Gauguin
A Spiritual Journey
“As to the sale of the pictures, . . . the important thing is to push mine.”
—Paul Gauguin, letter to his wife, Mette, 1885

Gauguin
A Spiritual Journey

Two themes are central to the career of Paul Gauguin (French, 1848–1903): the intimate relationships and professional friendships that shaped his life and work; and his quest to understand spirituality—both his own and that of other cultures he encountered. *Gauguin: A Spiritual Journey* is the result of an exceptional partnership that has allowed more than fifty paintings, ceramics, and wood carvings from the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen to be exhibited for the first time in San Francisco, alongside important works on paper by Gauguin and art of the Pacific Islands from the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco’s own collection.

Gauguin’s connection to Copenhagen through his wife, Mette Sophie Gad, resulted in the development of the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek’s exceptional collection of works spanning his career. Numerous pieces belonged to Mette or passed through her hands, and the exhibition highlights her critical role in the narrative of Gauguin’s life. Gauguin aspired to succeed and innovate as an artist through his exploration of novel subjects and a new aesthetic that would garner interest and critical acclaim in Paris. He drew inspiration from his travels and from a vast visual archive of photography and global art that he gathered throughout his life.

His artistic quest led him to the far reaches of the Pacific, where he explored the depths of his own spirituality and faith. The exhibition includes rare artworks from the Marquesas Islands, New Zealand, and Tahiti corresponding to the time of Gauguin’s travel and work in the region. They offer a unique dialogue between the artist’s oeuvre and the extraordinary Oceanic art that inspired him.

Another exceptional feature of this exhibition is a new video by interdisciplinary artist Yuki Kihara, commissioned by the de Young and the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, that addresses the colonial gaze represented by Gauguin and turns it back toward Western culture.

Christina Hellmich
Curator in Charge, Africa, Oceania, and the Americas and the Jolika Collection of New Guinea Art, Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco

Line Clausen Pedersen
Curator, Danish and French Nineteenth-Century Painting and Sculpture, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen

“What a religion the ancient Oceanian religion is. What a marvel! My brain is bursting with it.”
—Paul Gauguin, letter to his friend the artist Paul Skrøyer, 1892

#deYoungxGauguin
“She [Mette] agreed to let him go, not because she had faith in his genius, but because she respected his passion for art. It was brave of her. It meant she was to assume the burden of maintaining [raising] and educating the children.”

—Emil, eldest son of Paul and Mette Gauguin

France and Copenhagen 1870–1885

Family life, burgeoning friendships with fellow artists, and a consuming passion for painting filled the decade after Gauguin’s 1873 marriage to Mette Sophie Gad, a Danish woman he met in Paris. They lived in France and Denmark, and their family grew to include five children. However, their relationship became strained to the breaking point after Gauguin shifted his vocation from finance to art, and he left Mette and the children in 1885. As Mette made her life with the children in Copenhagen, she earned an income by working and by selling both Gauguin’s own paintings and pieces from his Impressionist collection. She promoted his work by organizing several exhibitions in Denmark. Though estranged for the majority of their marriage, Paul and Mette Gauguin never divorced. They remained connected until 1897, when she ceased correspondence with him after the death of their daughter, Aline, while he was living in Tahiti.

Gauguin embarked on a career in painting without any formal training. As a young man, he had received a Catholic seminary education before traveling the globe in service to the French merchant marines and navy. When he completed his military service and returned to Paris in 1871, he remained close to Camille pissarro, who was named his legal guardian after his mother’s death. In 1877, Gauguin’s exposure to Arno’s extensive art collection contributed to his developing passion for art.

At the home of Gustave Arroux, Gauguin met artist Camille pissarro, who became a mentor, friend, and teacher. Gauguin collected Pissarro’s paintings (including two in this gallery) and more than fifty works by other artists, including Paul cézanne and Edgar degas. He became both a lender to the Impressionist exhibitions and also, as an aspiring artist, an exhibitor. In the early 1880s, Gauguin often visited Pissarro at his home in Osny, a village northwest of Paris, where they painted together.
Gauguin wrote to Mette in the spring of 1886 that he had been introduced to Ernest Chaplet, a pioneering ceramist and designer who was creating innovative stoneware pieces influenced by Japanese and Chinese designs. In Chaplet's studio, Gauguin pursued his own experimental works. Modeling clay by hand rather than at the potter's wheel, he stated his intention was to “transform the eternal Greek vase . . . replacing the potter at his wheel by intelligent hands, which could impart the life of the figure to a vase while remaining true to the character of the material.” Gauguin incorporated into his ceramics a range of imagery and narratives from his travels in Martinique and Brittany. Other sources of inspiration were found among Gustave Arosa’s collection, which included paintings by Eugène Delacroix and the foremost artists of the French Salon as well as ceramics from around the world, and Gauguin’s mother’s collection of Peruvian pottery, which for him were references to his “Inca” heritage. His mother was Aline Marie Chazal, daughter of the French-Peruvian socialist revolutionary and activist Flora Tristan. The Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek holds fifteen of the approximately sixty ceramics by Gauguin known today.
“I love Brittany. Here I find the wild, the primitive. When my clogs echo on this granite earth, I hear the dull, muffled, powerful note that I am seeking in painting.”

