noa Noa Suite—a series of 10 woodblock prints that he made with the intent to illustrate his manuscript of the same name (Stratis 2016a). The artist’s graphic production embraced the printing of dozens of “unique multiples.” No two prints pulled from the same matrix were ever alike. Gauguin’s goal was not to produce a uniform edition but several visually distinct prints from the same matrix, deliberately obscuring the very same imagery that he had so meticulously and painstakingly carved into the block, thereby allowing chance and randomness to play an extremely important role in his process.

From this scientific investigation, it has become apparent that what has been described in the art historical literature as the “relative colorlessness” of the prints, as one scholar put it, is not a result of the artist’s intentions but rather the selective fading and chemical alteration of certain dyes and pigments, as well as the discoloration of paper supports. Pigment analysis carried out using XRF and SERS identified cadmium yellow and a cochineal lake as two of the primary examples of such fugitive media. Ultramarine blue was also identified and is known to be a pigment that is susceptible to alteration in an acidic environment. Using this information, a
handful of works were digitally recolorized, which effectively restored their narratives and linked them more closely to the artist’s paintings. Many works on paper were clearly meant to illustrate similar scenes painted in oils that are appreciated for their vibrant colors to this day.

**MANAO TUPAPAU AND ITS MATRIX**

Although Gauguin experimented constantly and reused imagery interchangeably between art forms, his repertoire of images remained quite static over a period of two decades. However, his experiments with disparate media to represent identical imagery in new and different ways was constantly in flux. Throughout his career, Gauguin sought to eliminate distinctions between art and craft; for him, the making of ceramics, wood carvings, and prints was equal to painting and sculpture.

As research progressed, the relationship between the artist’s wood-carved three-dimensional tikis, his decorative friezes, and his printing matrices became more and more apparent. Although it was difficult, if not impossible, to convince several art historians that there is indeed a direct correlation between Gauguin’s carving of decorative friezes and printing matrices in the physical context of his studio practice, the discovery of the block for *Manao tupapau* in a Swiss private collection makes the relationship all the more

![Image](image.jpg)

*Fig. 1. (a) Paul Gauguin, *Manao tupapau (She Thinks of the Ghost or The Ghost Thinks of Her)*, 1894-1895. Woodblock frieze; 22.5 x 52.5 x 5 cm. Private collection. (b) Paul Gauguin, *Manao tupapau (She Thinks of the Ghost or The Ghost Thinks of Her)*, 1894-1895. Woodblock print in black ink with brush and stencil-applied red, orange, yellow, green, blue, violet, and brown watercolors on ivory Japanese paper, laid down on cream Japanese paper; 227 x 522 mm (image), 232 x 572 mm (sheet). The Art Institute of Chicago, John H. Wrenn Fund, 1946.341.*
tangible. After Gauguin successfully printed a small number of impressions from the block, he returned to it with tools in hand to carve it more deeply and transform it into a bas-relief (Gamboni 2016; Stratis and Perlman 2017) (fig. 1).

**BLOCKS FOR THE SUITE OF LATE WOODBLOCK PRINTS**

Gauguin’s use of discarded and indigenous wood also informed his production, especially after his final relocation to Tahiti in 1895. His *Suite of Late Woodblock Prints* is an innovative tour-de-force in this regard. Many of the surviving matrices from the group reveal their common origins when their grain patterns and contours are flipped, rotated, and placed adjacent to one another, as in *Tē atua* and *The Rape of Europa* (Stratis 2016c, 2017b) (fig. 2).

By examining multiple impressions of prints from the *Suite*, it was determined that in *Ox Cart* and *Wayward Shrine in Brittany*, striations from the edge of the saw are similar, and *Eve, Buddha, and Human Misery* all share a contiguous grain pattern indicative of their common source (Stratis 2016b). In the art historical literature, it has always been assumed that the *Suite* contained 14 prints; however, careful study of Gauguin’s methods to make his blocks, and comparison of their overall contours and grain patterns as displayed in the prints, reveals that the *Suite* included 15, not 14, prints.

**TRANSFER DRAWINGS**

The transfer drawings Gauguin made in Tahiti and the Marquesas toward the end of his life fascinated art historians and conservators alike and warranted closer study (fig. 3, 4).

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When trying to come up with a clever title for this paper, the beautifully poetic statement penned by Gauguin’s dealer, Ambroise Vollard, was selected. He wrote, “It was a fact that Gauguin turned everything that fell into his hands—clay, wood, metal and so forth—into little marvels.”

This quote comes from the English translation of Vollard’s 1936 autobiography Recollections of a Picture Dealer. It is a much-cited statement, having appeared in monographs and exhibition catalogs for decades. However, when attempting to confirm the primary reference for the quote, it seems that the English translator took some liberties, adding the sentence that was quoted here—without any direct reference to Vollard whatsoever. And sadly, when returning to the original French text, no version of this statement is anywhere to be found. Despite disappointment, the quote continued to be embraced regardless of who uttered it. Gauguin left us a legacy of “little marvels” that continue to fascinate and perplex both the casual viewer and those who are determined to untangle the complexities of their making and materiality. Therefore, please forgive this inadvertent perpetuation of yet another myth.

THE EXHIBITION

The curatorial/conservation partnership that began with work for the online scholarly catalog revolved around a mutual fascination with Gauguin’s materials and his artistic process. When research began, there was no way to know that the findings of these investigations would come to shape Paul Gauguin: Artist as Alchemist, an exhibition that emphasizes the materiality of the artworks presented. Gauguin appropriated objects, worked in multiple media, and created a unique visual vocabulary that relied as much upon chance as it did an intuitive, yet firm, grasp of the potential in the assorted materials that he gathered to make art.

LITTLE MARVELS

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NOTES

1. To access the online scholarly catalog, visit https://publications.artic.edu/gauguin/reader/gauguinart/section/139805.

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