

BUDDHIST IMAGERY IN THE WORK OF PAUL GAUGUIN:  
THE IMPACT OF PRIMITIVISM, THEOLOGY  
AND CULTURAL STUDIES

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MASTER OF ARTS

by  
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University of Missouri-Kansas City, 2014

ABSTRACT

Scholars attribute aesthetics in Gauguin's work to the 1889 Paris *Exposition universelle* and Gauguin's quest for the primitive and "exotic." This study takes a deeper look at Gauguin and examines the personal context in which his works were created. This will show Gauguin's immense suffering and unhappiness as a result of separation from family, financial and health struggles. The personal context of the artists' life, I argue, influenced the appropriation of Buddhist imagery in his work.

I examine the visual elements within Gauguin's work that link his subject matter to Buddhism and look closely at several major works, including *Nirvana*, *Self – Portrait*, *Caribbean Woman*, and *Te nave nave fenua* that clearly appropriate Buddhist imagery. Gauguin's incorporation of *mudras*, color palettes, and other subject matter express his Buddhist sympathies. His appropriation of formal motifs served his spiritual beliefs just as much as his aesthetic purposes. My research draws on recent scholarship on Gauguin, and utilizes the artist's personal letters and manuscripts. Through these letters I examine Gauguin's failed marriage, his struggles with health and financial issues and his drive to be an artist. It is in this context of marital conflict and personal struggle that Gauguin's embrace

of Buddhist imagery should be understood. Although Buddhist motifs were among many exotic elements appropriated by Gauguin, including PreColumbian, Egyptian, Marquesan, and Tahitian, they alone carried a particular personal significance for the artist.

## APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of The College of Arts and Sciences have examined a thesis titled “Buddhist Imagery in the Work of Paul Gauguin: The Impact of Primitivism, Theology and Cultural Studies,” presented by Sara Camiscioni, candidate for the Master of Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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## CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	iii
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS.....	vii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	viii
Chapter	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. THE PERSONAL CONTEXT OF SUFFERING AND UNHAPPINESS.....	10
3. BUDDHIST IMAGERY IN THE WORK OF PAUL GAUGUIN.....	19
ILLUSTRATIONS.....	36
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	49
VITA.....	53

## ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure	Page
1. Nirvana, Portrait of Meyer de Haan, Paul Gauguin, 1890, oil thinned with turpentine on silk, 20 x 29 cm .....	37
2. Self-portrait, 1889, Paul Gauguin, oil on wood 79.2 x 51.3 cm .....	38
3. Caribbean Woman with Sunflowers, Paul Gauguin, 1889, Oil on canvas, 64 x 54 cm .....	39
4. The Spinner (Joan of Arc), Paul Gauguin, 1889, Fresco in wooden support, 52.76 x 24.76 in .....	40
5. Poemes Barbares (Savage Poems), Paul Gauguin, 1896, Oil on canvas, 64.8 x 48.3 cm .....	41
6. Te nave nave fenua (The Delightful Land), Paul Gauguin, 1892, Oil on Canvas .....	42
7. Dancers in the kampong, photograph. ....	43
8. Bouddha, Paul Gauguin, 1898-99, Woodcut on Japan tissue, 30.5 x 22.5 cm .....	44
9. Idole á La Perle, Paul Gauguin, 1889-90, Tamanu wood, 23.50 cm. ....	45
10. Martinique Woman, Paul Gauguin, 1889, Painted terracotta .....	46
11. The Assault of Mara, reliefs from the temple of Borobudur, Java .....	47
12. Seated Buddha, U-Thong, 12-13th Century .....	48

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## DEDICATION

To my mother, and Aaron.

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

I have heard the news of Vincent's death...Distressing as this death is, I cannot grieve overmuch, as I foresaw it, and knew how the poor fellow suffered in struggling with his madness. To die at this moment is a piece of good fortune for him, it marks the end of his sufferings; if he awakens in another life, he will reap the reward of his good conduct in this world (according to the teaching of Buddha)<sup>1</sup>

Paul Gauguin's painting *Nirvana, Portrait of Meyer de Haan*, 1889-90, (Figure 1) reflects Gauguin's appropriation and understanding of Buddhist imagery and his belief in Buddhism's spiritual teachings. The painting presents Meyer de Haan, a friend of Gauguin, draped in a vivid blue and white robe. De Haan's hands are wrapped with a golden, tendril-like snake and display a Buddhist *mudra*-esque pose.<sup>2</sup> Enhancing the snake-like imagery are De Haan's pointed ears and slanted eyes. Behind him, green and white waves crash upon a rocky shoreline where three naked women appear. The female figures represent the three stages of desire: longing, enactment, and loss.<sup>3</sup> A red-headed woman with her back to viewers flings her arm into her mouth while a second woman stands upright against her body. The second figure has a black-hatted head and fuses with the congenitally deformed body of de Haan. Together, they stand to suggest the two sides of desire: the abandonment to it and freedom from it; thus, Nirvana.

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Gauguin, *Lettres de Gauguin a sa femme et a ses amis* (Paris: Éditions Bernard Grasset, 1946), p. 200.

<sup>2</sup> A *mudra* is a symbolic or ritual hand gesture in Hinduism and Buddhism.

<sup>3</sup> Eric Zafran, "Finding Nirvana" in *Gauguin's Nirvana Painters at Le Pouldu 1889-90* (Hartford: The Wadsworth Antheneum Museum of Art, 2001), 103-27.

By looking at Gauguin's personal life and the disillusionment he felt as a result of his failed marriage and family life, I will connect the suffering experienced in Gauguin's life with his work, which often expressed his search to alleviate desire and suffering. In the frequent exchange of letters between Paul and Mette Gauguin, the disconnect between the two lovers can be felt. Through the letters, readers can also gain insight into why Mette believed the marriage was failing, and why Paul began to resent the institution of marriage and its role in society. The artist would eventually leave his family in order to follow his dreams of finding the exotic "Other," and going back to a 'primitive' 'natural' state to create his work.<sup>4</sup> I suggest that it is the suffering Gauguin endured while he remained in this marriage that furthered his interest in Buddhism as a means to alleviate some of his spiritual distress. Another cause of suffering was the separation he experienced from his family, mainly his children. Gauguin frequently wrote that he wondered if his family even knew he existed anymore, if they even thought of him, because countless months would pass without communication. Gauguin frequently wrote about the distress he felt over spending holidays alone and away from his family. Furthermore, he felt resentful of his inability to financially support himself and his family, which caused considerable stress and suffering to his wife and children. In addition, the artist often fell ill for extended periods of time due to his inability to care for himself without money.

The physical pain and suffering that Gauguin experienced for a large portion of his life greatly motivated his search for something deeper and more meaningful in his life and work. Gauguin's ever-growing disillusion with bourgeois society and his passion for creating

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<sup>4</sup> The term "primitive" is used in this essay to show it is a cultural construct, a way in which Western viewers see. The derogatory term shows progress in the understanding of other cultures. For more on Primitivism as the art historical movement with a deliberate regression of Western art towards the cultural construct, see Frances S. Connelly, *The Sleep of Reason: Primitivism in European Art and Aesthetics, 1725-1907* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995, 1998).

his art fueled his decision to follow a career as an artist. To be successful, he urgently needed to establish himself elsewhere in order to try and earn acclaim for his work. This led to the artist's short working periods in Brittany, Martinique, and Arles - all before 1888 - experiences which would influence his stylistic development. The frequent periods of travel reveal that Gauguin had a reoccurring tendency to wander, to travel in search of profound experiences. He searched for the intangibles, a "primitive" lifestyle along with an "exotic" other. He was in search of some geographical answer to his professional and personal quests.

Through the examination of his personal life, I will establish that Gauguin's immense suffering led him to a deeper spiritual life, which was reflected in his work and writings. To understand the expressions of spirituality in his work, I look closely at several major works from Gauguin which, I argue, clearly depict Buddhist imagery. By studying the visual elements in his work, I demonstrate that Gauguin's incorporation of *mudras*, color palettes, and other subject matter expresses his Buddhist sympathies. His appropriation of formal motifs served his spiritual beliefs, just as much as his aesthetic purposes. Gauguin followed his dreams in hopes of fulfilling his artistic passions, and in doing so I believe he thought his life would be easier. He believed he would be less reliant on the conventions of society such as finances, housing, and traditional romantic relationships. What Gauguin actually experienced and often wrote about was quite the opposite.

Gauguin was exposed to Buddhist theory in several ways. He frequently wrote to and worked from 1887-1890, alongside Vincent van Gogh, who was an avid reader of Buddhist philosophy. It is my belief van Gogh greatly impacted Gauguin's exposure to Buddhism. Additionally, Gauguin's relationship with Meyer de Haan, a philosopher of Eastern religions, exposed him to Haan's philosophical interpretations of Eastern religion that had grown

increasingly popular in France. Amidst the suffering he encountered in this period of his life, the artist frequently exchanged ideas and letters in which elements of Buddhism were discussed. Dissatisfied with his bourgeoisie life Gauguin had existential longings. Translated versions of Buddhist texts circulated among Gauguin's circle of friends and acquaintances.<sup>5</sup> In the late nineteenth century in Europe, there was a renewed interest in Eastern religions, particularly Hinduism and Buddhism. Theosophy, inspired by Eastern religions was a 'synthesis of all religion' and although Gauguin never considered himself a Theosophist, his works testify to his interest in religion. Buddhist texts circulating Gauguin's inner circle were *Le Bouddha et sa religion*, a short text which featured a twenty-seven page description of the word Nirvana in the section "Le Nirvana Bouddhique" debating the meaning and understandings of Nirvana. Additionally, the report published by E. Burnouf in 1844 *Le Petit Robert* reports the first recording of the word "Nirvana" which is believed to be the earliest explanations of Buddhism. In the article, Burnouf discussed the importance of the term Nirvana and its associations with Buddhism. These teachings and ideas on Buddhism were translated into French in the 1870s by German Philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer's teachings were read by the "Nirvanistes," those in the French literary circles who were fascinated by Buddhist and Hindu doctrines. The accessibility and presence of spiritual writings enabled Gauguin to produce an alternate lifestyle that subsequently influenced his art as well as his life. In chapter two, I explore Gauguin's *Self portrait with Halo* (Figure 2) and *Nirvana, Portrait of Meyer de Haan* (Figure 1) as expressive of his mental suffering and the struggles which he had with desires of the romantic kind. My work is informed by the critical scholarship on primitivism, theology, and cultural studies.

