

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide

a journal of nineteenth-century visual culture

Belinda Thomson

book review of

Gauguin by June Hargrove

Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide 19, no. 1 (Spring 2020)

Citation: Belinda Thomson, book review of *Gauguin* by June Hargrove, *Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide* 19, no. 1 (Spring 2020), <https://doi.org/10.29411/ncaw.2020.19.1.11>.

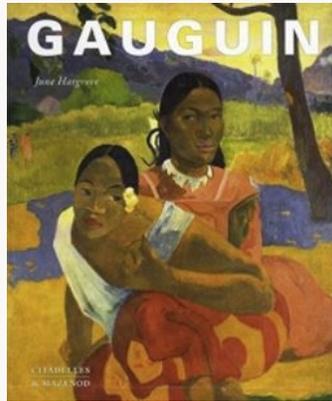
Published by: [Association of Historians of Nineteenth-Century Art](#)

Notes:

This PDF is provided for reference purposes only and may not contain all the functionality or features of the original, online publication.

License:

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License Creative Commons License](#).



June Hargrove,
Gauguin.
Paris: Éditions Citadelles-Mazenod, 2017.
432 pp.; 380 color illus.; bibliography.
ISBN 978–2–85088–718 5
189 € (hardcover)

It must have required considerable courage on June Hargrove's part to undertake a new, comprehensive monograph on Paul Gauguin at this juncture, given the attention that has been focused on the artist in recent decades. Such has been the uninterrupted flow of exhibitions, books, and scholarly essays that simply processing this information represented a formidable challenge. Yet for all this activity, there are still lacunae in the Gauguin scholarly apparatus, particularly where the post-1888 work is concerned. We await the appearance, long promised, of the post-1888 volumes of the artist's oeuvre catalogue as well as the complete revised edition of the later correspondence. This Citadelles-Mazenod monograph is a lavish publication, which joins their ongoing series heroically-dubbed "Les Phares," perhaps best translated as "The Beacons." In its insistence on high production values with excellent quality reproductions, often repeated as details, this French publisher is throwing down something of a *défi* to the recent trend of online art publishing—*vide* this journal—emphatically proclaiming its faith in physical and beautifully crafted books. But given the book's scale and price one wonders about its intended "general readership." It is too expensive and too weighty to serve usefully as a student textbook, although students are urged to consult it in libraries, always assuming and hoping that students do still read books in libraries. It is even somewhat on the unwieldy side for the specialist's library or the keen amateur's coffee table.

The strengths of June Hargrove's book are considerable, however, and it is a great pleasure to peruse, beginning with the apt images on the dust jacket which signpost Gauguin's two main geographical axes, Tahiti and Brittany (indeed the two are melded in the Maori features he gives the Breton women), and his thematic interest in women as the transmitters of their respective localized cultures. It is thorough, well-paced, chronologically arranged, and brings the reader up to date with much—though not all—of the most recent literature on Gauguin. Dario Gamboni's recent monograph, *Paul Gauguin: The Mysterious Centre of Thought* (2014) and his arguments about Gauguin's willful ambiguity have clearly informed the author's thinking, whereas certain contributions, particularly essays in exhibition

catalogues, seem to have passed her by. Currently the title is available in French and Chinese only. No translator is credited in the French edition, which I understand was an oversight regretted by the author. Françoise Jouen was responsible, and she produced a smooth text, although its somewhat didactic and un-nuanced tone does not quite convey the distinctive and spicy humor of the writer.

One of Hargrove's stated priorities is to demonstrate how all Gauguin's creativity was of a piece, that to a remarkable degree he was an artist who worked across a broad range of media, cross-fertilizing his activity in one with experiments or discoveries in another, not forgetting his considerable activity as a writer. The large page size and ability to cluster illustrations in different media serve this purpose admirably. While the ambition is laudable, one might object that, in fact, this is not such a new approach, the same intention having guided the selection of two recent exhibitions, the 2010 London and Washington exhibition *Gauguin: Maker of Myth* and the 2017 Chicago and Paris exhibition *Gauguin the Alchemist*.