—Paul Gauguin, letter to Émile Schuffenecker, February 1888

“...I entirely agree with you on the slight importance that accuracy contributes to art. Art is an abstraction.”

—Paul Gauguin, letter to Vincent van Gogh, July 1888

Brittany and Arles

1888

Gauguin first met Émile Bernard in 1886. They and other artists were drawn to the pension run by Marie-Jeanne Gloanec in Pont-Aven, Brittany, where life was simple and the food and accommodations reasonable. The dramatic coastal landscape and the devotedly Catholic Breton community were compelling subjects. Two years later, Gauguin and Bernard would renew their friendship and exchange of ideas in Pont-Aven. Gauguin embraced Bernard's artistic concepts, and together they became founding members of the Synthetist group, which eschewed naturalism in their works in favor of a more abstract and decorative style intended to evoke the emotion of a subject. While in Pont-Aven, Gauguin was also corresponding with Vincent van Gogh about their respective experiments with composition, color, and technique, and they exchanged self-portraits. In October 1888, Gauguin was invited to join Van Gogh in his Studio of the South, in Arles. Gauguin's visit would last just a few months before ending tragically with Van Gogh's self-mutilation and Gauguin's abrupt departure.
Gauguin returned to Paris in the spring of 1889, during which period he visited the Paris Exposition Universelle. This world’s fair included a juried art display at the Palais des Beaux-Arts, but Gauguin, Émile Schuffenecker, and their fellow artists were not invited to participate. So Gauguin collaborated with Schuffenecker to mount an independent exhibition of their Groupe Impressioniste et Synthétiste (Impressionist and Synthetist Group) at the Café des Arts, operated by Monsieur Volpini, on the Exposition grounds. The large “Volpini” show of more than one hundred works included paintings by Gauguin, Schuffenecker, Émile Bernard, Charles Laval, and others. Although the exhibition did not produce a single sale, several friendly critics, including Albert Aurier and Félix Fénéon, offered favorable reviews, and the show was widely viewed by artists, bringing new attention to Gauguin’s artistic explorations and aims.
"Mr. Gauguin, painter, has been charged with a mission to Tahiti, in order to study from an artistic viewpoint, and for the paintings that might result, the customs and landscapes of that country."

—French Minister of Fine Arts, 1891

Tahiti 1891–1893

In February 1891, Gauguin mounted a successful sale of thirty paintings at the Hôtel Drouot in Paris, enabling him to move forward with his dream to escape to Tahiti in search of novel subjects. In early March, he traveled to Copenhagen, where he would have his last visit with Mette and their children. By late March his application to the French Minister of Fine Arts was accepted, and he prepared to ship out of Marseille. In a letter to Mette from Paris at that time, he acknowledged the difficulty of the situation for her, but he was resolute in his purpose as an artist and confident of their happy life together upon his return. Gauguin arrived in the Tahitian colonial town of Papeete but eventually moved to the coastal community of Mataiea with a young companion and model, Teha’amana. Although he struggled with health issues and financial hardship, his letters state that he was “fairly pleased” with his newest works. He wrote Mette, “I can assert that what I am doing here has not been done by anyone else and nothing like it is known in France.”

Gauguin was eager to learn about Tahitian religion from local residents and aties, but he did not find the wealth of indigenous art and religious objects he had hoped to see in Tahiti. It is evident that he drew heavily for his knowledge from an ethnographic account by Jacques-Barthélémy Bourgeois, Voyages aux Tuamotu et aux Islas de la Société (Journey to the Islands of the Pacific Ocean), published in 1887. Gauguin transcribed excerpts with his own illustrations into a notebook, Ancien culte Maohue (Ancient Maohue Religion), and infused his paintings with religious images and themes synthesized from this and other sources of inspiration.