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<sup>5</sup> Gustave Flaubert's *Temptation of St. Anthony* is an example. Flaubert wrote about the saints' exotic visions which included an appearance by Buddha. Also, see poetry by Leconte de Lisle and Henri Cazalis. (Bass, p. 110-15). See also the writings of Emile Schuffenecker, fellow artist and loyal friend of Gauguin.

In "Going Native: Paul Gauguin and the Invention of Primitivist Modernism," Abigail Solomon-Godeau argued that the mythic narrative put forth in the 1988 exhibition at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., The Art of Paul Gauguin, perpetuated the personal mythology created by Gauguin himself.<sup>6</sup> The author took a critical position on Gauguin, problematized much of what we know about him. Solomon-Godeau examined Gauguin's life, and concluded that it reveals a negative paradigm of primitivism. She wrote "...in Gauguin's art the representation of the feminine, the representation of the primitive, and the reciprocal collapse of one into the other, has its analogue in the very process of his artistic production...the life of Gauguin, the art of Gauguin, the myth of Gauguin...a Borgesian labyrinth of pure textuality."<sup>7</sup> Gauguin's quest for the exotic in a distant geographical location is the perfect example of the white man escaping his bourgeois life and, portraying it as a journey of self-discovery, without acknowledging the power dynamics involved. Solomon-Godeau portrayed Gauguin's appropriation of "primitive" cultures as another form of imperialism. It was this journey outwards which took Gauguin to Tahiti. This quest, I argue, also took Gauguin on a deeper spiritual journey, summed up in a historical novel by Conrad, "The journey out, is, in fact, always a journey in."<sup>8</sup> The work Gauguin created during his time in Tahiti aligns with the imagery in the artist's photographs of the ancient Buddhist site of Borobudur, and incorporate the mudras that the Javanese dancers used at the 1889 *Exposition universelle*.

Jacquelyn Bass and Eric Zafran have each dedicated their recent publications to interpreting the underlying Buddhist meaning in Gauguin's work. By looking closely at the

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<sup>6</sup>Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Going Native: Paul Gauguin and the Invention of Primitivist Modernism." *Art in America*, (July, 1989), 118-29.

<sup>7</sup> Abigail Solomon-Godeau, *Going Native*, 328.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1902), 21.

mudras which are reoccurring themes in the artists' work, the scholars firmly conclude that the artist understood the deeper teachings of Buddhism and he intentionally and quite specifically incorporated the religion's imagery into his work. In the essay "Searching for Nirvana" in Gauguin's Nirvana: Painters at Le Pouldu 1889-90,<sup>9</sup> Eric Zafran discusses the intricate link between Buddhism and Gauguin's work, using period sources and letters to support the association. Zafran also looks at common expressive and aesthetic themes of *mudras* and their source in Buddhism. In addition, the titles of works such as *Nirvana* are analyzed against the subject of the work. Both Zafran and Jacquelynn Bass believe Gauguin's interest in Buddhism stemmed from his struggles with desire and suffering. Additionally, they trace the Buddhist imagery and meaning in Gauguin's work to his knowledge of the religion, and exposure to religious texts.

In her 2013 publication, *Art and Exoticism in Colonial Tahiti*, Elizabeth Childs dedicates two chapters to an in-depth examination of the role Tahiti and colonialism had on the art and life of Gauguin.<sup>10</sup> Childs examines Gauguin's travel-filled upbringing which, she argues, had a significant impact on his life-long desire to continue travelling in search of the "primitive," or societies removed from modern Parisian life. Childs explains how this desire led him to his life in Tahiti, where he lived in what he described as "savage" traditions and took a young Tahitian girl as his female companion. The author observes that Gauguin sought to accomplish this by adopting the European idea of a "savage:" living in a grass hut, attempting to hunt and fish for his food, and having sex with young native girls. For the relevance of this paper, Childs brings into view the economic circumstances, physical health

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<sup>9</sup> See Eric Zafran, *Finding Nirvana*, 103-27.

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Childs, *Vanishing Paradise: Art and exoticism in colonial Tahiti* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2013).

and habits, desires, ambition, and longing that shaped Gauguin's experiences while traveling, thus calling into question the work he produced while in Tahiti: Was it the actual life and reality of Tahiti depicted in his imagery, or was he simply interpreting the island through the lenses mentioned above and appropriating imagery which satisfied his pre-established requirements?

It is certainly true that Gauguin's representations of Tahiti drew far more from Buddhist sources than from direct observation of Tahitian art forms. While living and working in Tahiti, Gauguin drew much of his inspiration from the photographs of Borobudur, which he then combined with his recent exposure to the colonized peoples on display at the *Exposition universelle* in Paris in 1889, and the art and architecture of the colonies showcased at the fair. Gauguin was developing his artistic representation of Buddhist imagery and iconography. The multiple trips Gauguin made to the 1889 Exposition would influence him to continue his search for the "primitive" and the exotic other.

In his search for a society far removed from the modernized world, Tahiti appealed to Gauguin. The artist's exposure to the representations at the 1889 *Exposition universelle* personally impacted him and furthered his desire to journey outwards. Tahiti answered the artist's desire to live among "savage" people and sing, love, dance, and paint.<sup>11</sup> The French colony had been represented at the Paris Exposition as an exotic, tropical location with beautiful women, bountiful nature, and simple living. Gauguin and many of the artists in his circle sought alternate forms and representations to the classical tradition. Not seeking to create something ethnographically accurate, Gauguin emphasized the combination of various "primitive," aesthetically appealing motifs, borrowing from Buddhist, Marquesas,

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<sup>11</sup> Paul Gauguin, Malingue, *Letters*, 96-135.



Egyptian and Pre Columbian images, as well as Medieval.<sup>12</sup> Gauguin and his circle borrowed imagery specific to “primitive” cultures to create their work. After the World’s Fair, gestures and symbols from Hindu and Buddhist iconography began to appear in his work. He was also beginning to demonstrate some knowledge of Eastern religious philosophies. The extensive collection of colonial photographs of Tahiti on display at the *Exposition universelle*, the display of goods, and documentation of the local population all appealed to Gauguin. After picking up a free government brochure which promoted colonialism and immigration to the island, Gauguin wrote a letter to Bernard revealing his developing view of Polynesia as the answer to all he was seeking in his life and work:

The Tahitian woman is usually a perfect model for a sculptor...her large, dark eyes, so lovely and pure, her almost excessively full lips, and her magnificently white and regular teeth make her look so sweet and innocently voluptuous that it is impossible not to succumb to the admiration she inspires.<sup>13</sup>

Tahiti was presented at the Exposition as the “exoticist’s hybrid” of modernity, and just the answer Gauguin was looking for.<sup>14</sup> Gauguin’s exotic longings were deeply stimulated at the Exposition, which displayed staged conventions of exoticism typical of the era’s commercial images of Tahitian types. The display of Tahiti presented a sexualized, tropical haven in the South Seas. For Gauguin, Tahiti also awakened his dream of “living free at last, with no money trouble.” It was an escape from Parisian modernization, and also an escape from European morés, allowing Gauguin to pursue native women. Gauguin wrote to his wife,

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<sup>12</sup> All of these image traditions were considered “primitive” in Gauguin’s era. See Connelly, *Sleep of Reason*, introduction.

<sup>13</sup> Gauguin, Malingue, *Letters*, 88.

<sup>14</sup> In *The Colonial Lens*, Childs critiques Gauguin’s adopted cultural identity and hybridity of being part French and part Polynesian from the Exposition and during his career in the South Seas. See Childs, *Vanishing Paradise*, 89.

“...may the day come when I’ll be myself in the woods...to live there in ecstasy...with a family...I shall be in amorous harmony with the mysterious beings of my environment. Free at last...”<sup>15</sup>

After having a rendezvous with a ‘mulatto’ girl at the Exposition, Gauguin appeared convinced that Tahiti was the studio in the south he had long desired to create.<sup>16</sup> After the suicide of Vincent van Gogh in July 1890, Gauguin wrote he needed “peace and quiet” and that he would “go to Tahiti...to end my days there” and “forget all the bad things in the past.”<sup>17</sup> Gauguin began preparing for departure to the island in March of 1891, and was on the boat April 1, 1891. While there from 1891-1893, and again from 1895-1901, the artist created more than sixty works, including paintings, sculptures, prints, and manuscripts. Much as he had done in Paris, Gauguin covered the walls of his hut in Tahiti with Japanese prints and the photographs of ancient Buddhist sculptures from the temple of Borobudur. In works from his time in Tahiti, Gauguin depicted Tahitian women in poses which mimicked the Javanese dancers from the Borobudur relief, as well as the Javanese dancers he personally encountered at the Exposition. With his emphasis on combining things, Gauguin created his visual repertoire from a multitude of appropriations but for the purpose of this essay I will look at the components he borrowed from the Borobudur reliefs, his experience of ‘going native’ in Tahiti, and photographs from the *Exposition universelle* including those of colonized peoples.

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<sup>15</sup> Monfried, *Lettres de Gauguin à sa femme et ses amis*, p. 184.

<sup>16</sup> Gauguin, Malingue, *Letters*, 118.

<sup>17</sup> Paul Gauguin, *The Writings of a Savage*, ed. Daniel Guérin (New York, The Viking Press, 1978), 42.

CHAPTER 2  
THE PERSONAL CONTEXT OF SUFFERING  
AND UNHAPPINESS

My dear Mette, you are always the same, not looking where you are going, falling and hurting yourself. According to your letter, you seem to have spent Christmas alone, and it looks as if your family haven't much use for you. What has happened to these people, alleged to be so hospitable, and this family which you lauded to the skies to me - all unworthy as I was to tie their shoe strings? Perhaps one day you will be able to tell whether a door is open or shut...As to being reunited one day, I don't think about it, as I cannot see how it can be done. Without funds, I cannot summon the energy to give you the comfortable life like you need.<sup>1</sup>

Your husband,  
Paul Gauguin.

An understanding of Gauguin's personal state of mind may be established through a close examination of the letters between Mette and Gauguin. I assert that it is this state of mind which led him to incorporate Buddhist imagery into his work. Close examination of the letters between Gauguin and Mette reveal specific incidents that caused Gauguin anguish and suffering as a result of the separation from his family. Additionally, these letters provide information pertaining to the complex financial situation affecting Gauguin and its impact on his marriage and Mette. The letter quoted above illustrates the topics discussed by Mette and

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Gauguin, *Paul Gauguin Letters to his Wife and Friends*, translate: ed. Maurice Malingue (Cleveland: The World Publishing Company, 1949), 58.

Gauguin, as well as those discussed here. The dynamic between Gauguin and Mette is made visible through their frequent discussions of these topics and reveal Gauguin's torment at having to choose between his life as a husband and father, and the life as an artist he felt compelled to pursue.

