



## Gauguin and the Voyage to the Exotic

9 October 2012 to 13 January 2013  
Curator: Paloma Alarcó

To coincide with the celebration of the Museum's 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary, the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza is presenting *Gauguin and the Voyage to the Exotic*, opening on 9 October. Primarily focusing on Gauguin and his flight to Tahiti, the exhibition analyses how this journey to supposedly more authentic worlds resulted in an updating and rethinking of his creative idiom and to what extent this experience affected the transition towards modern art. The exhibition surveys the period that opens with **Gauguin's** visual experiments in the South Seas and continues with the artistic investigations of subsequent artists such as **Emil Nolde, Henri Matisse, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee** and **August Macke**, with the aim of revealing Gauguin's influence on the early 20<sup>th</sup>-century avant-garde movements.

Curated by Paloma Alarcó, Chief Curator of Modern Painting at the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, the exhibition includes 111 works loaned by museums and private collections around the world including the Beyeler Foundation, Basel, the Albertina, Vienna, The Fine Arts Museum, Budapest, and the National Gallery of Art, Washington. Particularly important loans include Gauguin's painting *Matamoe (Death. Landscape with Peacocks, 1892)* from the State Pushkin Museum, Moscow, *Two Tahitian Women (1899)* from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and *Girl with a Fan (1902)* from the Museum Folkwang, Essen. Also important are the loans of works from the Nolde Foundation, which is sending six watercolours by the artist from the series "Natives of the South Seas" (1913-1914), and the Centre Pompidou, Paris, which has lent a significant group of works from the Kandinsky Bequest.

### Primitivism and Modern Art

*Gauguin and the Voyage to the Exotic* falls within the context of the debate on primitivism and modern art. Artists' interest in exploiting the formal possibilities of primitivism and its anti-mimetic potential (which was crucial to the evolution of the artistic idioms of the avant-garde) will be analysed in this exhibition from a new viewpoint, that of the experience of voyaging in search of the exotic within the context of international colonialism.

Artists' interest in voyaging to distant places first manifested itself at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century as a consequence of the Romantic passion for adventure and the new scientific curiosity of Enlightenment

#### Images, Paul Gauguin, from left to right:

*Two Tahitian Women*, 1899. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Donated by William Church Osborn.  
*Matamoe (Death. Landscape with Peacocks)*, 1892. The State of Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts, Moscow.  
*The Girl with a Fan*, 1902. Museum Folkwang, Essen.

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<http://www.museothyssen.org/microsites/prensa/2012/Gauguin/index.html>



intellectuals. Voyaging to North Africa began to be part of the obligatory Grand Tour and was now considered not just a stimulus to the artistic imagination but also as a modern way of looking at life. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the growing scepticism that characterised modern society resulted in the emergence of an overwhelmingly powerful desire to recover lost innocence and to reencounter the self outside of Western conventions. This sentiment encouraged travel to distant places in the hope of encountering a final possibility of salvation in uncontaminated, virgin places. More than any other artist it is Gauguin who incarnates this desire.

More than six years ago the exhibition *Gauguin and the Origins of Symbolism* (Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza and Fundación Caja Madrid, from 28 September 2004 to 9 January 2005) revealed Gauguin's central role in the transformation of European art, from Impressionism to Symbolism, through a type of primitivism based on Breton folk culture. *Gauguin and the Voyage to the Exotic* now starts exactly where that exhibition ended with through exoticism.

The exhibition analyses three principal issues that link up in its **presentation**, which is structured into eight sections. The first is the figure of Gauguin, whose iconic paintings, inspired by his vision of Polynesia, have become not only the most seductive images in modern art but have also exercised a **major influence on the art movements of the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century** such as Fauvism in France and Expressionism in Germany. The second section looks at **the voyage as escape from civilisation**, which would become an **element within the avant-garde's process of renewal**, and the voyage as a leap back to origins, to that paradisiacal, utopian and elemental state that primitivism longed to encounter. The third section focuses on the **modern concept of the exotic and its links to ethnography**.

### 1. Invitation to the voyage

The first section opens with Delacroix's painting *Women of Algiers in their Apartment* (1849). Delacroix was one of the first artists to voyage to North Africa and was a pioneer in his approach to the work of art as a product of the creative imagination. The rhythmic movement and seductive colouring of his Romantic depictions of the Orient would be crucial precedents for modern painters. Gauguin's Tahitian scenes of women at leisure such as *Parau api (What's New?)* reflect Delacroix's influence.



Paul Gauguin. *Parau api (What's New?)*, 1892. Galerie Neue Meister, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden



Paul Gauguin. *Coming and Going, Martinique*, 1887. Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, on deposit at Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid

### 2. Allées et venues, Martinique

Gauguin's brief but intense period in Martinique in 1887 in the company of the painter Charles Laval brought about a crucial change of direction in his work. This first artistic experience among the lush density of the tropics and the charm of the island's people would permanently modify his pictorial language. His new approach is expressed in works such as the celebrated *Allées et venues, Martinique* (1887) in which he constructed the composition from long, oblique brushstrokes that are still indebted to Cézanne and which give the pictorial surface its vibrant texture. Also displayed here are works by Laval, who shared Gauguin's decorative application of the brushstroke.

### 3. Tahitian Paradise

In Oceania, Gauguin focused intensively on depicting the dazzling natural environment and the Maori culture that was in the process of dying out. With his particular synthetist style based on the application of large areas of colour (by this date a visual expression of his emotions and thoughts) and making use of a markedly symbolic content, he painted *Matamoe (Death with Peacocks, 1892)*, *Two Tahitian Women (1899)* and *Mata mua (Once upon a time, 1892)*. They are all examples of Gauguin's Tahitian landscapes in which he recreated a world from the past, now lost forever, in which men lived in harmony with nature.

