

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

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exhibition review of

Gauguin: Artist as Alchemist

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide 16, no. 2 (Autumn 2017)

Citation: Janet Whitmore, exhibition review of *Gauguin: Artist as Alchemist*, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 16, no. 2 (Autumn 2017), <https://doi.org/10.29411/ncaw.2017.16.2.14>.

Published by: [Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art](#)

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Gauguin: Artist as Alchemist
Art Institute of Chicago
June 25–September 10, 2017

Grand Palais, Paris
October 11, 2017–January 22, 2018

Catalogue:

Gauguin: Artist as Alchemist.

Gloria Groom, editor, with contributions by Dario Gamboni, Harriet K. Stratis, Ophélie Ferlier-Bouat, Claire Bernardi, Allison Perelman, Isabelle Cahn, Estelle Bégué, Nadège Horner, and Elsa Badie Modiri.

New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2017.

336 pp.; 408 color and 11 b&w illus.; chronology of materials and methods; bibliography; index.

\$65.00

ISBN: 9780300217018

Since 1988 when the Art Institute of Chicago collaborated with the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, and the Musée d'Orsay on *The Art of Paul Gauguin*, the artist has been the subject of extensive scholarly scrutiny. Exhibitions and publications have focused on nearly every aspect of Gauguin's life and analyzed it from every conceivable theoretical perspective. The most recent exhibition, *Gauguin: Artist as Alchemist*, opened in June 2017 at the Art Institute of Chicago before traveling to the Grand Palais in Paris in October. Organized in collaboration with l'Etablissement Public des Musées d'Orsay et de l'Orangerie and the Réunion des Musées Nationaux–Grand Palais, Paris, this exhibition moved beyond Gauguin's biographical idiosyncrasies and instead presented a thorough and thoughtful study with a particular emphasis on the artist's three-dimensional work (fig. 1). As Gloria Groom, chair of European Painting and Sculpture and the David and Mary Winton Green Curator at the Art Institute of Chicago, explains, the exhibition "seeks to further our appreciation of his work by drawing attention to his daring innovations in material and process and by situating his three-dimensional art within his radically experimental oeuvre as a whole" (19). To that end, there are some 200 objects on display, organized in roughly chronological order according to the locations where Paul Gauguin (1848–1903) was working at any given time: the "selections and groupings reflect critical moments in his career, occasions when he sought to free himself from the burden of working in the traditional medium of oil painting" (19). The result was an exhibition designed to satisfy viewers' expectations of a typical linear development while simultaneously providing in-depth groupings of objects linked by motifs and subject matter, but created in a variety of media.



Fig. 1, Entrance to the Art Institute of Chicago showing the banners for the exhibition *Gauguin: Artist as Alchemist*. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

The first gallery mimicked a nineteenth-century French interior, with decorative striped wallpaper wainscoting surmounted by a charcoal wall (fig. 2). This pattern of wainscoting with a charcoal colored wall above remained consistent throughout the exhibition; although the colors of the wainscoting changed, the horizontal charcoal walls maintained a sense of intimacy in the generously open spaces designed to accommodate crowds of visitors. Like the wallpaper, the objects in this gallery reflected something about Gauguin's domestic life in the early years of his career as an artist. Visitors were introduced first to his son Clovis, shown fast asleep with his head on a table next to an outsized tankard (fig. 3). Claire Bernardi, curator of paintings at the Musée d'Orsay, suggests that that tankard's "size, together with the ambiguous biomorphic forms that decorate the wall, adds to the narrative of this scene—as if the tankard were in some way affecting the child's dreams" (96). Nearby, there was an actual wooden tankard in a display case as well as another painting with a similar motif, *Still Life: Wood Tankard and Metal Pitcher* (1880).



Fig. 2, View of the first gallery showing works from Gauguin's early Impressionist years. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

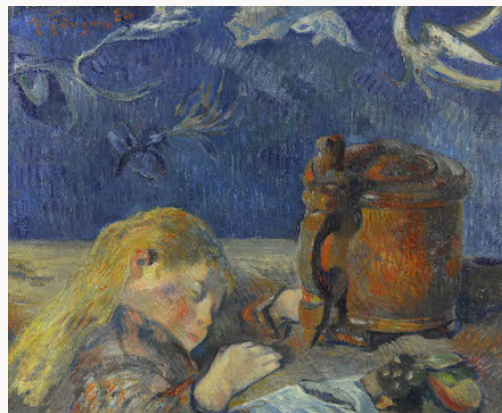


Fig. 3, *Clovis Sleeping*, 1884.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Gauguin's borrowing from multiple sources and cultures was introduced in the *Resurrection Sarcophagus-like Casket* (1884–85), which reveals both Japanese netsuke inlaid on the sides and bas-relief ballet dancers obviously influenced by Edgar Degas on the top; on the interior is a

small male mummy (figs. 4, 5). With his characteristic lack of concern about what these images might have meant in their original context, Gauguin has assembled a quirky combination of elements that seem largely unrelated to each other. The viewer is left to devise a meaning independently.



Fig. 4, *Resurrection Sarcophagus-Like Casket*, 1884–85. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 5, Interior view showing the “mummy” figure in the *Resurrection Sarcophagus-Like Casket*, 1884–85. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Another example of Gauguin’s early experimentation with mixed media was evident in *The Singer* (1880) (fig. 6). Although this bas-relief appears at first glance to be carved entirely from wood, in fact the bouquet in the lower left is made of plaster and applied to the wooden substrate. The artist then painted it to look like wood. Ophélie Ferlier-Bouat, curator of sculpture at the Musée d’Orsay, points out that “the imitation wood grain on plaster suggests that it was merely a later addition, not the result of a premeditated decision to create a striking association between two visually different materials” (48). This spur of the moment approach to design will characterize much of Gauguin’s work. The artist’s early explorations in furniture design show a similar interest in applying new materials to an existing project. *Cabinet* (1881) is a case in point (fig. 7). It was manufactured as a simple storage unit and Gauguin added elaborate, abstracted floral motifs as well as the tiny profile heads. Although not entirely successful, it is nonetheless a noteworthy experiment in transforming a basic piece of furniture into something that is entirely individual.



Fig. 6, *The Singer*, 1880.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 7, *Cabinet*, 1881.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

The progression of the artist's interest in three-dimensional form continued in the second gallery with a selection of ceramics from the mid-1880s. Gauguin's work as a ceramist began under the guidance of Ernest Chaplet (1835–1909), who had been working with Gauguin's friend, Félix Bracquemond (1833–1914). Chaplet's initial expectation had been that Gauguin would decorate the pots, but it became apparent that he was more interested in creating his own forms by hand, often working with ancient techniques such as coiling. The first display case in this gallery features one of Gauguin's vases flanked by two of Chaplet's pieces (fig. 8). Although still similar in style, Gauguin has already begun to abstract his motifs in *Vase Decorated with Foliage, Grapes and Geese*. Japonisme was a key influence in this 1887–88 vase, but the folk pottery of Quimper, Brittany would soon become a more dominant element as would the Andean pottery that Gauguin knew as a child in Peru.