Gauguin's personal state of affairs was in shambles throughout most of the period from 1882-1897. The failure of his marriage to Mette Gauguin largely contributed to the artist's personal anguish. Mette desired a marriage and a husband who was able and willing to support her and her children financially, including preserving the bourgeois lifestyle she was accustomed. Gauguin was often away from his wife and family while he pursued his artistic career. Frequently discussed in their correspondence were Mette's desires to have a present and loving husband, while Gauguin frequently wrote of his desires to live a free life, pursue multiple lovers, and live financially free as an artist.

Gauguin believed that no matter what choices he made, his wife would support him, as manifested by their legal union. As documented in his letters to the mother of a friend of his wife, Mme. Heegaard, Gauguin delighted in the early state of his marriage and at having swept Mette off her feet.<sup>2</sup> An affectionate husband and loving father who tenderly described his first baby "white as a swan, strong as Hercules,"<sup>3</sup> Gauguin happily sailed through the first years of his marriage. With the loss of his employment from the Bertin investment firm in the banking collapse of 1882-1883,<sup>4</sup> Gauguin was determined to become a full-time artist. Mette did not approve of the lifestyle Gauguin desired; she wanted a husband who could financially support their family. With pressure from Mette to continue working a traditional job,

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<sup>2</sup> Gauguin, Malingue, *Letters*, XXI.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, XXI.

<sup>4</sup> It was two years after the beginning of their marriage, in December 1884, when Gauguin left Bertin's Bank to become a painter. Mette decided to return to Denmark and Gauguin followed.

Gauguin attempted to remain in the financial industry and then spent a brief time selling tilt, tarpaulins, and industrial goods.<sup>5</sup> For almost three years Gauguin's subsequent depression and lack of personal fulfillment led to his increased awareness and belief that he was stifling his development as an artist. Eventually, Gauguin decided to leave Mette and their five children with her family in Denmark, so that he could return to Paris to paint. The letters to Mette that followed Gauguin's departure in August 1885 would continue until 1897 and recount an extraordinary love affair, full of suffering and bitterness towards the only woman Gauguin ever really loved and respected. The letters are also full of Gauguin's charges that Mette was incapable of understanding his artistic desires and indifferent towards his artistic purpose.<sup>6</sup>

In the forward to his edition of Paul Gauguin's *Letters*, Maurice Malingue commented on what he believes to have been one of the main factors on Mette's treatment of her husband: it is the specter of poverty that Mette faced when Gauguin began to pursue his artistic career that turned her against her husband. Mette, brought up in a financially sound household with strict family, could not understand how Gauguin could give up a comfortable position of employment without bothering to consider what was to become of his family. Having been left by her husband for his painting, Mette faced ridicule and sarcasm from her brothers and sisters regarding the translation work she took up in order to support her family.<sup>7</sup> Gauguin's letters show that he did not feel as though his wife supported his artistic pursuits and was conflicted about remaining in the relationship. Gauguin often noted his resentment towards Mette because she was "stifling his artistic passions"<sup>8</sup> and "bullying"<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Tilt is a woven fabric that can be spun into goods, like jute.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Gauguin, *The Writings of a Savage*, ed. Daniel Guérin (New York: The Viking Press, 1978), 28-161.

<sup>7</sup> Gauguin, Malingue, *Letters*, p. 40.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

him into staying in employment positions unrelated to his creative desires. The letters between Gauguin and Mette cover a range of topics but frequently highlight the conflict over Gauguin's financial situation and its impact on Mette.

Mette justifiably objected to her husband's desires to become an artist and did not understand how Gauguin could jeopardize the financial security of his family because it exemplified very contradictory behavior: Gauguin, deeply in love with his wife and family, as demonstrated in their frequent exchange of letters, would never sacrifice the well-being of his loved ones for the sole purpose of pursuing his artistic career, would he? Mette's "bullying" Gauguin to pursue stable employment stemmed from the fact that the family's financial livelihood depended entirely on Gauguin's work. Mette was completely right to be afraid of ruin and poverty, in addition to the shame she felt at having to go live with her family. The resentful tone and cold voice Mette demonstrated in her letters is justifiable, considering Gauguin abandoned their family. Gauguin exhibited contradictory behavior in his family life as well as in his artist career.

Gauguin embraced the Buddhist imagery associated with freedom from desire and materialism, yet it is clouded over by his constant quest for material needs and sensual pleasures.<sup>10</sup> Gauguin consistently refused to consider the consequence of his actions: perhaps his suffering was in direct relation to the suffering he put on his family? His behavior conflicted with the Buddhist emphasis found in his writings and art. In a letter from July 1886 from Gauguin to Daniel de Monfried, Monfried discussed Gauguin's move to Brittany

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>10</sup> For more on Gauguin's contradictory behavior see Abigail Solomon-Godeau, "Going Native: Paul Gauguin and the Invention of Primitivist Modernism," 312-329.

and how the artist was “hoping to find a different atmosphere from our exaggeratedly civilized society.”<sup>11</sup> In a letter to Mette in 1889, Gauguin wrote:

...May the day come soon when I'll be myself in the woods of an ocean island! To live there in ecstasy, calmness and art. With a family, and far from the European struggle for money. There in Tahiti I shall be able to listen to the sweet murmuring music of my heart's beating in the silence of the beautiful tropical nights. I shall be in amorous harmony with the mysterious being of my environment. Free at last, without money trouble, I'll be able to love, to sing, to die.<sup>12</sup>

Gauguin frequently wrote in his letters of his amorous relationships. In his search for a society removed from the European bourgeois lifestyle, he dove deeper into a romanticized, sensual Tahiti: “...pleasure which I have every day. And then I have a 15-year-old wife who cooks my simple every-day fare and gets down on her back for me whenever I want, all for the modest reward of a frock, worth ten francs a month.”<sup>13</sup>

Although it was Gauguin's choice to leave his family, he still suffered from being separated from them. The correspondence between Gauguin and Mette shows the cracks in their marriage, and through them one can better understand why the artist sought release from his troubles through his exploration of Buddhism and the incorporation of Buddhist motifs in his work.<sup>14</sup> In a telling letter from June 1889 from Le Pouldu, Gauguin wrote of his separation from his wife, children, and his lack of money. In closing his letter, Gauguin addresses his unhappiness at the unpleasant, distant tone his wife took while writing and signing her letters, “...once and for all do not end your letters with that dry phrase ‘Your wife,

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 319.

<sup>12</sup> Gauguin, *Malingue*, 184.

<sup>13</sup> Letter to Armand Séguin, Jan. 15, 1897. Cited in Danielsson, *Gauguin in the South Seas*, p. 191.

<sup>14</sup> See Paul Gauguin, *Paul Gauguin's Intimate Journals* ed. Van wyck Brooks (Liveright Publishing Corp, 1936), 17-127.

Mette' I should prefer you to say plainly what you think."<sup>15</sup> Gauguin often complained at the dry, distanced position Mette took in her letters. He frequently wonders in his letters if she had she ever loved him at all. At Mette's request to communicate calmly in order to address family business matters, Gauguin re-read a stack of letters on April 25<sup>th</sup>, 1886 and wrote in response:

...you have loved me, but that you are only a mother and not a wife...leaving me no illusion about the future, so you mustn't be surprised if one day...I find a woman who will be something more to me than a mother.<sup>16</sup>

In the same letter, Gauguin questioned the marriage and what Mette wants of her husband "...what is it you want of me? Above all, what have you ever wanted of me?...I am, it appears, to be a beast of burden for wife and children whom I must not see...Very well then, I accept the role that has been assigned to me."<sup>17</sup> Outwardly, Gauguin fully believed in himself as an artist and his ability to financially support his family through a concerted effort at producing quantities of art to be sold. Gauguin believed that pursuing his artistic career full-time would lead him to financial fulfillment, but what Gauguin failed to consider was his cost of living and his financial responsibilities to his wife and family. So, although Gauguin left his employment hopeful and optimistic about a secure financial future, he was naive to the reality of the world. Even after taking up painting as his full-time job, Gauguin would never recover financially. While in Tahiti, Gauguin produced countless works that were shipped back to Mette and Theo van Gogh to be sold, but he would nearly die from poverty and starvation. In the letters between husband and wife, the financial situation was a constant topic of contention.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>17</sup> Gauguin, Malingue, *Letters*, 60.



Another theme throughout their letters was the financial situation between husband and wife. Gauguin frequently wrote Mette questioning her the whereabouts of expected funds from the sales of his paintings. Once she returned to Denmark, Gauguin suggested Mette do her best to make him known there, ensuring her it would grant them both financial success and be the surest means for bringing them back together. Instead, the opposite happened. Mette constantly demanded canvases from Gauguin, which she sold fairly easy and for very little money. Despite Gauguin's protests, the money Mette collected was never sent to him. His advice to prepare his wife and future in Denmark only benefitted his wife. Many dealers, sensing his wife's urgency to sell Gauguin's canvases, often bought his work cheaply, only to turn around and sell the pieces for exorbitant profits. In particular, Gauguin attributed his poverty to the art dealer Ambroise Vollard.<sup>18</sup> For 2,000 francs, Vollard obtained a good, large painting by the artist and then sold it to an amateur for 10,000 francs. Vollard also bought smaller paintings by Gauguin for 150 or 200 francs, which he sold for 1,000 francs, and irregularly remitted money to Gauguin.<sup>19</sup> Gauguin constantly expressed frustration and confusion over Mette's decision to sell his paintings at a low return. Gauguin would write several letters in rapid succession while waiting to hear any news from Mette, often becoming impatient at her lack of response. In a letter from 19 September, 1885, Gauguin writes about his repeated attempts to contact his wife only to be answered by silence,

...I confess your present silence seems to me extraordinary- a month has gone by without a word from you. I am still awaiting an answer... You have the children with you,

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<sup>18</sup> Childs comments on the relationship between Gauguin and Vollard. See, Elizabeth Childs, *Gauguin and Sculpture: The art of the "Ultra Savage"* in *Gauguin: Metamorphoses*, (New York, NY: The Museum of Modern Art, 2014), 37.