With her extensive background knowledge of French nineteenth-century sculpture, Hargrove is better placed than most to discuss Gauguin the sculptor, and she judiciously weaves the most telling and ground-breaking examples of his wood carvings and ceramics into her narrative. One appreciates the occasions when she illuminates the discussion by reference to comparisons, such as Edgar Degas's wax *Little Dancer of Fourteen Years* (1878–81), linked to Gauguin's *Dame en promenade* (Woman on a Stroll also known as *The Little Parisienne*) (1880) and to his *Bust of Clovis* (1881–82). It was good to have this fascinating but rarely-seen bust which also makes use of wax discussed in such detail, to learn that the wooden base it sits on is likely to have been a repurposed shop sign, and to see that Degas saw fit to sketch it, demonstrating their shared interest in the Quattrocento portrait bust type, notwithstanding the absence of arms in the *Clovis*. Considered in isolation, Gauguin's sculpture can appear unprecedented in its strangeness and willed barbarism, so it is well to be reminded of the experimental and polychrome character to be found in work by such near contemporaries as Jean-Paul Aubé, Charles Cordier, Auguste Préault, and Jean-Léon Gérôme. Most of her choices of works to highlight are unarguable, and in many cases the descriptive analyses are illuminating. She favors the view that Jules-Ernest Bouillot, Gauguin's teacher, must have helped finish the surface of the Courtauld Gallery's "elegant and sensual" marble portrait head of *Mette* (1879), Gauguin's Danish wife. One would have liked a little more supporting evidence and explanation for her claim that Gauguin began the elaborate bas-relief sculpture *Soyez amoureuses* (Be in Love) (1889) in Paris (164). She presumably means that he worked up a ceramic or clay version there (he mentions this in a letter). But this would scarcely have been transportable, so did he subsequently make the colored pastel drawing, of which a torn fragment exists (not illustrated), as *aide-mémoire* and take it with him to Brittany? For we know it was in Le Pouldu that he made the wood carving, once he received delivery of the linden wood block he had ordered. As for the Getty's wooden *Head with Horns* (before 1894) from the end of the career, Hargrove omits it altogether. One would like to have known whether she considers its origins too problematic to incorporate. Sidestepping such problems—of which many remain in the Gauguin oeuvre—is the prerogative of a monograph author, who is not after all a cataloger.

The book's chapters follow a chronological sequence, with the artist's travels serving as obvious milestones. It is a familiar story, and there are few surprises. But there are still

questions worth posing, areas of Gauguin's life that have escaped documentation, and the book does try to shine a spotlight on some of them. Hargrove speculates on what English paintings and museum exhibits Gauguin might have seen in London on his little-documented visit in the summer of 1885. In the same context (70) she draws attention, surely a first, to the existence, in the Château-Museum of Boulogne, of remarkable and extensive Oceanic collections—Tahitian and Marquesan artifacts brought back in the early to mid-nineteenth century by a series of sailors and explorers—and wonders whether Gauguin passed this way on his journey to or from London in 1885. At first this idea struck me as absurd. Gauguin's apparently spur-of-the-moment decision to make that cross-Channel trip was surely facilitated by the regular ferry service between Dieppe, where he was staying at the time, and Newhaven. His purpose, so he claimed in a letter to Mette, was the chance of meeting contacts involved in Spanish political maneuverings in which he had some mysterious business interest (not touched on by Hargrove). But perhaps, on his return journey, he did take the Folkestone–Boulogne route, as he mentions, in a much later journalistic reminiscence about London Zoo, taking a train from London to Folkestone.^[1]

Questions such as this arise because, while it is written in an authoritative tone and full of valuable insights, the publication adopts a light touch as far as footnoting is concerned, and it is occasionally unclear when the author's comments are factually supported and when they are essentially speculative. For instance, why does the author describe the early painting *La famille du peintre au jardin, rue Carcel* (The Painter's Family in the Garden, rue Carcel) (1881) as unfinished (44)? Is it because it is unsigned and undated? In all other respects it seems a complete and considered composition and it may well have been exhibited as *Un morceau de jardin* at the Impressionists' exhibition of 1882. Again, why are the figures represented in *Intérieur, rue Carcel* (1881) described as "not his family" (46) when the pianist can surely be identified as Mette? This is the more surprising given that elsewhere we are told Mette earns money from giving music lessons; moreover, we are asked to consider—something of a stretch—that she may be seated at the piano in the inner room in *Nature morte dans un intérieur, Copenhague* (Still Life in an Interior, Copenhagen) (1885) (65). More convincingly, analyzing this puzzling and emotionally loaded painting, a hybrid of a still life and a genre piece, which is unusually well reproduced here, Hargrove is sharp-eyed in spotting the presence of two of the Gauguin children in the stiff little party in that inner room from which the artist is so clearly excluded, or excludes himself, a detail that suggestively signals the growing fractures developing at the heart of his sense of family. Following the author's lead, I was led to wonder whether the draped form filling the right foreground of this room might be a bed, which would confirm just how over-crowded, makeshift, and constraining the atmosphere in the Gauguins' Danish apartment was.