Fig. 8, View of the first gallery showing works from Gauguin's *Vase decorated with Foliage, Grapes and Geese* (center) flanked by works by Ernest Chaplet, *Flowerpot* (left) and *Pot with handle* (right).
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

The impact of myriad cultures on Gauguin's ceramics also provided a convenient segue into a wall mural of a world map identifying the locations where Gauguin travelled and worked. This gallery also offered a short video, *A Visual Voyage*, with a blessedly brief and understated

biography and a discussion of the various media that Gauguin investigated over the course of his career.

The third gallery demonstrated the success of the exhibition design concept effectively. The large open room was subdivided by strategically positioned partitions that defined smaller groupings around a number of motifs and themes. Making comparisons between ceramics, watercolors, prints, and paintings became effortless, and the connections between the subject matter or motif used in each medium was immediately clear, as in the classical subject of Leda and the swan (fig. 9). This female figure first appeared as a pastel and charcoal drawing of a nude bather in 1886, but emerged as the mythological figure of Leda in a glazed stoneware vase in 1887–88 (fig. 10). She is clearly a young Breton woman rather than the ancient Greek queen of Sparta, but her intertwined position with the swan readily recalls Ovid’s well-known story. In his catalogue essay “Leda and the Bathers,” Dario Gamboni, Université de Genève, argues that the swan is actually a gander in Gauguin’s rendition, noting that: “Depending on the angle of view, the twisted shape of the gander, which serves as a handle and evokes a dance of seduction, turns away from the girl or towards her, and it looks like a bird, a snake, or a phallus” (167). The multiple possible interpretations that Gamboni suggests underscore not only Gauguin’s ambiguity in developing the form of the vase, but also reinforce the open-ended nature of much of the artist’s work.



Fig. 9, View of the second gallery.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

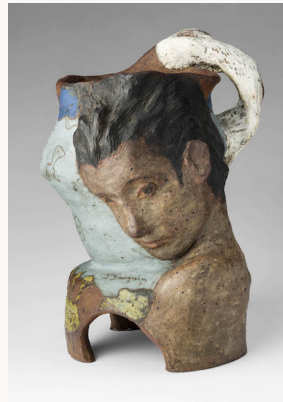


Fig. 10, *Vase in the Form of Leda and the Swan*,
1887–88. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

On the wall behind the vase, the image of Leda also appears in a gouache, watercolor, and charcoal image on Japanese rice paper ca. 1888 as a design for a ceramic jug; immediately adjacent to it is the design for the frontispiece of the *Volpini Suite* showing Leda and the swan contained within an inscribed circle on chrome yellow paper. By creating an aesthetic relationship between these three objects, the curators have facilitated a discussion about how Gauguin used—and re-used—images in different media for diverse purposes. This technique is used throughout the exhibition, encouraging visitors to speculate about what they’re seeing and how it fits into the larger narrative of Gauguin’s artwork over time.

The wealth of material in this third gallery was divided into multiple subdivisions, most of which were grounded in the years the artist lived in Brittany. The initial section extended the ceramics from the previous gallery into a display of stoneware with Breton themes, often

still produced in association with Chaplet. Shepherds, young girls dancing, gleaners, washerwomen, and laundresses appear on a variety of stoneware, some glazed with bright colors and some left unglazed or highlighted only with a single color. Other ceramics related to the themes seen in the paintings, such as a cup with the figure of a bather (fig. 11). Another subdivision focused on carved wooden objects for daily use: walking sticks, wooden shoes (sabots), and a cask, presumably for wine. Nearby were several examples of Andean Moche pottery from the first century, displayed side by side with the ceramic sculptures Gauguin based on these ancient works.



Fig. 11, *Cup Decorated with the Figure of a Bathing Girl*, 1887–88. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Japanese-style fans with Breton scenes formed another small grouping, combining with a selection of prints and pastels of similar subjects as well as zincographs from the *Volpini Suite* (1889) that feature images of Brittany. Off to the side of this gallery was an opening in the wall where the chest known as *Earthly Paradise* (1888) was on view (fig. 12). Designed collaboratively by Gauguin and Emile Bernard (1868–1941) when they both lived near the village of Pont-Aven, it exemplifies the dissolution of the barriers between fine art and decorative art, creating instead an environment in which potentially all objects could become art. Most of the painted bas-relief images on the chest reference the life and landscape near Pont-Aven, although Gauguin's work on the right panel reveals figures from Martinique, the French colony that he had visited in 1887.



Fig. 12, Paul Gauguin and Emile Bernard, *Earthly Paradise*, 1888. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

This area flowed into a larger sub-division filled with the largest concentration of paintings in the exhibition. Naturally, they were mixed with drawings, pastels, watercolors, and prints. In this section, Gauguin's fascination with Breton women's costume was immediately apparent. The dark blue, green, and brown tones of their dresses seem to have captured his attention, particularly as a foil to the ubiquitous white hats. In fact, two crisply starched and very imposing white Breton bonnets were also on display in this area.

Visitors also had the opportunity to observe the development of Gauguin's painting during his years in Brittany here. In *Breton Girls Dancing, Pont-Aven* (1888), he captured a scene of three girls dancing hand in hand in a field, a painting that has retained strong elements of Impressionism (fig. 13). In *Vision After the Sermon (Jacob Wrestling with the Angel)* of the same year, he experimented with a new direction (fig. 14). Naturalistic colors have given way to arbitrary hues and the composition of the painting owes more to Japanese woodblock prints than to western conventions of linear perspective. Although this is a familiar canvas, it was a pleasure to see it in person on this side of the Atlantic.



Fig. 13, *Breton Girls Dancing, Pont-Aven*, 1888.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 14, *Vision of the Sermon (Jacob Wrestling with the Angel)*, 1888. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

The fourth gallery, a more contemplative and intimate room following the open space of the large third gallery, was filled primarily with artworks based on motifs and themes from Brittany, including self-portraits, ceramics, and sculpture (fig. 15). Here was Gauguin's well known *Portrait of the Artist with the Yellow Christ* (1890–91) accompanied by the actual stoneware sculpture, *Self-Portrait in the Form of a Grotesque Head*, that is depicted to the right of the artist's head in the painting (fig. 16).



Fig. 15, View of the third gallery.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 16, *Portrait of the Artist with The Yellow Christ*, 1890–91. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

In the center of the gallery was his formidable sculpture of his friend, Jacob Meijer de Haan (1852–95), who traveled with him to Brittany (fig. 17). The two artists spent the summer and fall months of 1889 in the remote village of Le Pouldu, working on their individual projects, and gathering frequently with Paul Sérusier (1864–1927) and Charles Filiger (1863–1928) to discuss their visions of how the visual arts should be developed in the future. During those months, the four of them also decided to decorate the dining room of Marie Henry's inn where they stayed. Gauguin's sculpture of Meijer de Haan was originally part of an ensemble on the hearth, but the image of his friend's face was one that Gauguin returned to many times over the years. Claire Bernardi explained its role in the artist's life this way: "This figure, which Gauguin invested with great symbolism, haunted him until the end of his life, appearing in a late wood-block print and an even later painting, *Contes barbares* (*Primitive Tales*)" (178).