<sup>19</sup> Gauguin, Malingue, *Letters*, XV.

don't forget, and their health cannot be a matter of indifference to the absent one. Try then to write more often...<sup>20</sup>

So frequent were the arguments over money between husband and wife, that in one letter Gauguin went to great lengths of writing down his expenses and spending habits, in an effort to prove to Mette he had barely enough money to feed and shelter himself while purchasing supplies to continue painting, let alone spare the funds to send to her. In a letter to Mette from June 1889, while in Le Pouldu, Gauguin wrote "...I live here like a peasant, at work every day in canvas trousers...I spend a franc a day on my food and two pence on tobacco, so no one can say I am extravagant. I speak to nobody, and I have no news of the children."<sup>21</sup>

In addition to the financial struggles, Gauguin was deeply saddened and affected by the separation from his family. In June of 1889, Gauguin attempted to visit his children, whom he had not seen for five years, but due to a disagreement with Mette's family in Denmark and the logistics of his travel arrangements, he never made the trip.<sup>22</sup> In an undated letter to his wife at the end of June 1889 from Le Pouldu, Gauguin wrote in reference to this failed attempt to visit, "...money reasons always - those of the heart are not worth considering. Poor woman, to allow yourself to be advised so badly, and by people in short, who do not pay, either in money or in broken hearts..."<sup>23</sup> Gauguin, of course, could have been with his children, but clearly felt that in order to fulfill the demands of his artistic calling, he had to renounce his paternal duties. Gauguin allowed nothing, even his own children, to affect his devotion to his artistic career.<sup>24</sup> Never intending for the separation with his family to be permanent, Gauguin assured Mette from time to time that they would resume their life

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 120

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.,119.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., XI.

together, and that she "...will rest, and as for me, I will work...your faithful lover and husband."<sup>25</sup> In all their time apart, Mette agreed to meet Gauguin two times.<sup>26</sup> Gauguin often inquired in his letters about his children, desperate to be included in the family life he had abandoned. While still in Paris, Gauguin's anguish over the lack of communication from his family and their disinterestedness in him became apparently unbearable. In a letter from January of 1895, he wrote, "I begin to wonder whether my family knows of my existence, as my birthday, Christmas, and New Year's Day all go by without a word from them."<sup>27</sup>

It is in this context of marital conflict and personal struggle that Gauguin's embrace of Buddhist imagery should be understood. Although Buddhist motifs were among many exotic elements appropriated by Gauguin, including Pre Columbian, Egyptian, Marquesan, and Tahitian, they alone carried a particular personal significance for the artist.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 153.

## CHAPTER 3

### BUDDHIST IMAGERY IN THE WORK OF PAUL GAUGUIN

Buddha, a simple mortal who neither conceived nor comprehended God, but who conceived and comprehended fully the intelligence of the human heart, reached eternal bliss, Nirvana – the last stage of the soul in its progressive movement through all ages – all people, by virtue of the attainment of this wisdom, are able to become buddhas.<sup>1</sup>

The personal context driving Gauguin's embrace of Buddhist imagery can be seen through the dissolution of his marriage and family life, his struggles with physical and mental ailments, and financial hardships. With this awareness of Gauguin's personal life, I begin my analysis of the visual imagery and elements related to Buddhism and their context within his work. Scholars have mostly attributed the Buddhist imagery appearing in Gauguin's work to his visits to the 1889 Paris *Exposition universelle* and his exposure to "exotic" peoples. Upon closer examination, his paintings reveal deeper meaning and reflect more than his aesthetic preferences for the "primitive."<sup>2</sup> Gauguin's knowledge that all men become Buddha is presented to readers in his manuscript *Modern Thought and Catholicism* when Gauguin wrote the idea of God:

...in the time of the savages, to our own civilized era, conforms but litter to the observations of modern science, it is tool restrictive also for idealistic philosophy.

As a matter of fact, when materialized the idea cannot be reasoned about in any way except by mathematical rules. Whereas, considered not acting materially but as a

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<sup>1</sup> See Paul Gauguin, *Modern thought and Catholicism*, Translated and annotated by Frank Lester Pleadwell from an unpublished manuscript in the possession of Arthur B. Cecil, M.D., 1927, p. 26. And see Paul Gauguin, *Noa Noa*.

<sup>2</sup> See Connelly, *The Sleep of Reason*.

symbol of the pure eternal spirit, the general spirit of the universe, it becomes the principle of all harmonies, the end to be attained, presented by Christ, and before him by Buddha. And all men will become Buddha's.<sup>3</sup>

This chapter explores the visual elements of Gauguin's works which link the subject matter to Buddhism. I will focus on elements he incorporated and why. For example, I examine and interpret the hand *mudras*, a symbolic or ritual hand gesture in Buddhism, which Gauguin used to convey specific meanings in Buddhist philosophy. Gauguin incorporated his belief in Buddhism and Buddhist philosophy into his works as a means to further his own personal path of enlightenment. The purpose of following the Buddhist path is to alleviate suffering and desire, and I argue that Gauguin sought to alleviate his personal suffering by following the principles of Buddhism and incorporating ideologically loaded imagery into his work.

The imagery associated with the alleviation of suffering became a prominent, reoccurring theme after several trips to the *Exposition universelle* of Paris in 1889. Specifically, Gauguin incorporated Buddhist *mudras* that are meant to convey fearlessness and the release of suffering. At the exposition, Gauguin encountered Javanese dancers and witnessed their performances. The hand gestures used in their dances are nearly identical to the hand *mudras* used in Buddhist art and imagery. The gestures and narrative relief-like designs of his work also mimic the reliefs found on the photographs of Borobodur which Gauguin owned. In a flurry of inspiration following his trips to the Exposition, Gauguin duplicated the Javanese hand gestures in several paintings, examples such as: *The Caribbean Woman* (Fig. 3), *Te nave nave fenua* (Fig. 6) and *Poèmes Barbares* (Fig. 5).

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<sup>3</sup> Paul Gauguin, *Modern thought and Catholicism*, p. 26.

In his painting, *The Caribbean Woman* from 1889 Gauguin depicted a naked woman whose right arm bends at the elbow to accommodate the placement of her hand between her breasts, while her left arm is gracefully raised above her head. The woman is centered in the composition, framed on either side by large, oversized yellow sunflowers. The position of the woman's hands mimics the hand positions of the Javanese dancers. It reflects a variation of popular Buddhist *mudras*, shown in the staged photographs of the Javanese dancer from the 1889 Exposition (Fig. 7). *Te nave nave fenua (The Delightful Land)* depicts a naked woman, fully frontal, with her hands in similar positions to the Javanese dancers. "She is also a prophet, her posture inspired by a sculpted figure of Buddha from the façade of the Javanese temple of Borobudur."<sup>4</sup> The young woman – probably modeled from Gauguin's lover Teha'amana, holds her left hand beneath her right breast while her right hand holds the blossom of a flower resembling a peacock feather.<sup>5</sup> She stands in a contrapposto pose, allowing Gauguin to imply movement through a swaying motion in her hips. Teha'amana's nude body is neither classical or stereotypically beautiful: she is compact and weighty, with broad shoulders, thighs and thick calves; she is depicted with dark skin, black head and pubic hair, and is disfigured by a polydactyl foot.<sup>6</sup> Her large hands and feet prompted her to be compared to a "quadrumane," a simian with feet that function as hands; she is a monkey, at once sexually immoral and degenerate,

...the perfect embodiment of European racist and exoticist ideas....she is in every way a liminal character who represents but does not resolve the contradictory perspective of the

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<sup>4</sup> Stephan Eisenman, *Gauguin's Skirt* (New York: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1997), p. 65.

<sup>5</sup> Stephan Eisenman, *Gauguin's Skirt*, p.66-67.

<sup>6</sup> Eisenman, *Gauguin's Skirt*, p. 68.

metropolitan male artist toward the colonial female subject whom he wishes to know in every sense of the word.”<sup>7</sup>

Always a Symbolist, Gauguin synthesized available mythic patterns and motifs appropriated from sculptural reliefs at Borobudur, and affinities from photographs of the Javanese dancers and his real life encounters of their performances at the Paris Exposition and appropriates it into his work for symbolic meaning.

Aesthetically, the Javanese dancers answered Gauguin’s search for the “primitive;” ritualistic movement infused with religious and spiritual meaning. In appropriating this imagery into his work, and merging it with the nudity and sensuality of his Tahitian depictions, Gauguin perpetuated the culturally constructed idea of the “primitive,” and specifically, the “primitive” Tahitian, “naturally” sexual and enticing in appearance.<sup>8</sup> The photographs of the Javanese dancers and other imagery produced as a result of the *Universelle exhibitions* no doubt impacted the aesthetic choices in subsequent works by Gauguin. Gauguin not only borrowed aesthetic elements from the photographs, but entire subjects and compositions.

Gauguin’s obsession with collecting “primitive” sculptures and images of the “exotic” from the Exposition is expressed in a letter to Bernard in the spring of 1889 Gauguin wrote: “You missed something in not coming the other day. In the village of Java there are Hindoo (Hindu) dances. All the art of India can be found there, and the photographs that I have of Cambodia fit into that context.”<sup>9</sup> In another painting *Poemes Barbares* Gauguin depicted a topless Tahitian woman with her right hand between her breasts, identical to the hand

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<sup>7</sup> Eisenman, *Gauguin’s Skirt*, p. 68.

<sup>8</sup> Robert Welsh, “Gauguin and the Inn of Marie Henry at Pouldu,” in *Gauguin’s Nirvana Painters at Le Pouldu 1889-90*, (Hartford: Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, 2001), 65.

<sup>9</sup> Gauguin, Malingue, *Letters*, LXXXI.

positioning of the woman in *The Caribbean Woman*. Regardless of the fact that Tahiti had been under French rule for quite some time, Gauguin's work produced from this time is a continuation of his appropriated primitivizing style, made apparent through the repeated motifs of topless Tahitian women, idols and Buddhist imagery, and the identical Eastern styled hand gestures which can be seen in figures listed above. They encapsulate the conflict in Gauguin's stated aims: the Buddhist imagery in his work specifically designed to represent freedom from desire is conflated with topless Tahitian women.

The painting of *The Caribbean Woman* was likely inspired by either an image of a Javanese dancer Gauguin acquired from the 1889 *Exposition universelle*, or from watching a live performance. It depicts a frontally nude dark-skinned woman whose right arm is locked in close to her body and bends at the elbow, allowing her to place her upward pointed hand between her breasts. The woman's left arm, raised upward alongside her left ear, bends at the elbow. Her forearm lays atop her head with wrist bent, leaving her fingers to point downward. The woman is framed within the composition with large yellow-orange pigmented sunflowers and green tendril-vine like branches.

In works following *Poèmes Barbares*, scholars have discerned a deeper religious undertone.<sup>10</sup> It is through close examination of the images and the scholarly texts that I conclude that these works reflect Buddhist imagery specifically associated with the alleviation of suffering. There are several works to review, but I will begin with *Idole a la perle (Idol with a Pearl)* 1892 (?) (Fig. 9).<sup>11</sup> This sculpture, viewed from the front, is a figure sitting cross-legged in a niche. The figure has been carved from a separate piece of wood. To the right, as though rising from the exterior of the niche, emerges the forehead and closed

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<sup>10</sup> Zafran, *Searching for Nirvana*, 65.