There are a few errors that should be noted. The use of the word Salon to describe the Impressionist exhibitions is a bothersome one, which becomes especially confusing when we read, of Degas's *Little Dancer*, that it was "announced for the Salon des Indépendants in 1881" and "presented the following year" (52). On several counts this is wrong. First, there is a confusion of dates since Degas announced his sculpture for the 1880 Impressionist exhibition but only showed it in 1881 (he abstained from the 1882 show). Second, even though Degas preferred for himself the designation "Independent" to Impressionist, the word Salon was not, to my knowledge, used for the Impressionist group's exhibitions at the time, either by the artist participants or the critics, since the group's rationale was to separate their private "Expositions" from the official annual Salon. Finally the present wording risks confusion with

the inauguration of the *Société des Artistes Indépendants* by artists such as Redon, Seurat, Signac, Schuffenecker and others in 1883–84, which did indeed go on to hold a more or less annual Salon, but this was a distinct enterprise from the Impressionists' exhibitions, and Gauguin showed the utmost disdain for its heterogeneous character. A typo, one assumes, resulted in the transposition of "Japonais" for "Javanais" (155) which is unfortunately repeated in the caption to illustration 169. The importance or agency of André Fontainas, the critic and poet with whom Gauguin had a productive epistolary exchange in 1899–1903 and to whom he sent his manuscripts *Racontars de rapin* and *Avant et après*, is overstated by calling him, variously, Editor-in-chief and Director of the *Mercure de France* (318, 360). On the contrary Fontainas occupied a more lowly position as the *Mercure's* regular art critic; thus it was scarcely in his gift to "chose not to publish" Gauguin's manuscripts. An anomaly, quite possibly outside the author's control given that the work is from a private collection, concerns the delightful watercolor self-portrait in which we glimpse an aging Gauguin at work, presumably in his Marquesan studio (illus. 460), yet the caption gives the much earlier loose date of "vers 1891–4."

One area in which the author's attention to detail occasionally falls short is in the exactitude of titles. The haunting and portentous painting of his daughter Aline asleep is given the title *La Petite Rêveuse* (The Little Dreamer) (1881), which has a somewhat clichéd ring, whereas at the Impressionist exhibition of 1882 Gauguin called it *La petite rêve, étude* (The Little One is Dreaming, Study); in the same show he repeated this arresting, active use of the verb in another title, again a painting of his daughter Aline, *La petite s'amuse* (The Little One is Playing) (1881). Not picking up on this was a missed opportunity, for Hargrove's description explores the former composition in detail, even pointing out the scrappy musical notation below the pattern of birds on the wallpaper. What was this musical notation, one wonders? Later in the book she claims, regrettably without divulging a source, that Gauguin's favorite piece of music was Schumann's popular piano composition, *Rêverie*, which is certainly consistent with his aesthetic (345). It prompts the speculation as to whether that tune was in Gauguin's "oeil qui écoute" ("listening eye") while he worked on this painting. The author rightly makes much of Gauguin's musical affinities, his repeated alignment of the function of color in painting to music's use of keys and notation and offers a detailed analysis of his fascinating watercolor drawing *Musique barbare* (Barbarous Music) (1893). She mentions his recurrent citing of a Wagner proclamation about the unsullied spiritual purity of the genuine artist, a quote inscribed on the wall of the Le Pouldu inn and again in the visitor's book at the Pension Gloanec, among other places, but she confuses the issue by claiming the words have been reattributed to Schumann by Linda Goddard. In reality it was Henri Dorra in his 1984 article on the so-called "Texte Wagner" who failed to differentiate the sayings of Wagner, of which the aforementioned Le Pouldu text is one, from certain dictums Gauguin took from Schumann's "Conseils aux jeunes musiciens," a slippage Goddard was indeed the first to point out.

Another title quibble concerns the painting that played a crucial role in Gauguin's career, sparking his rebranding as a symbolist painter, namely the 1888 canvas depicting Breton women responding to a sermon about Jacob wrestling with the Angel. For many years this was entitled, as it is here, *Vision après le Sermon* (Vision After the Sermon), following the title attributed to it in an 1891 Drouot sale. As I pointed out in the exhibition catalogue *Gauguin's Vision* (2005), Gauguin originally gave it a somewhat different title, listing it for its first showing in Brussels at the Belgian *Vingt* exhibition of 1889 as *Vision du sermon*, and for over a

decade now the National Gallery of Scotland has accepted the change. Does Hargrove have a strong reason for rejecting that change or is the conventional title merely resurrected as an oversight?