Fig. 17, View of the third gallery with *Portrait of Meijer de Haan*, 1889–90.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

It is in this gallery too that the first signs of Gauguin's preoccupation with tropical environments appears. In 1887, he had traveled to Panama with his friend and fellow painter Charles Laval (1862–94) where they worked on the construction of the Canal. Eventually

they moved on to the more relaxing island of Martinique. Like the portrait sculpture of Meijer de Haan, the painting, *Caribbean Woman*, (1889) was originally part of the decoration for the inn at Le Pouldu (fig. 18). A similar female figure was also the model for the wooden sculpture, *Lewdness*, several months later in 1890. Both pieces share an unusual composition, with one of the woman's arms resting on top of her head and the other one posed almost as a straight line between her breasts. Likewise, their unabashed nudity was a departure from the Breton women in their head-to-toe costumes that Gauguin had been painting earlier.



Fig. 18, View of the third gallery. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

The next gallery was essentially a “break room” (fig. 19). It was designed as a space to sit and browse through the exhibition catalogue or perhaps peruse the photographic enlargements of costumed Breton women, Tahitian plantations, and objects from the French colonial pavilions at the Exposition Universelle in Paris. By placing this room in the middle of the exhibition circulation path, the exhibition designer offered visitors a chance to rest their eyes with views out the south-facing windows and more importantly, to take a breath before moving into the second half of the exhibition. Typically this type of space is placed at the end of an exhibition near the ubiquitous gift shop; this was a welcome change to that pattern.



Fig. 19, View of the fourth gallery with exhibition catalogues available for view at tables and photographic murals of Breton women, Colonial pavilion at Exposition Universelle, Paris, and Tahitian plantations. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Moving along into the fifth gallery, viewers entered the Polynesian world of Gauguin's later career. Signaling this shift, the color of the wainscoting was a soft green rather than the blue

or gold of the previous galleries; the charcoal color above the wainscoting remained the same. Again the emphasis was on the extraordinary diversity of Gauguin's production. Immediately on entering the gallery, the curators paired a large reverse-painted glass window, *Rupe Tahiti (Hurrah Tahiti)* (1893) with a very small watercolor in the shape of a fan, *Soyez amoureuses vous serez heureuses (Be in love and you will be happy)* (1894; figs. 20, 21). Seen together, these pieces may suggest the artist's pleasure at being back in Tahiti after a stay in Paris; the fan shows a semi-nude woman in a luxurious landscape with an admonition to "be in love and you will be happy" written in French (not Tahitian) in the sky above. That sounds like either hopeful advice or a statement of personal contentment at that moment.



Fig. 20, *Rupe Tahiti (Hurrah Tahiti)*, 1893.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 21, *Soyez amoureuses vous serez heureuses (Be in love, you will be happy)*, 1894.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Rupe Tahiti (Hurrah Tahiti) also emphasizes semi-nude women in luscious landscapes, but it is the technique of reverse-painting on glass that is most intriguing here. Gauguin was in the process of designing his studio in Papeete and this was an experiment in creating a stained glass effect by using oil paints on framed sections of glass. Both the adjacent fan watercolor and this window illustrate Gauguin's intentional mixing of Western traditions, such as stained glass windows, with Polynesian imagery; the fan too reflects an Eastern form, in this case filtered through the cross-cultural lens of Japonisme, which was then combined with Polynesian images. The artist selects whatever captures his attention and experiments freely, ignoring the conventions of composition and subject matter that would have been accepted without question a quarter of a century earlier.

Another example of this free-wheeling appropriation of images is seen in the carved wooden dinnerware that he produced. By this point in the exhibition, visitors undoubtedly realized that the popular concept of Gauguin as 'that artist who ran off to Tahiti' is quite limiting, but it is unlikely that they expected to see his work as a designer of dinnerware (fig. 22). The cups and bowls were actually purchased as plain wooden forms that Gauguin then covered in patterns inspired by Marquesan tattoo patterns and decorative designs that he had seen in photographs. As so often happens with Gauguin's work, it can be challenging to know whether he saw actual objects in this style or was simply reproducing something that he's seen in travel literature or photographs.



Fig. 22, View of the fifth gallery, showing from left to right: *Drinking Cup*, 1889–91.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

The painting, *Merahi metua no Tehamana* (*Tehamana has Many Parents or The Ancestors of Tehamana*), (1893), poses a similar quandary (fig. 23). Displayed on the wall opposite the carved wooden bowls and cups, this portrait of the artist's companion Tehamana depicts her in a 'missionary' dress, clear evidence of the imposition of western Christian values on traditional Tahitian women—and of the fact that French Polynesia was not a paradise untainted by Western contact as Gauguin had imagined. In spite of these signs of colonial power; however, he adds the figure of the goddess Hina as part of the wall decoration to the left of Tehamana; he also included a spirit figure at each shoulder, suggesting that the ancestors will protect her—even in her disguise as a Christian presumably.

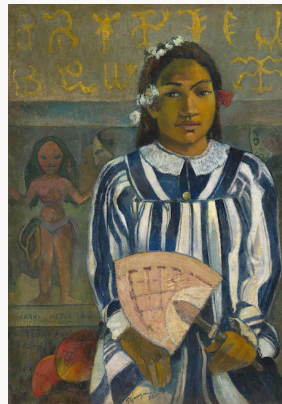


Fig. 23, *Merahi metua no Tehamana* (*Tehamana Has Many Parents or The Ancestors of Tehamana*), 1893.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

For those who had been anticipating Gauguin's scenes of Polynesia, the next gallery was full of treasures, including *Parahi te marae* (*The Sacred Mountain*, 1892) and *Manao Tupapau* (*Spirits of the Dead Watching*, 1892) (figs. 24, 25). Many of these canvases are familiar images to Gauguin aficionados, but it is rare to see so many of them in one exhibition. Two renditions of *Pape moe* (*Mysterious Water*, 1894) introduce the motif of the Polynesian landscape in this gallery. Both show a male figure precariously balanced on a rock and attempting to drink from a small waterfall; one is a watercolor and one is a bas relief. The source for the image was a photograph in the artist's collection entitled *Rock Spring in the Samoan Islands*, ca. 1887, but

Gauguin has reformulated it as a narrative about a young man who may or may not succeed in his quest for water before tumbling into the stream. Because of this potential for calamity—or at least embarrassment for the young man—the image creates a sense of tension, leaving viewers uncertain about the outcome. There is also humor in this image, a rarity in Gauguin's work.