<sup>11</sup> For the most recent scholarship on Gauguin's sculpture see Childs, *Gauguin and Sculpture*.



right eye of a face, outlined by long hair. On the right side, viewers encounter a profile view of the body belonging to the emerging face, which appears to hug the exterior of the niche. On the back of the sculpture and carrying over to the left side are three figures linked together by a niche in low relief. Together, the figures read like a continuous narrative. Gauguin's technique of having one image flow into another deliberately presents them as interconnected ideas, thoughts and beliefs.

The Buddhist symbolism and meaning in the work is abundant. In the sculpture, the seated figure is positioned in a half-lotus posture with its right hand displaying *Bhumisparsamudra*, the earth-touching gesture that Buddha makes upon the conquest of *Mara* or the great deluder or illusioner.<sup>12</sup> The gesture signifies Buddha's calling the earth goddess to witness him overcome the delusions *Mara* put forth to Prince Siddhartha in an attempt to keep him from obtaining a state of enlightenment.<sup>13</sup> The earth, representing purity and truthfulness, witnesses and confirms Buddhas' act.<sup>14</sup> The left hand of the seated figure rests meditatively in the lap or *dhyanamudra*, while the figure sits within a *stupa*, or a commemorative tumulus which traditionally enshrines the relics of the Buddha, thus signifying the symbol of the last great event of the Buddha's life.<sup>15</sup> Additionally, Gauguin depicts the eyes of the sitter without pupils, creating possibility that they are either closed or opened. This interpretative symbolism of the eyes signifies a meditative or trance-like state,

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<sup>12</sup> Saunders, *Mudra*, 81. The symbolism of the *Bhumisparsamudra* is linked to the story of Buddha's point of proving his Buddha perfection. The gods of the earth warned Buddha that he would be attacked by demons. Buddha calmed them and proclaimed he would suppress the evil-doers by his power alone. The demon king appeared and challenged Buddha. Buddha, pointing to the ground with his finger, called upon the gods of the earth, who rose up and killed the demon king. Another version *Mara*, following the defeat of his demon army, presses his claim for the *Bodhi* throne and calls upon his troops as witnesses. The Buddha takes earth as his witness by touching the ground. The earth trembles and proclaims Buddha the rightful occupant of the *Bodhi* throne. For more about the legend story of Buddha's enlightenment see *La Vie du Bouddha*, pp. 183-84

<sup>13</sup> See Figure 12. *Seated Buddha* is an example of 12<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup> Century U-Thong sculpture of Buddha displaying the *Bhumisparsamudra*, earth-touching gesture that Buddha makes upon conquest of *Mara*.

<sup>14</sup> Prince Siddhartha is the worldly persona of Buddha.

<sup>15</sup> Jehanne Teilhet-Fisk, *Paradise Reviewed*, 50.

symbolic of the state of achieving enlightenment. Thus, in *Idole à la perle* Gauguin's seated figure is characterized and identifiable as Buddha, it presents the exact moment of enlightenment experienced by Prince Siddhartha, the worldly persona of Buddha preceding the moment of his enlightenment, a conclusion approved by Jehanne Teilhet-Fisk.<sup>16</sup> Teilhet-Fisk credited Gauguin's photograph of the Borobudur frieze *The Assault of Mara* as his visual source (Fig. 11).

To a degree, the symbolism of the Buddha resisting earthly temptations and tribulations to achieve an enlightened state of being echoes the life choices of Gauguin himself. Like the Buddha, Gauguin left a secure, family-centered life to seek out artistic refuge and obtain peace and happiness through his travels and artistic practice. This was his claim for traveling to Tahiti, but his letters also show that Gauguin was drawn to the sexual freedom afforded to French colonists in the South Pacific. In this sculpture, Gauguin depicts Buddha at the moment he is most susceptible to the temptations of worldly pleasures and pursuits, and yet rises above the pleasures to a heightened state of mental clarity known as enlightenment. Although Gauguin did not resist the worldly pleasures available in his sexual pursuits, he clearly aspired to take lessons from the life of Buddha and apply them to his own life.

Gauguin's writings and images repeatedly emphasize the uninhibited sexuality as a virtue of "primitive" societies, and we see this in the nude availability of the *Caribbean Woman*. (Fig. 3) The sexual undertones of the painting aside, Zafran interprets the contrast the painting shows between the wanderer and the innocent temptress who has become symbolic of sexual liberation and death.<sup>17</sup> Despite the woman's nudity and the overzealous

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>17</sup> Zafran, 65.

interpretations of the work as a symbol of sensual delight and temptation, another meaning of the painting aligns with the Buddhist philosophy and symbolism prevalent in Gauguin's work. In *Caribbean Woman* the woman's upward and downward pointed hands alludes to heavenly and earthly spheres within Hindu and Buddhist beliefs. The *abhayamudra mudra*, when bestowed upon viewers, grants them the absence from fear. The right hand which points upwards and is placed between the woman's breasts is the Wisdom hand, and when exposed in its gesture of the *semui, gatha* is granted to all beings, which gives the power of granting the absence to fear.<sup>18</sup>

Individual components of the *abhayamudra* gesture are found in numerous works by Gauguin including *Te nave nave fenua* and *The Spinner (Joan of Arc)* (Fig. 4), a fresco transferred to canvas from 1889. In *Spinner*, a frontally centered woman in traditional Breton costume gazes at the viewer through her downcast, meditative eyes, while her right hand rests between her breasts, as seen in *Caribbean Woman*. In *Martinique woman* 1889, carved from painted terracotta, a woman kneels down in front of the viewer with her knees directed toward the right side; her left arm rests alongside her body with her hand between her breasts, and fingers pointed upward (Fig. 10). The hand gestures in these examples can be associated with the Javanese dance performances from the *Exposition universelle* as often discussed by scholars.<sup>19</sup> The repetition of the *mudra* representing *abhayamudra* and the absence of fear in the three works created between 1889-90, aligns better with Gauguin's Buddhist beliefs at the time. Gauguin, fearful of failing as an artist, sought to release his fears through the incorporation of these *mudras*. Despite often overwhelming obstacles of physical illness,

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<sup>18</sup> *Semui* is a raised and exposed hand, the Wisdom hand. *Gatha*, to all the groups of people, has the capability of granting fearlessness. Saunders, *Mudras*, 56.

<sup>19</sup> Scholars discussed in Introduction Chapter.

poverty, and mental torments, Gauguin was determined to put forth the value of his work and the importance of the message within it.

To understand why Gauguin incorporated the *mudras* granting fearlessness, and the imagery associated with the alleviation of suffering, we must return where we began, to the painting of *Nirvana* (Fig. 1). It is this painting that clearly gives viewers the insight to Gauguin's beliefs in Buddhism and even himself, as Buddha.

As mentioned in chapter one, *Nirvana* presents viewers with a hand *mudra*, which follows the tradition of Buddhist hand positioning. Changes Gauguin made to the hand positioning were revealed in the technical examinations conducted by Kornhauser and suggest that Gauguin made significant changes over time to the composition, which was not his typical manner of working.<sup>20</sup> In addition to the hands in the work, the painting is laden with Buddhist symbolism. The three female figures behind de Haan represent the three stages of desire: longing, enactment, and loss. The Janus figure, has a black-hatted head and stands near the congenitally deformed body of de Haan. Together, they suggest the two sides of desire: the abandonment to it and freedom from it, thus, Nirvana. Additionally, de Haan's blue and white robe are the colors of the robe of Vajrapani, a protector of Buddha and the manifestation of the Buddha's power to persuade others.<sup>21</sup> Vajrapani or "Vajra-handed" the *yaksha*, or demonic being who bears in his right hand the diamond thunderbolt (*vajra*), which

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<sup>20</sup> Zafran, 117.

<sup>21</sup> The diamond-headed snake/lotus, the demonic eyes and pointed ears of de Haan, and the blue and white colors of his robe, Baas argues is "strong evidence" for identifying him with Vajrapani. Gauguin wrote about the lotus in *Noa Noa* "in time with the sound of the ax I sang: Cut down the entire forest (of desires) at the base, cut in yourself the love of yourself, as with the hand, in autumn, one would cut the lotus. See Paul Gauguin, *Noa Noa*, p. 29. In a passage from the *Dhammapada* the importance of desire and the lotus is established in the saying "whoever overcomes this clinging vulgar craving in the world, so hard to get over, has sorrows fall away, like the drops of water from the lotus...just as a tree will regrow even if cut, as long as its root has not been destroyed and is firm, so will this misery regrow again and again as long as the tendency to craving is not rooted out." See Thomas Cleary, *The Dhammapada Sayings of Buddha Translated from the original Pali*. (New York: Bantam Doubleday Dell Publishing Group, Inc., 1995). p. 108.

in Tibetan Buddhism represents the male generative organ and power. His *vajra* is oftentimes paired with a lotus, representing in this context the female generative organ and energy, much as de Haan is paired with female energy in *Nirvana*. In *Nirvana*, Gauguin thus presents his friend and alter ego as a bodhisattva (enlightened being).<sup>22</sup>

The symbolic meaning in the painting further emphasizes Gauguin's interest in Buddhism. In *Nirvana*, Gauguin answers the challenge and presents de Haan as a manifestation of Vajrapani, thus identifying Gauguin as Buddha himself, unlike van Gogh who simply alluded to it in his painting of the Japanese monk. In a letter from Gauguin to van Gogh in the first two weeks of November 1889 Gauguin wrote: "We are, de Haan and I, set up for work and serenity." It is as though Gauguin wanted to reassure his dear friend van Gogh, who was working by himself in Arles, that he had not forgotten about their time together. Take, for example, the snake entwined in de Haan's hand, which is also seen in Gauguin's self portrait of 1889. It is a symbol for fertility, temptation, and regeneration, like the lotus in Eastern and Buddhist imagery. The snake in *Nirvana* has a diamond-shaped head, similar to the diamond-shape yellow lotus blossoms on the wall and in the foreground framing Gauguin in *Self Portrait* (Fig. 2). The tendril likeness of the snake's body arguably resembles the lotus stems in Tibetan and other Buddhist art.<sup>23</sup>

Gauguin titled the painting *Nirvana*, possibly referring to the esoteric interests of de Haan, but more likely, inviting the viewer to interpret the work in Buddhist terms. In Buddhism the word means deliverance or salvation, the supreme end that the founder of Buddhism has proposed to all human effort. Gauguin was exposed to the teachings of Buddhism through his associations with van Gogh, but it was E. Burnouf's writings on

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<sup>22</sup> A Bodhisattva is an enlightened being. Traditionally a bodhisattva is anyone, who motivated by great compassion has generated spontaneous wish to attain Buddhahood for the benefit of all sentient beings.

