

# GAUGUIN'S WOODCUTS

Like many artists before and after him, Paul Gauguin used the medium of the print to recapitulate and initiate ideas and images. The first lithographs (1889) and the first woodcuts (1894) both summarized the creative years which preceded and carried stylistic trends further. In the first series of ten woodcuts, which may be called the Noa Noa Suite after the manuscript they were to illustrate, Gauguin compressed much of his mythological constructions of the Tahitian past—images of his first voyage to Oceania, 1891-93. At the same time he found a medium which could not only unite the optical and abstract qualities of his paintings but also straddle the esthetics of painting and sculpture. Gauguin was passionately concerned with the

creation of objects by hand—the shaping or carving of clay and wood—in which the more primitive or historically fundamental styles would again assert themselves. By contrast, painting was the expression of a civilized and conventionalized culture; Gauguin felt compelled to try to bridge the gulf that had come to separate the two ideals—and, internally, to unite the savage and the sensitive aspects of his own soul. The woodcut provided an opportunity to do this in terms of coalescing broad, decorative forms with subtle, coloristic optical description. It also allowed for the creation of a dark image which would evoke the mysterious night world Gauguin associated with Tahiti, and, by extension, with his own subconscious. And, finally, the woodcut



*TE PO (The Night)*  
Woodcut, 1894. G. 15  
Edition of 1921

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*TE ATUA (The Gods)*  
Woodcut, 1894. G. 30  
Edition of Louis Roy, 1894  
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Woodcut numbers preceded by G. refer to Marcel Guérin, *L'Oeuvre gravée de Gauguin*. Paris, 1927 . . . All Philadelphia Museum of Art photographs are by the staff photographer, Al Wyatt.

—EDITOR



*MANAO TUPAPAU*  
(She thinks of the Spirit of the Dead)  
Woodcut, 1894. G. 18  
Edition of 1921

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**NAVE NAVE FENUA**  
(Land of Sensuous Pleasure)  
Woodcut, 1894. G. 27  
Edition of 1921  
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**MAITRAKANYAKA — JATAKA**  
(Arrival at Nandana)  
Stone relief from the Temple of Borobudur, Java, 12th century. Photograph from N. J. Krom, *Beschrijving van Barabudur*, The Hague, 1920. The source for many images, including the Eve of 1890 and the woodcut, Nave Nave Fenua of 1894. The style of the Borobudur reliefs fitted perfectly Gauguin's quest for a simpler figure type. The heavy, imperfectly articulated, earthy limbs of the Javanese personages, arranged with a slow grace and ordered with a deliberate and archaic rhythm, influenced even some of the Breton paintings. In Tahiti it was as if Gauguin's personal style found an objective correlation with the Tahitian physique itself.



**EVE**  
Woodcut, 1898-99. G-57  
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**EVE AND THE SERPENT**  
Doorjamb sculpture from the church at Guimiliau, Brittany. 17th or 18th century. Gauguin and his friends were fascinated by the crude but expressive, weathered Calvaries scattered throughout Brittany. Although these and other indigenous arts do not appear often in Gauguin's painting or sculpture (a parallel to the same small influence exerted by primitive arts when Gauguin was in the South Seas), this Eve is quite surely the source for the more "European" of the Eves he created while in Tahiti.



**PAPE MOE (Mysterious Water)**  
Monotype and Watercolor, ca. 1894  
COURTESY OF THE ART INSTITUTE OF CHICAGO



**TAHITIAN DRINKING FROM A WATERFALL**  
Photograph of ca. 1885-90  
COURTESY OF H. ROGER VIOUET, Paris  
It is indicative of the archaic character of the monotype, oil painting, and wood relief which this photograph inspired, that they were formerly considered as being derived from some Egyptian source. Recent research (mostly by Danielsson, Gray, and Field) has shown how often Gauguin turned to contemporary photographs, how he was friendly with several photographers, and how many internal relationships are shared by old photographs and Gauguin's compositions.

enhanced the suggestive and symbolic qualities of the images, for, as compared with painting, it did not demand complete, narrative compositions. The later woodcuts, in fact, display considerable fantasy elements.

The woodcuts fall into five groups. First and most important is the Noa Noa Suite of early 1894; these offer the greatest synthesis of style and imagery and are also the most complex compositions. There survive no more than a dozen impressions by Gauguin himself from any of the ten blocks; one often encounters instead the later editions by Louis Roy (with added color blocks) or Gauguin's son, Pola, whose painstaking experiments enabled him to capture every nuance of cutting and scraping. The next group is quite varied and probably dates from the summer and fall of 1894; of these nine, very few are represented by more than a half-dozen impressions. Most are experimental and two (Guérin numbers 36 and 42) are to be thought of as impressions from low reliefs. Illustrated are two of Gauguin's archetypal figures, *Hina* and *Oviri* (G. 44 and 48).

In 1895 Gauguin returned to the South Seas. The winter of 1895-96 witnessed a tentative return to woodcutting; a small group of five (mostly known in two or three impressions each) includes the little double image of a woman gathering fruit and the savage monster, *Oviri*, reproduced here.

The dating of the next group of fifteen major woodcuts is problematical. Certainly they were all executed by the end of 1899, but whether they represent a continuous effort commenced before the suicide attempt of late 1897 is impossible to say. These works are cruder than the Noa Noa Suite, reflecting the nature of the woods and tools available, as well as paralleling the tendency to simplify the subjects and figures in the paintings. A work such as *Soyez Amoureuses* (G. 58) is no longer a scene but a collection of personal symbols arranged in a decorative fashion within a curvilinear, simply textured frame. There is a simplicity which Gauguin likened to the earliest (around Dürer) woodcuts he knew, and there are similarities with contemporary European decoration which need not be labored. The last batch of cuts, about fifteen, seems to fade into pure decoration, repeating single figures previously used and occasionally offering satirical themes appropriate to Gauguin's journal, *Le Sourire*, which they illustrated in 1899 and early 1900.

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**IDOLE TAHITIENNE**  
(Tahitian Idol)  
Woodcut, 1894. G. 44  
COLLECTION OF  
MR. AND MRS.  
SAMPSON R. FIELD,  
New York City



**MAHANA ATUA (The Day of the God)**  
Woodcut, 1894. G. 42  
Edition of 1921  
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**CHANGEMENT DE RÉSIDENCE (Change of Residence)**  
Woodcut, 1898-99. G. 66  
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