

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.¹ 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

Presented at the Book and Paper Group Session, AIC's 45th Annual Meeting, May 28-June 2, 2017, Chicago, Illinois

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



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 drawings² 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,



Fig. 2. Top left: Paul Gauguin, woodblock matrix for *Tē atua* (*The God*), 1898-1899. Polynesian teak wood, irregular; 24.1 x 28.6 cm. Private collection. From Druick, D., and P. Zegers. 1995. *Paul Gauguin: Pages from the Pacific*. Auckland, New Zealand: Auckland City Art Gallery. 54. Top right: Paul Gauguin, woodblock matrix for *The Rape of Europa*, 1898-1899. 24 x 23 x 4 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Harriet Otis Cruft Fund, 36.624. When one of the blocks is flipped and rotated 180°, the two mirror each other. Bottom left: Paul Gauguin, printed by Luc Guérin, *Tē atua* (*The God*), from the *Suite of Late Woodblock Prints*, 1898-1899, printed 1995. Woodblock print in black and brown ink from two blocks on cream Japanese paper with cream fibrous inclusions throughout; 244 x 227 mm (image); 500 x 335 mm (sheet and sight). The Art Institute of Chicago, gift of Gilles Artur and Jean-Pierre Zingg, 1995.373. Bottom right: Paul Gauguin, *The Rape of Europa*, 1898-1899. Woodblock print in black ink on ivory Japanese paper, laid face down on ivory wove paper; 231 x 205 mm (image and sheet). The Art Institute of Chicago, Print Sales Miscellaneous Fund, 1949.934.



Fig. 3. Left: Paul Gauguin, *Nativity (Mother and Child Surrounded by Five Figures)*, 1902. Transfer drawing in brown and black ink on cream wove paper, trimmed and perimeter mounted on cream laid paper (recto); 244 x 221 mm. The Art Institute of Chicago, gift of Robert Allerton, 1922.4317. Right: Detail of Gauguin's *Nativity* illustrating the linear voids in the foreground figures.

left). To do so, photometric stereo techniques to more accurately visualize the drawings' surfaces were developed in partnership with scientists in the Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science at Northwestern University. Gauguin's own words written in 1900 were used as a starting point (Gauguin et al. 1943): "I have just done a series of experiments in drawings with which I am fairly well pleased . . . It looks like a print, but it isn't. I used a thick ink instead of pencil, that's all."

Added to this was art historian Richard Field's insightful 1973 working hypothesis that explained that the "ghost lines" (fig. 3, right) in many transfer drawings were caused by residual indentations in the paper from previous drawings. But in fact, for his more ambitious transfer drawings, Gauguin's process was much more complex and involved several steps. Photometric stereo revealed that there were no indentations in the papers themselves, so the lines had to have been created by some other means. This, it turns out, involved the transfer of ink from a piece of glass from which some of the ink had been removed in a previous transfer (Cossairt et al. 2015; Stratis 2017a).

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

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.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The success of this study is a result of the collaborative and innovative spirit of scientists Céline Daher, at the Centre de

Recherche sur la Conservation des Collections (CRCC) in Paris; Oliver Cossairt, Xiang Huang, Aggelos Katsaggelos, and Jack Tumblin, at Northwestern University's Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science; Marc Walton, at Northwestern University and Northwestern University/Art Institute of Chicago Center for Scientific Studies in the Arts (NU-ACCESS); and Francesca Casadio and Kenneth Sutherland at the Art Institute of Chicago.

NOTES

1. To access the online scholarly catalog, visit <https://publications.artic.edu/gauguin/reader/gauguinart/section/139805>.
2. To view a didactic video explaining Gauguin's transfer drawing process, visit <https://vimeo.com/221656549/55ac5574b0>. Other processes featured in the exhibition *Gauguin: Artist as Alchemist* can be accessed at the following sites: <https://vimeo.com/221656467/77ee96d00a>, <https://vimeo.com/221656512/c080214a36>, <https://vimeo.com/221656617/b594e8f7a1>.

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