<sup>23</sup> Baas, 39-41.

Theosophy and Buddhism and the German philosopher Schopenhauer's texts on Nirvana,<sup>24</sup> which Gauguin would have read.<sup>25</sup> Other writers, such as Jean Leymarie, credit the impact of the colonial pavilions and exhibits at the *Universelle exposition* of 1889 as his source of inspiration.<sup>26</sup> Discussion of possible influences aside, the sure evidence of Buddhism in the painting is found in the title *Nirvana* itself.<sup>27</sup> Through his letters, we can conclude Gauguin suffered and that his suffering was only matched by that he caused his family and others. Gauguin's actions, and his idea of escaping all desires is markedly contradicted with his letters concerning Tahiti which he frequently expresses his desires and sexual exploits. Gauguin desired to escape the confines of European bourgeois society for the sexual plenitude of Tahiti. Gauguin's use of Buddhist imagery is as conflicted and contradicted as his life.

The personal context of Gauguin's life influenced the appropriation of Buddhist imagery in his work. In early 1874, the artist began exhibiting and associating with the Impressionists and was exposed to translated French literature on Buddhist philosophy and principals of Buddhist conduct. He demonstrated competency with Buddhist teachings in his published manuscripts, writings, and letters. In 1887, after struggling to become financially sustained as an artist, Gauguin met the better read van Gogh, who had considerable interest in Japanese culture, art and religion, even called a Buddhist himself. Working alongside

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<sup>24</sup> Burnouf's writings were some of the earliest published French texts on Buddhism. The texts were widely analyzed and cited in subsequent scholar's writings on Buddhism. It is because of the popularity and frequency of Burnouf's article being quoted that scholars believe Gauguin would have read them. Zafran, 105.

<sup>25</sup> Zafran discusses how Gauguin came across the texts. *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>26</sup> Zafran, 105.

<sup>27</sup> Gauguin brought himself and de Haan back to an earthly ecstasy stage of Nirvana. Titling the work *Nirvana*, according to Wayne Anderson, follows the familiar theme of loss of innocence leading to death, implying the scene is essentially one of rebirth. There are two stages of Nirvana, complete Nirvana and simple Nirvana. Complete Nirvana is that which follows death, when a person has known to prepare for it with faith, humility, and virtue, while simple Nirvana is something to be acquired during life, by adopting a certain line of daily living conduct that Buddhism teaches and that of which Buddha himself sets as example.

Gauguin in Arles, van Gogh wrote of both men's life and their shared internal sufferings and the release of suffering Gauguin experienced working with van Gogh. Gauguin then worked and lived in Le Pouldu with Meyer de Haan, an expert on Eastern religions. The collaborative periods with both men impacted Gauguin's adaptations of Buddhism in his life and work.

As demonstrated in my research, Gauguin not only revealed his understanding and acceptance of Buddhism through his artistic expressions, but also in his personal manuscripts and writings, which reveal his knowledge of the religion and its belief system of karma and reincarnation. Did Gauguin's daily life reflect acceptance of Buddhist principles of right conduct, right speech, and right actions: most argue no. Acceptance of a religious belief system can still lead to a disconnect in our actions and how we are represented to the outside world. Gauguin's lack of right speech and right conduct do not denounce the potential significance of Buddhist themes in his work and their connection to his personal life. Gauguin's specific use of *mudras* that represent the release of suffering and the granting of fearlessness are intentional. In his letters and manuscripts written alongside the production of his work are repeated mentioning of his suffering and desires to move beyond it. Gauguin looked to exoticism as an escape from the suffering associated with his vision of European life. These external desires reinforced his internal sufferings and conflict. In this essay, I developed my argument around evidence that supports this notion: Gauguin incorporated *mudras* that represent fearlessness, peace and release from suffering in his works for personal reasons. Regularly, scholars focus on exoticism as the source for Gauguin esthetics, and I propose scholars question his appropriation of imagery as an expression of his life of suffering and the promise of Buddhism's Nirvana.

## TIMELINE OF PAUL GAUGUIN

(Events pertaining to the artists interest in Buddhism shown in bold)

- 1848 Born in Paris on June 7<sup>th</sup>
- 1849-1854 Fleeing Paris after the 1848 Revolution, the family sails to Peru to stay with the great-uncle from his mother's side. Father Clovis Gauguin dies of a ruptured aneurysm during journey.
- 1854-1862 Family returns to France. Gauguin becomes a boarding student in 1859.
- 1862-1864 Gauguin lives with mother in Paris, prepares for the Naval Academy entrance exams.
- 1865-1867 Unable to take the Naval Academy exam, Gauguin enlists in merchant marine; sails twice to South America and back.
- 1868-1871 Gauguin joins the navy and participated in the Franco-Prussian War.
- 1871-1873 1872 Gauguin returns to Paris, finds employment as a stock agent. Meets young Danish woman, Mette Sophie Gad. They marry November 22, 1873; over ten years they have five children. Gauguin takes up painting as a serious hobby and befriends Émile Schuffenecker.
- 1874 Befriends Camille Pissarro. April or May, visits first group exhibition of Impressionists.
- 1879 Begins painting with Pissarro and meets Degas, Manet, Renoir, and Cezanne.
- April 10-May 11  
Invited by Pissarro and Degas to participate in fourth Impressionist exhibit.
- 1880 Gauguin participates in the fifth Impressionist exhibit
- 1881-March Sells three paintings to the dealer Durand-Ruel.
- April-May Participates in sixth Impressionist exhibition.
- 1882 Stock market collapses and Gauguin loses his job. Decides to become full-time artist. Participates in seventh Impressionist exhibition.
- 1883-1885  
January- October  
Moves to Rouen with his family; takes up employments selling life insurance, tilt and tarpaulins.
- July Mette travels to Denmark with her children.
- September A letter to Mette dated the 19<sup>th</sup> of September reveals Gauguin's frustrations at his wife for not responding to his letters and his inquiries about their children.



- November At Mette's insistence, Gauguin moves to Copenhagen with his family. In 1885, he returns to Paris with son Clovis and begins work-hanging posters in the train stations.
- 1886-April In a letter to Mette from April 25<sup>th</sup>, Gauguin tells his wife "you mustn't be surprised if I find a woman who will be something more to me than a mother." In her letter, Mette mentions swelling in her breast, ceases corresponding.
- Gauguin's interest in ceramics is growing, he exhibits nineteen paintings and one wood relief at the eighth Impressionist exhibition. Meets Ernest Chaplet, a ceramist influenced by **Asian** ceramics, frequents his studio in Paris.
- July Gauguin, flustered and uneasy hearing the news of Mette's possible breast tumor writes "If I could be operated on for you, I would gladly suffer."
- August He stays in Pont-Aven, Brittany, for the first time, where he meets Emile Bernard.
- He refuses to exhibit in the Société des Artistes Indépendants and breaks ties with Pissarro.
- November Meets Vincent van Gogh and begins to exchange work. Vincent introduces Gauguin to Theo van Gogh.
- 1887-April Travels with Charles Laval to Panama and works briefly on the Panama Canal. Travels with Laval to Martinique and paints, becomes ill; suffering from dysentery and malaria, writes to Mette that four months and no news of her or the children "and in my present state of health, this silence has brought on a relapse each time... all the misery of hunger."
- November In France, meets painter and collector George-Daniel de Monfreid. Exhibits paintings he made in Martinique.
- 1888-January Theo becomes Gauguin's dealer. Gauguin travels to Pont-Aven, Brittany for the second time. Laval and Emile Bernard join him.
- May-July van Gogh sends drawing after recently completed *Moussmé*, Gauguin later pastes it into *Noa Noa*. In June van Gogh writes to Gauguin "I shall set my individuality free (here) and feel free." Gauguin and van Gogh exchange paintings.
- Aug – Dec. Invited by van Gogh to Arles, who's motivated by the light and colors reminiscent of the Japanese way, and financially supported by Theo, Gauguin goes to Arles in late October and stays through the end of December. Theo sells several of Gauguin's paintings. Gauguin, by request of van Gogh, reads Pierre Loti's *Madame Chrysanthème*. The "Studio of the South" ends in a violent conflict between Gauguin and van Gogh. Van Gogh and Gauguin talk of their inner suffering.
- 1889 Gauguin exhibits works at the invitation of the Brussels art group Les Vingts.

- February Undated letter, writes to Bernard insisting he visit the Exhibition and see the Buffalo (Buffalo Bill). Visits World Fair with Tahiti and Polynesia on his mind.
- March Gauguin visits **colonial** exhibition and draws **Javanese** dancers performing live. Writes in a letter to Bernard, “in the **Java village** there are **hindoo** dancers and all the art of **India**...like my photos.” Collects small plaster relief featuring Javanese dancer from recreated Angkor Wat temple, takes to Le Pouldu. Reads government brochures on relocating to Tahiti and Polynesia.
- May 5- Nov.6 Universal Exhibition, World’s Fair officially opens in Paris.
- June-Oct. With Bernard, Schuffenecker, and others, Gauguin exhibits alongside Universal Exhibition at Café Volpini.
- June Visits Le Pouldu and works with **Meyer de Haan**. Paints the dining-room walls of the Marie-Henry Inn. Friends Paul Serusier and Charles Filiger join later. A letter to Mette describes Gauguin’s living conditions as “peasant like.” Gauguin creates *Martinique Woman* and *Self-portrait with Halo and snake*. In an undated letter to Mette from the end of June, Gauguin remarks on his failed attempt to visit his wife and children, “matters of the heart aren’t worth considering, money reasons always.”
- August Returns to Pont-Aven.
- October-early 1890  
Returns to Le Pouldu with de Haan, paints *Nirvana: Portrait of Meyer de Haan*.  
In an undated letter to van Gogh, November 1889, Gauguin writes of de Haan and himself being “set up for work and serenity.”
- 1890 Brief return to Paris. Exchanges more work with van Gogh.
- June Returns to Le Pouldu with de Haan. Visits Pont-Aven. Begins planning **Tahiti** voyage.
- July Van Gogh dies. Gauguin needs “peace and quiet” and wants to “end his days in Tahiti and forget all the bad things in the past.”
- Fall of 1890 Gauguin returns to Paris, meets writers Charles Morice, and Stephane Mallarme, begins frequenting Symbolists gatherings at Café Voltaire. In a letter to Bernard, Undated, from August 1890 from Le Pouldu, Gauguin wrote of van Gogh’s death as the end of his suffering and reaping the rewards of good conduct in this life by rebirth in another (according to the teaching of the **Buddha**).
- 1891 Gauguin’s work is publicized by Albert Aurier and others, thirty paintings are sold at the Paris Hotel Drouot to fund Tahiti trip. Gauguin requests and is granted government-funded artistic mission to Tahiti.