Fig. 24, *Parahi te marae (The Sacred Mountain)*, 1892. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 25, *Manao Tupapau (Spirit of the Dead Watching)*, 1892. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

The seventh gallery, another large open space, is almost entirely devoted to printmaking, and in fact, could almost serve as an instructional manual in how to produce woodblock prints (fig. 26). *Noa Noa*, Gauguin's fictionalized account of his time in Tahiti, was presented in many forms here. There were the woodblock prints that illustrated the book, as well as watercolors and related paintings (figs. 27, 28). One video station allowed visitors to virtually turn each page of the book, and others explained the techniques involved in creating monotypes and woodblock prints. One of the partition walls in this space displayed five different versions of *Te nava nava fenua (Delightful Land)*, a image that is central to the story of *Noa Noa* (figs. 29, 30).



Fig. 26, View of the seventh gallery showing *Mahana no atua* (*Day of the God*), 1894.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 27, View of the seventh gallery with *Nave nave fenua* (*Delightful Land*), from *Noa Suite*, 1893–94.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 28, *Noa Noa* (*Fragrant*) from the *Noa Noa Suite*, 1893–94. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

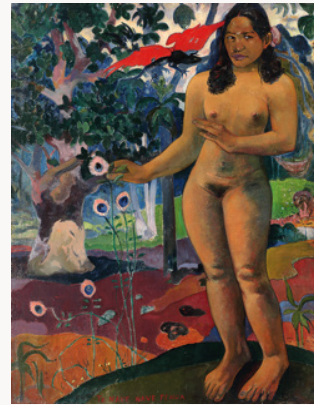


Fig. 29, *Te nave nave fenua* (*Delightful Land*), 1892. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 30, *Te nave nave fenua (Delightful Land)*,
ca. 1892. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Gauguin's painting of *Mahana no atua (Day of the God)*, 1894) was also on view in the seventh gallery (fig. 31). This canvas was created during his stay in Paris between his first and second voyages to Tahiti. It marks a transitional moment for the artist, described by Art Institute of Chicago researchers Harriet K. Stratis and Allison Perelman as “a culminating synthesis of the Polynesian imagery from his first trip as well as a precursor to the more personal, blended symbolism of his later years” (260). The upper third of the image is a naturalistic landscape showing the ocean and the beach with the Tahitian goddess Hina in the center. The middle register contains Gauguin's version of the cycle of life, with three women representing birth, life, and death; and the bottom third of the canvas is devoted to a series of flat, abstracted areas of color. Some of these images recur in Gauguin's work repeatedly: the goddess Hina, the horseback rider on the beach, and of the curled up figure representing death, who is based on a newspaper photograph of a Peruvian mummy. As the artist worked with these images over time, he continually instilled them with personal meaning. Hina, for example, first appears as a curiosity, a figure out of novels and travel photos, but she gradually becomes more three-dimensional and perhaps more genuinely meaningful to the artist as an embodiment of earth-centered power.



Fig. 31, *Mahana no atua (Day of the God)*, 1894. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Following this large open gallery was a smaller, more intimate space that extended the survey of Gauguin's print work, but with a concentration on religious themes and motifs. In

particular, the *Suite of Late Woodblock Prints* (1889–99) included *Te Atua (The God)*, *Buddha* and *Eve* (fig. 32). Curiously, there is also an image of a *Wayside Shrine in Brittany* in this suite of prints, indicating that Gauguin was revisiting his own earlier work from the perspective of a decade later (fig. 33). The roughly carved woodblocks in these prints was offset by the increasingly elegant paintings in this gallery, although the theme of religious or spiritual imagery is at the heart of the canvases as well. *Vairumat* (1897), the goddess associated with the Tahitian creation myth, is a serene presence seated on her bed or altar of gold as she gazes into the distance (fig. 34). Without a doubt, this painting would have appealed to the Paris art market, but the figure of Vairumati is no longer simply an exotic—and erotic—woman designed for male pleasure. She has become an image of quiet, self-contained authority.



Fig. 32, *Buddha*, from the *Suite of Late Wood-Block Prints*, 1898–99.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 33, *Wayside Shrine in Brittany*, from the *Suite of Late Wood-Block Prints*, 1898–99.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 34, *Vairumati*, 1897.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

In the other half of this gallery, the viewer was presented with panoramic paintings and bas-reliefs as well as a photomural of a Tahitian archway from the Auckland Museum in the 1890s. Gauguin had visited the museum in Auckland, New Zealand, on his return trip to Tahiti in 1895, and the Maori artifacts on display had captured his imagination. The panoramic painting *Faa ihe ihe (Tahitian Pastoral, 1898)* echoes many of the motifs seen in his

monumental painting of 1897, *D'où Venons Nous / Que Sommes Nous / Où Allons Nous* (fig. 35). The horseback rider, the red-haired woman, the woman picking fruit, even the presence of the dogs are all part of the personal symbolic vocabulary that Gauguin had created over the years. This painting has none of the emotional intensity of *D'où Venons Nous*, but rather seems to be an investigation with a more decorative purpose; even the hand gesture of the red-haired woman harks back to the almost identical gesture of the *Caribbean Woman* designed for Marie Henry's dining room at the inn in Le Pouldu.



Fig. 35, *Faa Iheihe, (Tahitian Pastoral)*, 1898. [\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Not surprisingly, the final gallery offered a selection of Gauguin's very late works (fig. 36). Here too was an unexpected surprise in the form of the door surround boards from the *Maison de Jouir* (*House of Pleasure*) that Gauguin built for himself on the Marquesan island of Hiva Oa (figs. 37, 38). These door surrounds are carved with a series of bas-reliefs that again counsel us to "soyez mystérieuses et vous serez heureuses" (be mysterious and you will be happy). Despite its enigmatic tone, the repetition of this phrase from earlier works suggests its importance to the artist. The entrance was originally flanked with two wooden sculptures, one a deliberately satirical caricature of the local bishop as a horned demon and the other of his servant Thérèse, who was the cleric's mistress. As Ophélie Ferlier-Bouat notes in the catalogue, these works "reflect the freer rein and often incendiary social and theological commentary that characterized the end of his life" (350). It might also be said that what Gauguin accomplished in the *Maison de Jouir* was an ensemble of painting, sculpture, architecture, and probably decorative arts that all worked together to create a totally designed environment—not unlike what his friends and colleagues back in France were creating at the same time.



Fig. 36, View of sixth gallery showing
Polynesian Woman with Children, 1901.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 37, View of ninth gallery featuring
Maison du Jouir (House of Pleasure).
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)



Fig. 38, Door frame boards from *Maison du Jouis* (*House of Pleasure*), 1901–02.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

Although the purpose of this review was to offer a perspective on the exhibition, the catalogue accompanying this show must be mentioned (fig. 39). Like the exhibition itself, it was approached with an open mind in thinking about how best to present the material. Instead of the usual introductory essay at the beginning, there is a chronology of materials and methods that establishes immediately that the intent of this exhibition was the examination of how Gauguin's art was influenced by a diverse range of mediums, materials, and techniques. This is followed by seven essays by the curators who were involved in the project. At the conclusion of this essay section is a compendium of the art and artifacts that were significantly influential in Gauguin's development; works by his fellow artists are predictably included, but so are ethnographic images and his personal photographs and documents. Finally, there is the catalogue of the exhibition, with one-page essays at the beginning of each thematic section. All in all, it is an exhibition catalogue that satisfies both the goals of a picture book and the hopes of art historians for substantive, thoughtful information.