Gauguin filled the pages of a notebook, titled Cahier pour Aline (Notebook for Aline), with notes about his thoughts and experiences, transcribed passages from writings by Edgar Allan Poe, and poems by Arthur Rimbaud. He also included an epitaph of a painting that he sent to Mette so she could explain it to potential buyers. He prepared this book for his daughter Aline during his first stay in Tahiti. Aline died from pneumonic in 1897 and never received the notebook from her father.
“My exhibition did not, in fact, produce the result one might have expected, but one must face up to the facts. I had fixed my prices very high. . . . The crucial thing is that my exhibition was a very great success from the artistic point of view . . . for the moment I am considered by many people to be the greatest modern painter.”

— Paul Gauguin, letter to Mette, Paris, December 1893

Paris and Brittany
1893–1895

In 1893, without the money to purchase a ticket back to France, Gauguin was repatriated from Tahiti by the French government. He arrived in Marseille destitute but with sixty-six paintings from his stay. An exhibition Mette organized that spring in Copenhagen included some of his newest compositions but proved a disappointment. In November Gauguin sought and received critical success in Paris for a solo exhibition at the Durand-Ruel Gallery, featuring forty-one paintings, though few works sold. Despite marital strife and the financial disappointment of his artistic endeavors, Gauguin stayed in Europe in an attempt to enhance his stature. With poet Charles Morice, he began preparing the illustrated memoir of his time in Tahiti, Noa Noa, to promote the works he created there. Gauguin also rented a studio, where he organized gatherings of artists and friends and lived with a young woman, Annah, and her pet monkey, Taoto. He painted his studio walls chrome yellow and hung his paintings from Tahiti and artworks from the Pacific and Africa.
“I think that in the Marquesas, where it is easy to find models, and with new country to explore—that I shall do beautiful things... The public has grown so used to Tahiti.”

—Paul Gauguin, letter to Georges-Daniel de Monfreid, 1891

**Tahiti and the Marquesas**

1895 –1903

Gauguin arrived back in Tahiti in September 1895, and by the end of the year he had settled in Punauia, a suburb of Papeete, in a Tahitian-style house. In January he was joined by a young companion and model, Pau'ura a Tai. While working on a monumental canvas that presented existential questions through its subject matter and title—*D'où venons nous / Que sommes nous / Où allons nous (Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*)—Gauguin wrote the essay “Catholicism and the Modern Mind,” a philosophical exploration of world religions and critique of the social institutions of church and marriage. In 1901 he moved to the Marquesas Islands, where he hoped to finally find a place “where Oceania is not yet swamped by European civilization.” He turned much of his energy to solidifying his artistic legacy and to further exploring his spiritual musings through both writing and painting. His memoir *Avant et après*, finished in 1903, served, in Gauguin’s words, as “at once a vengeance and a means to make myself known and understood.”

Share your thoughts: #deYoungxGauguin
Yuki Kihara (b. 1975, Sāmoa)

First Impressions: Paul Gauguin, 2018

HD video; 16:9; 2 episodes from 5-part episodic talk show series; each 13 minutes

Courtesy of the artist

Among Paul Gauguin’s figurative paintings, some subjects are believed to depict Indigenous Māhu, or Tahitian “third gender” individuals. In Sāmoan culture, the equivalent of Māhu is a Fa’aafafine—an Indigenous queer minority known to be gifted in the spirit of more than one gender, or “third gender”; the term is also used broadly to describe those who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex, or nonbinary (genderqueer) in the Western context. Sāmoa-based artist Yuki Kihara, who identifies as a Fa’aafafine, has been commissioned by the de Young and the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek to create this new video work, which features Fa’aafafine turning the colonial gaze, represented by Gauguin, back upon Western culture. Gauguin never visited Sāmoa, but his works mirror those by a number of Western artists who worked in the Pacific Islands and produced paintings that represented a romantic view of life in timeless villages untouched by Western colonization. First Impressions: Paul Gauguin, filmed in Sāmoa, features Kihara’s Fa’aafafine friends sharing their initial “first impressions” of selected Gauguin paintings created during his time in the Pacific, including two that are featured in the exhibition, Reclining Tahitian Women or The Amusement of the Evil Spirit (Arearea no varua ino), and Tahitian Woman with a Flower (Vahine no te tiare).