March	Visits family in Copenhagen
June	He travels to Tahiti and works in and around Papeete. Mixes with <b>colonial</b> community.
August	Visits Paea, area south of Papeete
September	Travels to Tahitian village of Mataiea, rents native house. Take Titi, an anglo-Tahitian woman, as partner.
1892	Creates <i>Idol with a pearl</i> in 1891 or 1892 and <i>Te nave nave fenua</i> . Attempts to gain financial support, all civil applications and positions denied. Takes local Tahitian girl, Tehamana as his female companion. Her family sends food supplies.
1893	Returns to Papeete with Tehamana. Gauguin leaves Tahiti in June and arrives in Paris by the end of August.
October	Gauguin begins intensive writings for <i>Noa Noa</i> . Writes "...opposite the grottoes of <i>Mara</i> ."
Winter	Begins work on ten woodcuts to illustrate <i>Noa Noa</i> . Writes text that ends up in <i>Modern Thought</i> . "Already before this time the same comprehension was formulated by <b>Buddha which he considered entire existence as different successive stages ending finally in Nirvana as the last stage existing in the infinite.</b> "
1894	Continues working on <i>Noa Noa</i> . Makes a return trip to Brittany, stays in Pont-Aven and Le Pouldu.
November	Returns to Paris
December	Works with the <b>Asian</b> ceramicist, Chaplet. Creates woodcut <i>Te Atua (The Gods)</i> .
1895-1900	An undated letter from Paris in January, Gauguin wrote to Mette wondering if his family even knew he exists anymore, as his birthday, Christmas, and New Year's Day passed without word.
July	Gauguin leaves Marseille for Tahiti, never returns to France.
August	En route to Tahiti, stops in New Zealand and Australia, studies sketch collection of <b>Maori</b> art in Auckland Museum.
September	Arrives in Papeete.
November	Moves to Punaauia (near Papeete) and rents small plot of land.
1896	Works on <i>Noa Noa</i> , adds "Diverses choses" ("Miscellaneous Things"), illustrated appendix to main text. Writes for <i>Noa Noa</i> but ends up in <i>Modern Thought</i> "as a symbol of pure eternal spirit...it becomes the principle of all harmonies, the end to be attained...by <b>Buddha</b> . And all men will become <b>Buddhas</b> ."

- April Writes to Morice saying he is suicidal.
- July Gauguin hospitalized in Papeete
- November Exhibition of Gauguin's work opens at Galerie Vollard, Paris.
- 1897 Gauguin hospitalized in Papeete, again. Gauguin is destitute and suffering from deteriorating health. Gauguin learns his daughter Aline died of pneumonia in Copenhagen "Her tomb is here near me; my tears are her flowers; they are living things" He writes his essay "*The Catholic Church and Modern Times.*"
- October-December
- He suffers a mild heart attack. Writes to Monfried, explains his attempted suicide with arsenic.
- 1898 Hospitalized and bedridden from September throughout the rest of year.
- 1899 Paints *The Great Buddha.*
- 1900 Becomes sick and unable to paint, son Clovis dies, creates a will requesting Monfreid receives his sculptures, and to be buried in Tahiti. Spends the end of the year hospitalized.
- 1901 Gauguin hospitalized, makes plans to move to Marquesas Islands.
- September Arrives on the island of Hiva Oa in the Marquesas, Gauguin buys several plots of land to construct a **native house**, the house of pleasure.
- November Moves into his new house with new female companion, Vaeoho.
- 1902 Sends shipment of works to Monfreid and Vollard. Vaeoho leaves Gauguin, gives birth (presumably his) the following month.
- December Mostly unable to paint the past year, Gauguin worked extensively on publications such as *Noa Noa, Avant et après*, articles for various publications in Paris. He works on revisions of manuscript, which is now titled "*Modern Thought and Catholicism.*" "Likewise, the incarnation of **Buddha** was dated... The last of the **Buddhas** who is designated "all the **Buddhas**..."
- 1903-May 8 Gauguin dies in Hiva Oa.

## ILLUSTRATIONS

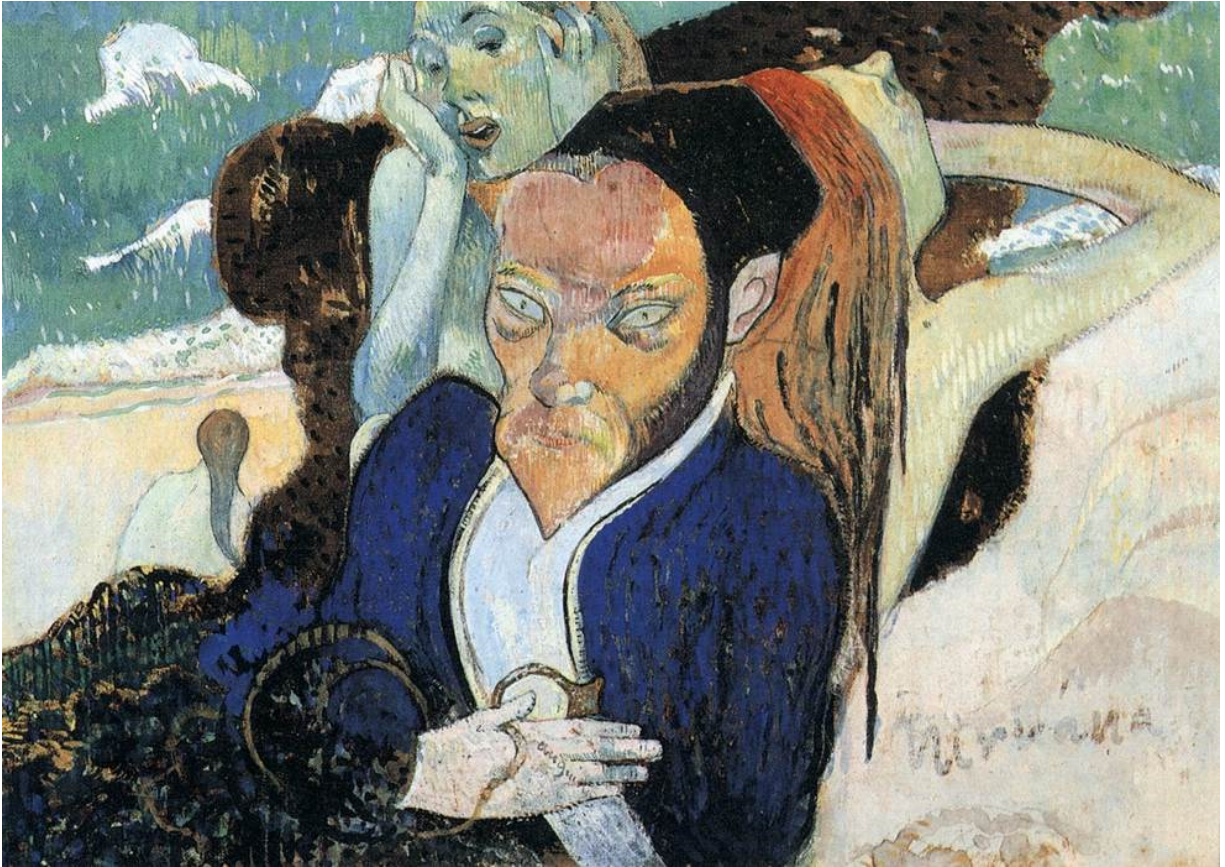


Figure 1  
*Nirvana, Portrait of Meyer de Haan*  
Paul Gauguin  
1890  
Oil thinned with turpentine on silk  
20 x 29 cm  
Photo: Web Gallery of Art

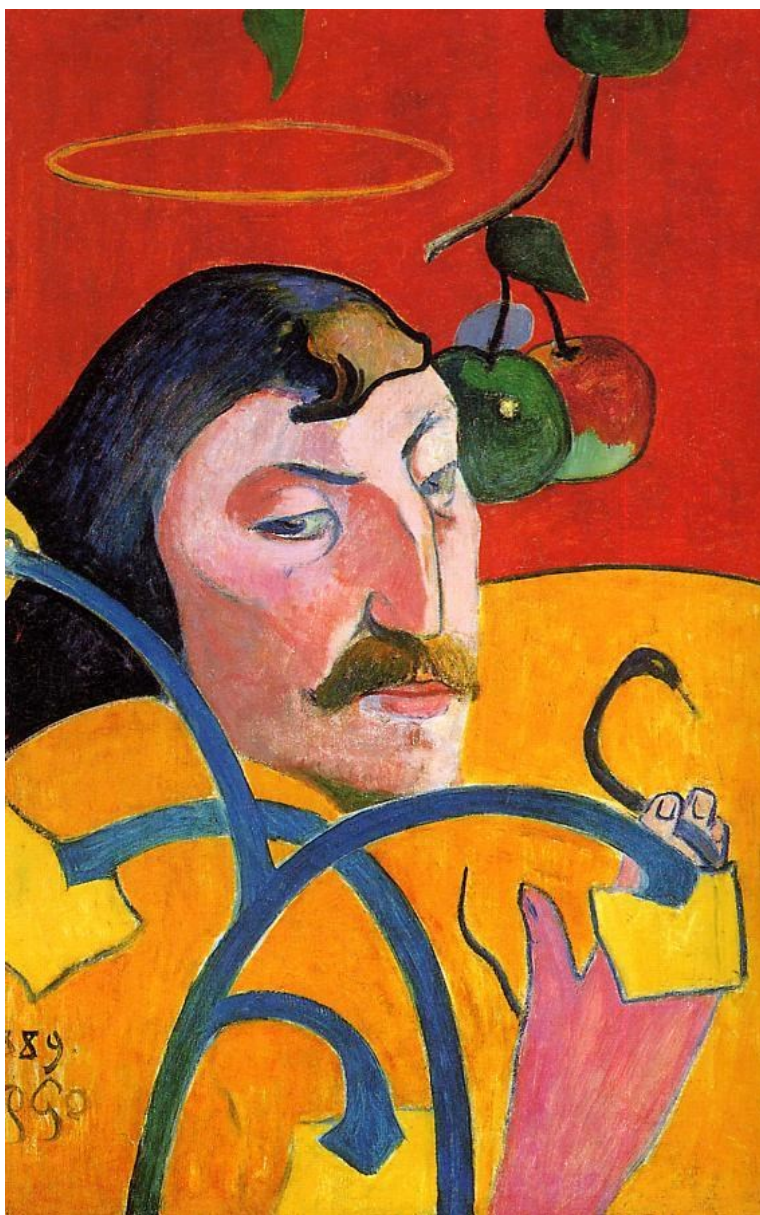


Figure 2  
Self-portrait  
Paul Gauguin  
1889  
Oil on wood  
79.2 x 51.3 cm  
Photo: Web Gallery of Art