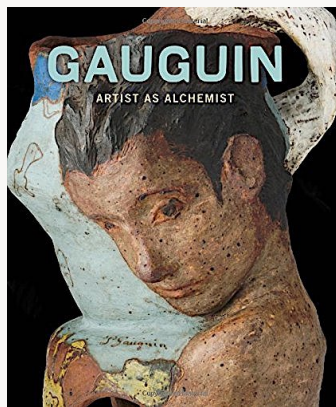


Fig. 39, Cover of exhibition catalogue, *Gauguin: Artist as Alchemist*, 2017.
[\[view image & full caption\]](#)

If there is only one major exhibition to see this year, *Gauguin, Artist as Alchemist* may well be it. It offers visitors a noteworthy way of looking at Gauguin's work and thinking about his contributions. There was refreshingly little about his endlessly documented personal failings; equally welcome was the lack of tiresome pseudo-psychoanalysis. Instead, the

exhibition offered visitors an opportunity to encounter the artist's three-dimensional work in sculpture, furniture, ceramics, glass, and functional daily objects. The sheer quantity of these works made it clear that Gauguin's artistic voice developed in the practice of constantly exploring new materials and methods. As a counterpoint to the three-dimensional work, *Artist as Alchemist* also showcased his printmaking, again with the goal of demonstrating how he used this medium both to work out his ideas and to produce suites of finished prints that challenged existing conventions on many levels. Within this complex context of Gauguin's total aesthetic output, his paintings take on new layers of meaning. Museum visitors could see how a painting may have grown out of an experiment in ceramics, or conversely, how a painting might sometimes be nothing more than a collection of motifs that would later be used in a sculpture or a print. By studying the extraordinary range of Gauguin's production, and the profound relationship of one medium to another, the viewer can begin to understand the artist's over-arching intention to free himself from conventional approaches to art, and attempt to create work that would unapologetically reflect his own worldview.

Gauguin's appetite for visual images from around the world was equally evident. He collected and absorbed numerous sources of popular literature, travel photographs, museum exhibitions, and the latest trends in Paris, but ultimately all of these became fodder for his imaginative production and for the creation of his personal symbolic lexicon. Sometimes, the significance of these symbolic forms seems clear and other times, there is simply no way to do anything other than step back and let the visual quality of the image wash over you. And that is where the alchemy begins.

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Illustrations

All works of art are by Paul Gauguin unless otherwise noted. All photographs courtesy of the Art Institute of Chicago, 2017, unless otherwise noted.



Fig. 1, Entrance to the Art Institute of Chicago showing the banners for the exhibition *Gauguin: Artist as Alchemist*. Photograph by the author. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 2, View of the first gallery showing works from Gauguin's early Impressionist years. [\[return to text\]](#)

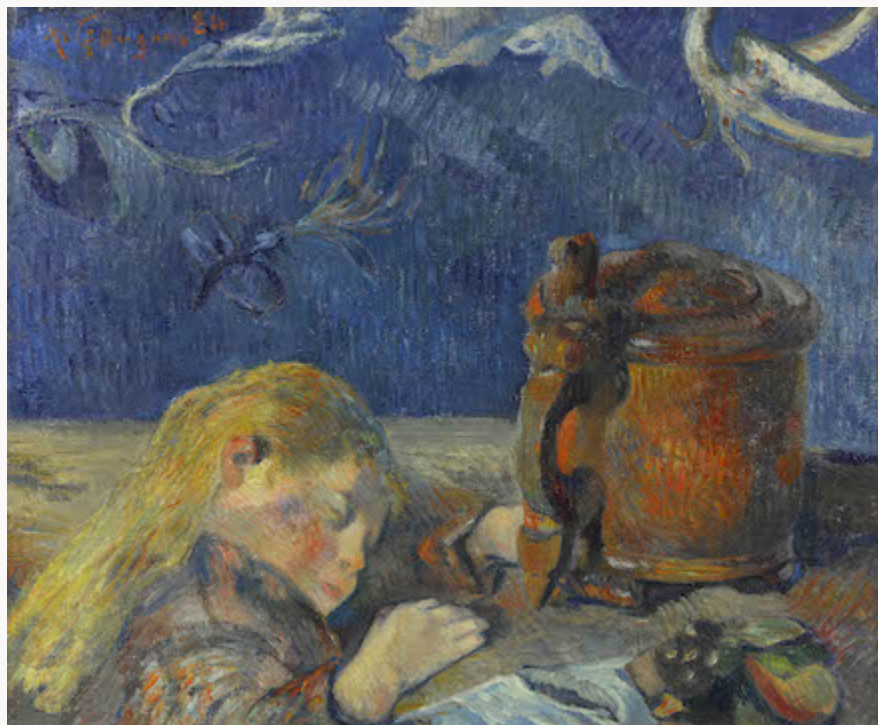


Fig. 3, *Clovis Sleeping*, 1884. Oil on canvas. Private Collection. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 4, *Resurrection Sarcophagus-Like Casket*, 1884–85. Pearwood, with iron hinges, leather, and red stain, inlaid with two netsuke masks. The Kelton Foundation, Santa Monica. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 5, Interior view showing the “mummy” figure in the *Resurrection Sarcophagus-Like Casket*, 1884–85.

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Fig. 6, *The Singer*, 1880. Wood, mahogany, plaster, paint, and gilt. Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek, Copenhagen.
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Fig. 7, *Cabinet*, 1881. Alder wood, painted. Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe, Hamburg. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 8, View of the first gallery showing works from Gauguin's *Vase decorated with Foliage, Grapes and Geese* (center) flanked by works by Ernest Chapelet, *Flowerpot* (left) and *Pot with handle* (right). Map showing Gauguin's travels in the background. Photograph by the author. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 9, View of the second gallery. In case: *Vase in the Form of Leda and the Swan*, 1887–88. On wall at left: Design for a plate; frontispiece from the *Volpini Suite*. On wall at right: Designs for *Jugs*, ca. 1888.