The progressive deterioration of the artist's mental and physical health is reflected in a phase of darker, more mysterious and sinister compositions. Gauguin began to realise that the tropics were a region in which paradise and hell were close together and his longed-for Tahitian paradise became a "Paradise Lost".



Paul Gauguin. *Mata mua (In Olden Times)*, 1892. Carmen Thyssen-Bornemisza Collection, on deposit at Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid



Henri Rousseau. *Tropical Landscape: An American Indian Struggling with a Gorilla*, 1910. Virginia Museum of Fine Arts, Richmond. Mr. and Mrs. Paul Mellon Collection

### 4. Beneath the Palm Trees

The world of the jungle became a recurring subject in modern art. This universe beneath the palm trees offered artists crucial inspiration for resolving the contemporary crisis of aesthetic, moral and political values and for constructing a new artistic paradigm. Gauguin had transformed Symbolism's analogy between art and dream into a fantasy. By combining the primitive and the savage with these fantasies, he grew and evolved as a creative figure in Tahiti. This relationship between untamed nature, be it real or imaginary, became the ideal route to recover innocence and the true meaning of art for other artists including Henri Rousseau, Franz Marc, August Macke, Emil Nolde, Otto Müller and Henri Matisse.

### 5. The Artist as Ethnographer

The attraction for the exotic becomes evident in the new relationship that evolved between artists and ethnography. As Victor Segalen maintained, what is important is not revealing difference but "eternal incomprehensibility", the irresolvable otherness of cultures, customs, faces and languages. This way of seeing the Other was Gauguin's greatest contribution, through which he invented a new way of apprehending that unknown, mysterious world. As such, he became a forerunner of modern ethnography. Influenced by the artist, the French and German Expressionists maintained this commitment to difference and formulated an artistic gaze on the Other that is to be seen in *Girl with a Fan (1903)* by Gauguin and Emil Nolde's series on the inhabitants of the South Sea islands (1913-1914).



Emil Nolde. *Jupuallo*, 1914. Nolde Stiftung Seebül

## 6. Gauguin: the Canon of the Exotic

In the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Gauguin, that runaway from civilisation, the artist who had become a wild man in order to find a new vision for art, became the new canon for the German Expressionists, the Russian Primitivists and the French Fauves. While many of these artists, including Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Erich Heckel and André Derain, studied primitive art in ethnographic museums, others such as Emil Nolde and Max Pechstein set out for distant lands in search of the exotic. In addition, the various exhibitions on Gauguin after his death in 1903 introduced his pictorial innovations to new generations of artists.



Ernest Ludwig Kirchner. *Two Nudes with Bathtube and Oven*, 1911. Museum Frieder Burda, Baden-Baden



Wassily Kandinsky. *Improvisation 6 (African)*, 1909. Stadtische Galerie im Lenbachhaus, Munich

## 7. The southern Moon

The artists who travelled to North Africa in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were looking to formulate a new language based on light and colour. The Romantic exoticism and the seductiveness of tropical nights that we see in Gauguin's *Landscape with a Dog* (1903), one of the last canvases that he painted in Atuona before he died, find their continuation in works such as Emil Nolde's *Moonlit Night* (1914), a symbolic image from his trip to the South Seas, and in the emotional intensity of the group of watercolours and sketches by Kandinsky, Macke and Klee on display in this section of the exhibition.



Henri Matisse. *Panel with Mask*, 1947. Designmuseum Danmark

## 8. Taboo. Matisse and Murnau in Tahiti

The exhibition concludes with Henri Matisse's trip to French Polynesia in 1930 where he coincided with the filming of *Taboo. A Story of the South Seas* (1931) by the German Expressionist film director F. W. Murnau. During the filming in Tautira, Matisse produced various drawings of the landscape and portraits of the principal actress, which are displayed in this room.

While Gauguin had envisaged his journey as a flight from civilisation, Matisse's trip was a leisure activity but one that would ultimately become the starting point for a new phase in his career. He used his recollections and imaginings of Tahiti in his late experiments with *papiers découpés*, works that are venerated as the culmination of his career and as the last breath of the avant-garde utopia.

## **EXHIBITION INFORMATION**

**Title:** *Gauguin and the Voyage to the Exotic.*

**Organiser:** Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza.

**Venue and dates:** Madrid, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, 9 October 2012 to 13 January 2013.

**Curator:** Paloma Alarcó, Head of the Department of Modern Painting, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza.

**Technical curator:** Marta Ruiz del Árbol, Department of Modern Painting, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza.

**Number of works:** 111

**Publications:** Catalogue, published in Spanish.

## **VISITOR INFORMATION**

### **Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza**

**Address:** Paseo del Prado, 28014. Madrid.

**Opening times:** Tuesdays to Sundays, 10am to 7pm. Saturdays, 10am to 10pm. Last timed entry one hour before closing.

**Ticket prices:**

#### Temporary exhibition:

- General ticket: 10 Euros.
- Reduced price ticket: 6 Euros for visitors aged over 65, pensioners, students with proof of status and Large Families.
- Free entry: Children aged under 12 and unemployed Spanish citizens with proof of status.

#### Temporary exhibition + Permanent Collection:

- General ticket: 15 Euros.
- Reduced price ticket: 8 Euros.
- Free entry: Children aged under 12 and unemployed Spanish citizens with proof of status.

**Pre-booked tickets** at the ticket desks, from the Museum's website and on 902 760 511.

**Further information:** [www.museothyssen.org](http://www.museothyssen.org)

**Audioguide:** available in various languages.

## **PRESS INFORMATION**

[http:// www.museothyssen.org/microsites/prensa/2012/Gauguin/index.html](http://www.museothyssen.org/microsites/prensa/2012/Gauguin/index.html)