Figure 3  
*Caribbean Woman with Sunflowers*  
Paul Gauguin  
1889  
Oil on canvas  
64 x 54 cm  
Photo: Web Gallery of Art





Figure 4  
*The Spinner (Joan of Arc)*  
Paul Gauguin  
1889  
Fresco in wooden support  
52.76 x 24.76 in  
Photo: Van gogh Museum

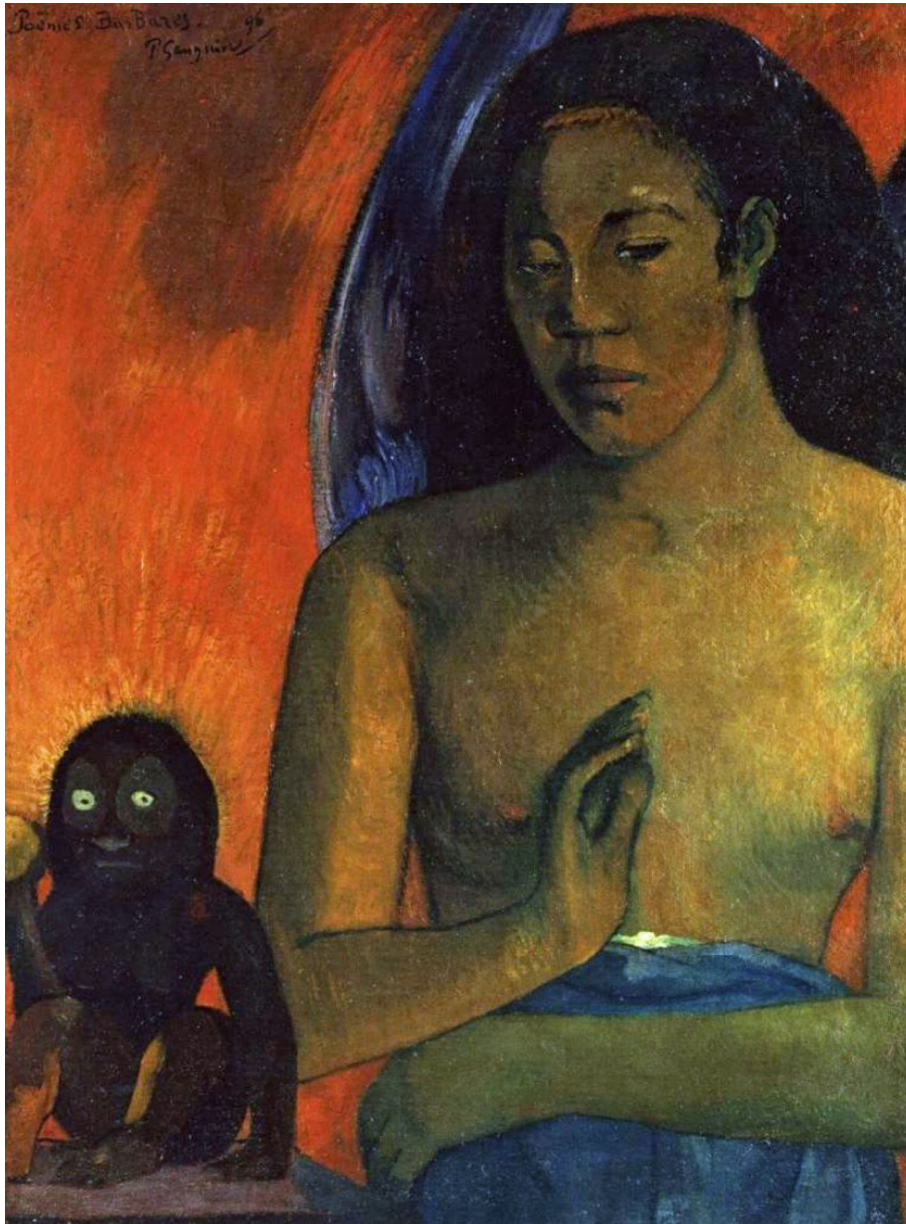


Figure 5  
*Poemes Barbares (Savage Poems)*  
Paul Gauguin  
1896  
Oil on canvas  
64.8 x 48.3 cm  
Photo: Harvard Art Museums

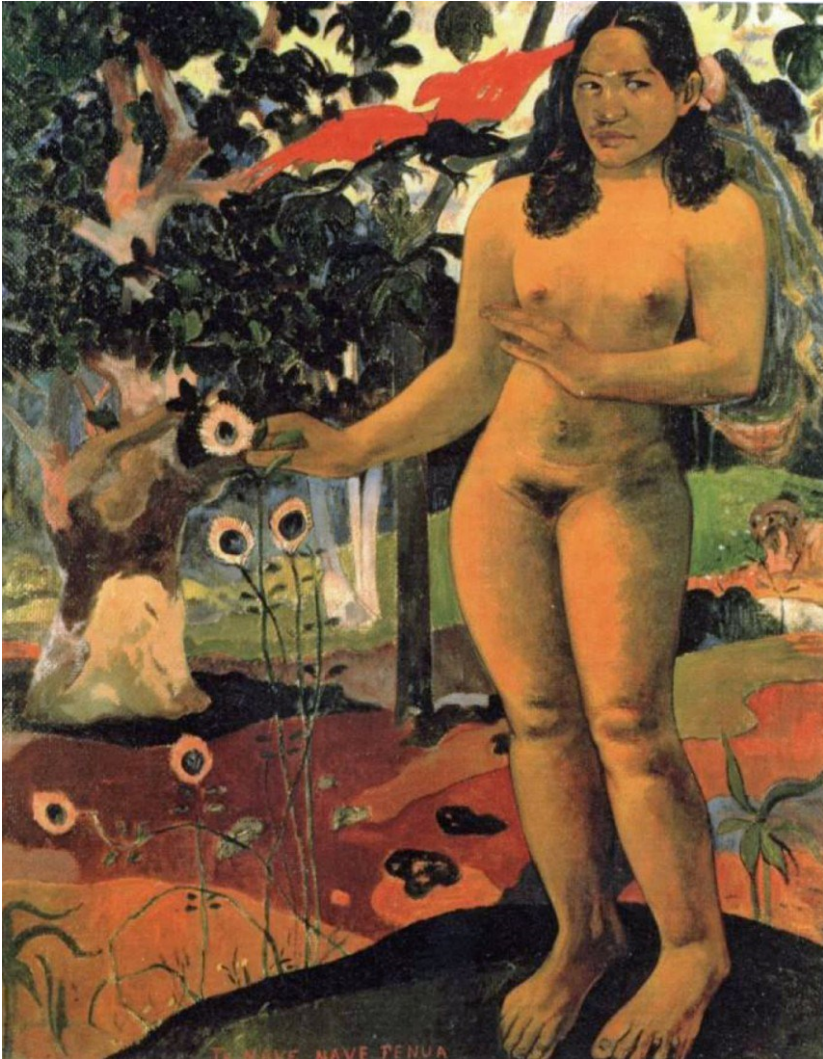


Figure 6  
*Te nave nave fenua (The Delightful Land)*  
Paul Gauguin  
1892  
Oil on canvas  
Photo: National Gallery of Art



Figure 7  
Dancers in the kampong  
Photo: The Art Institute of Chicago



Figure 8  
*Bouddha*  
Paul Gauguin  
1898-1899  
Woodcut on Japan tissue  
30.5 x 22.5 cm  
Photo: Carnegie Museum of Art



Figure 9  
*Idole à La Perle*  
Paul Gauguin  
1889-1890  
Tamanu wood  
23.50 cm  
Photo: Musée d'Orsay



Figure 10  
*Martinique Woman*  
Paul Gauguin  
1889  
Painted terracotta  
Photo: The Art History Archive

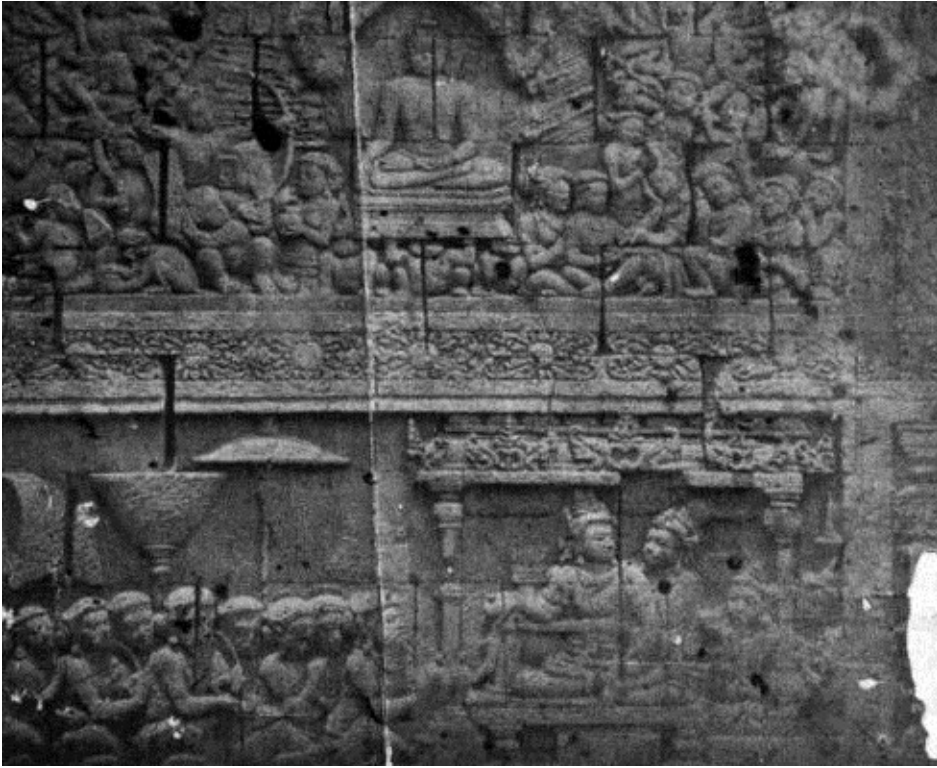


Figure 11  
Reliefs from the temple of Borobudur, Java  
Above: *The Assault of Mara*  
Collection Roger Viollet





Figure 12  
*Seated Buddha*  
U-Thong, 12-13 Century  
Photo: The National Museum, Bangkok

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