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Fig. 10, *Vase in the Form of Leda and the Swan*, 1887–88. Partially glazed stoneware decorated with slip.
Private Collection. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 11, *Cup Decorated with the Figure of a Bathing Girl*, 1887–88. Stoneware with dark mottled glaze.
Dame Jillian Sackler. Photograph by Demetra Vartzikos. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 12, Paul Gauguin and Emile Bernard, *Earthly Paradise*, 1888. Chestnut and pine, carved and polychromed; glass, metal hardware. Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 13, *Breton Girls Dancing, Pont-Aven*, 1888. Oil on canvas. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 14, *Vision of the Sermon (Jacob Wrestling the Angel)*, 1888. Oil on canvas. Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 15, View of the third gallery. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 16, *Portrait of the Artist with The Yellow Christ*, 1890–91. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

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Fig. 17, View of the third gallery with *Portrait of Meijer de Haan*, 1889–90. Polychromed oak. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. On rear wall: *Breton Eve*, 1889. Watercolor and pastel on paper. McNay Art Museum, San Antonio. Photograph by the author. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 18, View of the third gallery. In case: *Lewdness*, 1890. Polychromed oak and pine with gilded highlights and metal. J. F. Willumsens Museum, Frederikssund, Denmark. On rear wall: *Caribbean Woman*, 1889. Oil on wood. Private Collection. Photograph by the author. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 19, View of the fourth gallery with exhibition catalogues available for view at tables and photographic murals of Breton women, Colonial pavilion at Exposition Universelle, Paris, and Tahitian plantations. Photograph by the author. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 20, *Rupe Tahiti (Hurrah Tahiti)*, 1893. Oil paint on reverse-painted glass. New Orleans Museum of Art. Photograph by the author. [\[return to text\]](#)

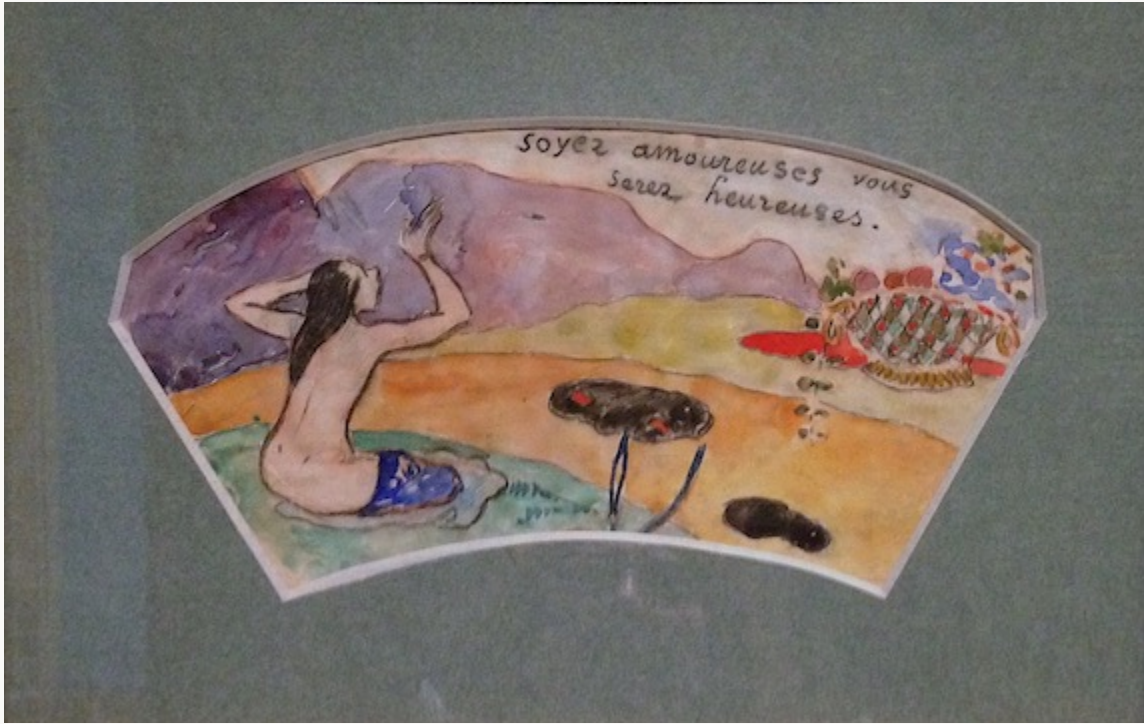


Fig. 21, *Soyez amoureuses vous serez heureuses* (*Be in love, you will be happy*), 1894. Fan project. Watercolor, charcoal, and gouache. Private Collection. Photograph by the author. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 22, View of the fifth gallery, showing from left to right: *Drinking Cup*, 1889–91. Wood. Private Collection; *Umete (Cup)*, ca. 1891. Carved pua bowl. Musée d'Orsay, Paris; Artist Unknown, *Bowl*, early 20th century. Coconut wood. Musée du Quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, Paris; *Cup for Popoi*, ca. 1891. Tamanu wood. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. In rear of case: *Cane*, 1893–95. Wood, leather, and metal. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Photograph by the author. [\[return to text\]](#)

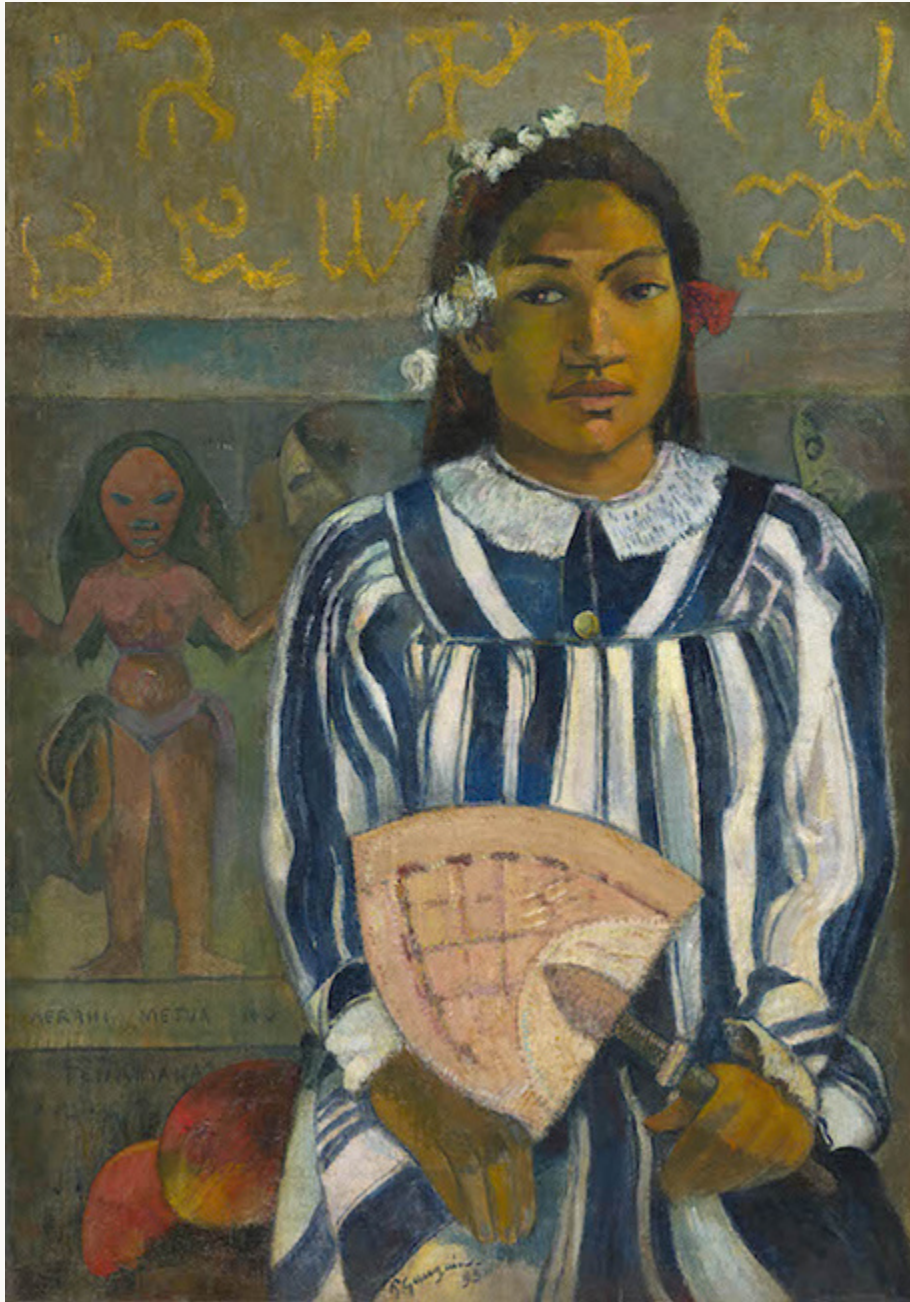


Fig. 23, *Merahi metua no Tehamana* (*Tehamana Has Many Parents* or *The Ancestors of Tehamana*), 1893. Oil on jute canvas. Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 24, *Parahi te marae* (*The Sacred Mountain*), 1892. Oil on canvas. Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia. Photograph courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 25, *Manao Tupapau* (*Spirit of the Dead Watching*), 1892. Oil on canvas. Albright-Knox Gallery, Buffalo.
Photograph courtesy of the Albright-Knox Gallery. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 26, View of the seventh gallery showing *Mahana no atua* (*Day of the God*), 1894. Oil on canvas. Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago. At right: *Reclining Tahitian*, 1894. Watercolor transfer with additions in watercolor, Private Collection; and Gauguin's bound manuscript of *Noa Noa, Voyage de Tahiti*.

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Fig. 27, View of the seventh gallery with *Nave nave fenua (Delightful Land)*, from *Noa Noa Suite*, 1893–94.
Wood block print with wood block original below. Photograph by the author. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 28, *Noa Noa (Fragrant)* from the *Noa Noa Suite*, 1893–94. Third state of four. Woodblock print in black ink, over traces of brown ink, with hand-applied blue, light blue, several greens, pink, orange, pale-orange, yellow, pale-red, and dark-gray watercolor, on ivory Japanese paper. The Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 29, *Tē nāve nāve fenua (Delightful Land)*, 1892. Oil on canvas. Ohara Museum of Art, Kurashiki. [\[return to text\]](#)

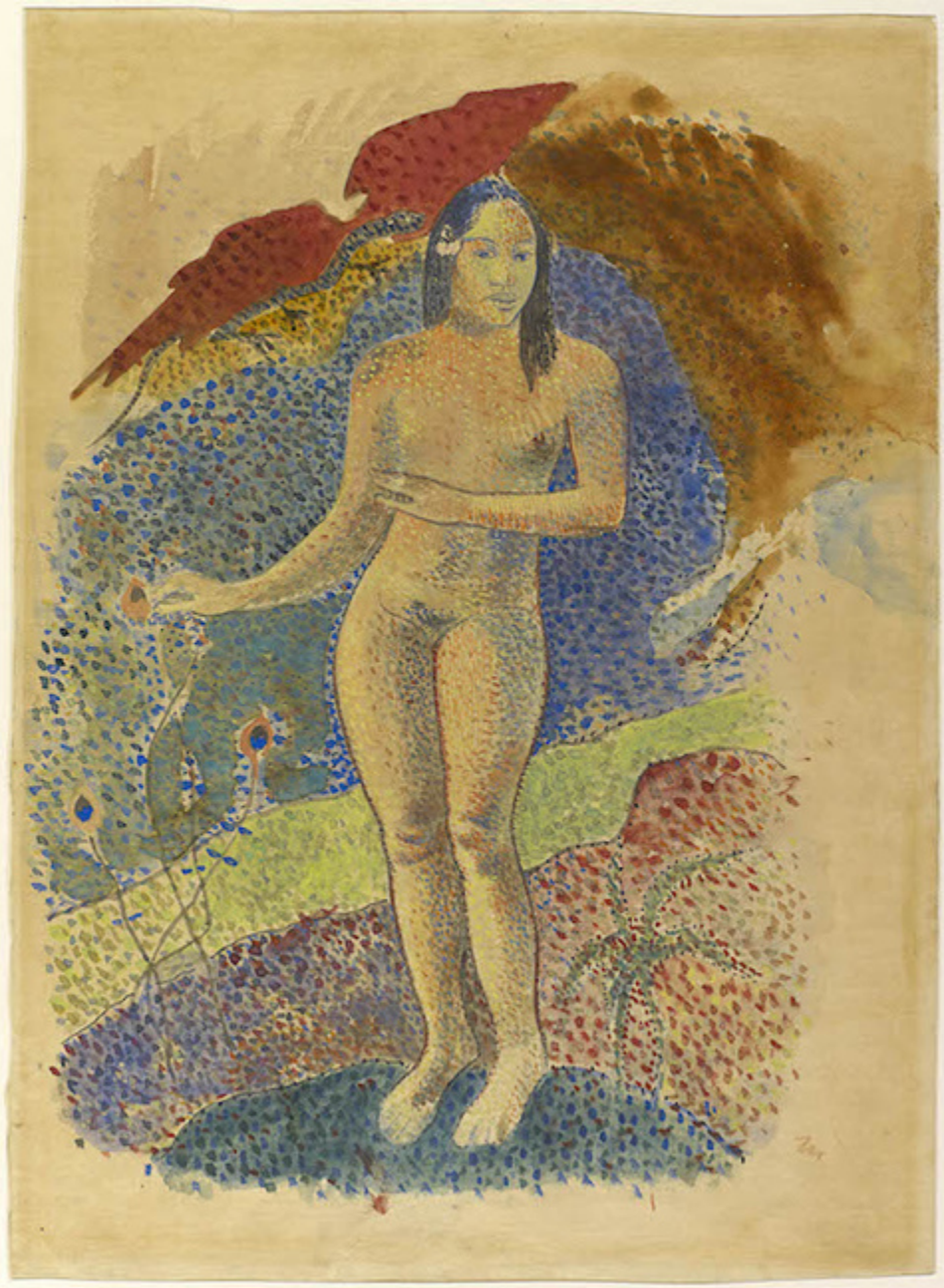


Fig. 30, *Te nave nave fenua (Delightful Land)*, ca. 1892. Wash in ink, watercolor, and gouache on paper.
Musée de Grenoble, Grenoble. © Musée de Grenoble. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 31, *Mahana no atua (Day of the God)*, 1894. Oil on canvas. Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago.

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Fig. 32, *Buddha*, from the *Suite of Late Wood-Block Prints*, 1898–99. Woodblock print in black ink on thin ivory Japanese paper perimeter mounted on white Japanese paper. Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago. [\[return to text\]](#)

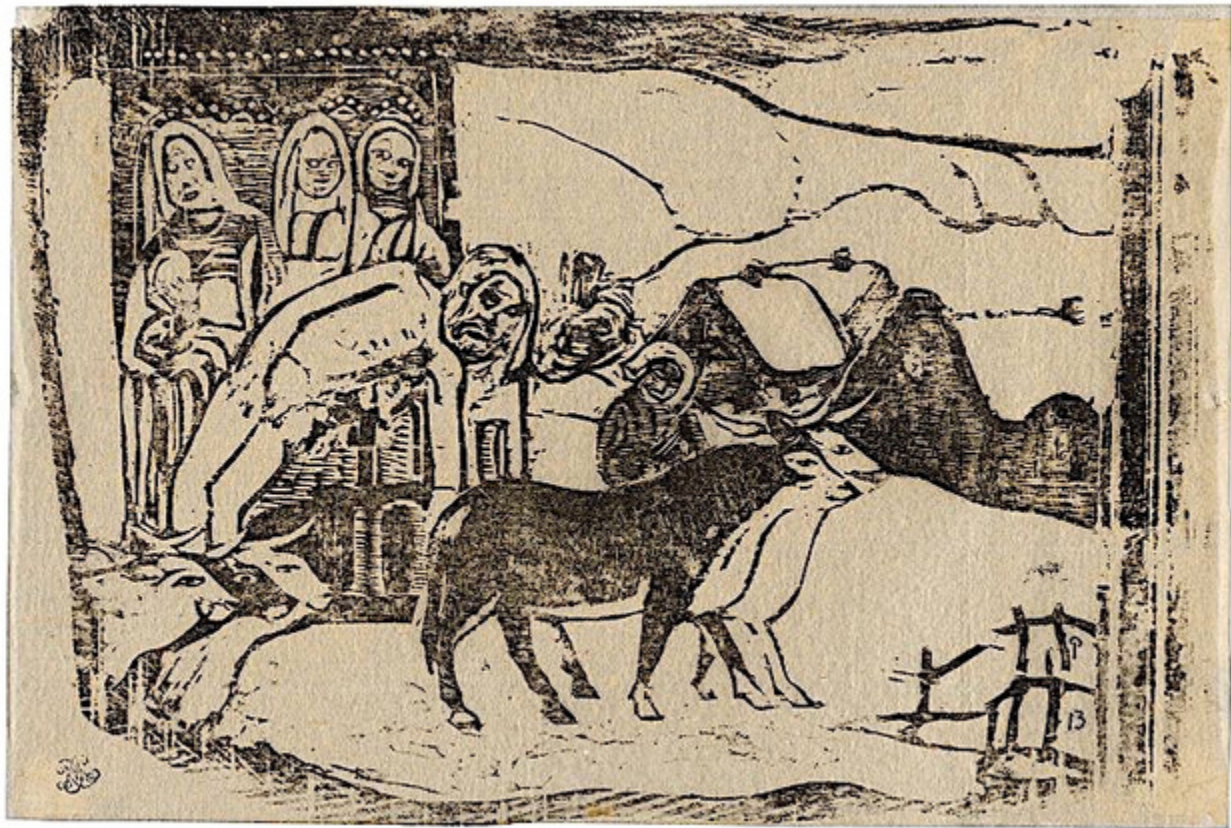


Fig. 33, *Wayside Shrine in Brittany*, from the *Suite of Late Wood-Block Prints*, 1898–99. Woodblock print.
Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 34, *Vairumati*, 1897. Oil on canvas. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Available from: Wikimedia Commons.
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Fig. 35, *Faa Iheihe*, (*Tahitian Pastoral*), 1898. Oil on canvas. Tate, London. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 36, View of sixth gallery showing *Polynesian Woman with Children*, 1901. Oil on linen. Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago; and *The Invocation*, 1903. Oil on canvas. National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC. Photograph by the author. [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 37, View of ninth gallery featuring *Maison du Joui* (*House of Pleasure*). [\[return to text\]](#)



Fig. 38, Door frame boards from *Maison du Joueur* (*House of Pleasure*), 1901–02. Sequoia wood, polychrome. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. [\[return to text\]](#)

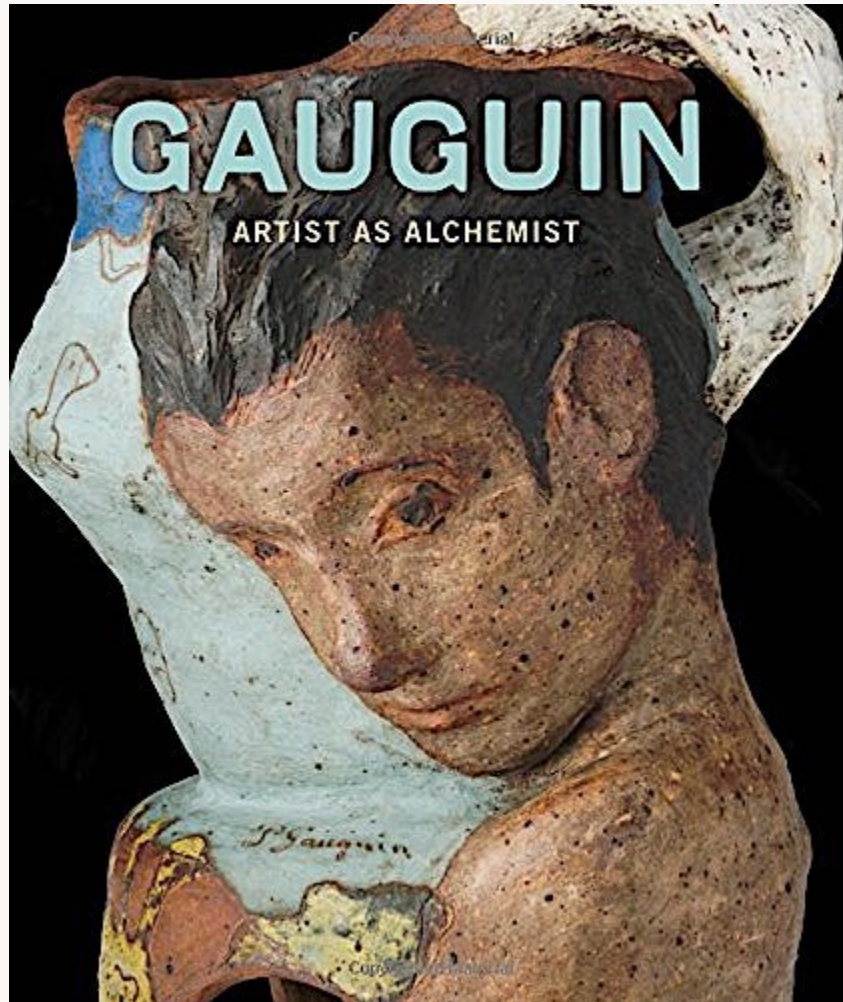


Fig. 39, Cover of exhibition catalogue, *Gauguin: Artist as Alchemist*, 2017. [\[return to text\]](#)