What kind of a Gauguin emerges from this new study? Do we learn anything new? Does she oblige us to rethink previously unquestioned assumptions? Certainly Hargrove achieves her goal of impressing upon the reader the extraordinary versatility of this complicated artist, skillfully interweaving his wide-ranging literary, cultural, religious ideas that are often borrowed from others, with his intensive campaigns of work in new media, experimenting productively right up to the end of his life with new ways of making prints, whilst never losing sight of haunting motifs from earlier work, such as the image of Meijer de Haan or Oviri. As she aptly puts it, “L’artiste revisite son passé afin de forger son avenir” (“The artist revisits his past in order to forge his future”). On the biographical front she makes plentiful and apposite use of quotations from his letters. There is an unfamiliar photograph of his five children, taken in Copenhagen in 1889 (illus. 19), and at various junctures in the narrative Hargrove draws attention to Gauguin’s capacity for sensitivity combined with self-delusion, particularly regarding his belief that he could rebuild his fractured family. She argues that for his wife Mette it was reading *Noa Noa* in 1901 that was the hardest cut to bear, exposing as it did her husband’s infidelities, real or imaginatively embroidered. Indeed, the public shame must have been humiliating for this well-educated, strait-laced Protestant woman, but she can scarcely have taken until this date to realize what went on in Tahiti. For Gauguin had written her a letter during his first Tahitian trip in which he seems to assume a certain broad-mindedness on her part, making no secret of the fact that he has, for limited company, a Tahitian model of fourteen years, whose weight is about “150” (pounds presumably, a crude detail, surely intended to demonstrate that she is sexually mature), whom he describes as just about capable of making a fire, washing clothes, smoking, and not much else, speaking not a word of French.^[2] Mette’s worst suspicions would scarcely have needed more information than this on which to base an assumption of infidelity, particularly once the paintings arrived in 1893. Gauguin’s reputation as an artist seems still to ride high despite—or perhaps because of—the moral offense his life and character naturally trigger in the younger “#Me too” generation. Hargrove acknowledges Gauguin’s exploitative attitudes, as a colonial interloper, towards Polynesian women (somewhat wearily in relation to Linda Nochlin’s old gibe against the Metropolitan Museum’s *Deux Tahitiennes* (1899), a painting that is surely more beautiful than offensively suggestive). She does nothing to downplay his odious self-aggrandizing stances vis-à-vis his contemporaries, but by and large she presents a measured, non-judgmental case for the artist. Admirably frank in her discussion of Gauguin’s sexual impulses and their effects on his work and social relationships, she provides a new and quite persuasive interpretation of one of his most avowedly raunchy subjects, *En pleine chaleur* (Woman with Pigs) (1888), also known as *Les Cochons* (135, illus. 142), proposing that the Bretonne sprawled semi-naked against a hayrick has been caught not abandoned but *in flagrante delicto* with a fellow peasant. His presence, she argues, has been reduced to a leg and clog kicking out at an importunate swine. However, I found the author’s kneejerk tendency to describe all Brittany’s rocks, stones, and menhirs as “phallic” (152), in the same way as his carved Tahitian *ti’is* undoubtedly were, betrayed a way of seeing that perhaps owes more to Freud than Gauguin. It was hard to understand in what sense one could so designate the black rocks which he introduces into the background of several 1889–90 works: *La Vie et la Mort*, (Life and Death) (1889), *Nirvana: Portrait de Meijer de Haan*, (1889–1890), and *Aux roches noires* (At the Black Rocks) (1889), the lithograph he designed as cover for the Volpini

exhibition (illus. 165, 171, 217). Surely for once Gauguin might just have been responding to a curious natural effect observed near Le Pouldu: rocks that were, in effect, black with seaweed. The effect of this phallogentricity is to leave Gauguin as an irredeemably macho figure—albeit one whose paternal pride and love of family were genuine—whereas a more recent, contrary argument, advanced by Norma Broude invites us to consider the challenge Gauguin presents to feminist art historians, given certain of his social pronouncements in letters and texts and his work’s foregrounding of the traditions associated with powerful Polynesian women.[3] He may not have done so consistently, but Gauguin did try to espouse the anti-patriarchal, radical credo of his feminist grandmother, Flora Tristan.

In her conclusion, in which Gauguin’s immediate importance for his French Nabi followers is briefly sketched, we are invited to consider some of the more formal debts owed by Matisse and Picasso, several of the German Expressionists, and artists from the United States such as Milton Avery and Mark Rothko to Gauguin’s non-naturalistic use of color, and to his hedonistic celebration of the primitive and untamed. In some ways it is as interesting to consider what aspects of Gauguin’s legacy fall away. Certainly, the atmosphere of mystery to which Gauguin was firmly attached seems to have had little staying power (Roger Fry, for instance, overtly rejected it) whereas his *bricolage* practice and openness to a variety of media has currency even today. It is, as she indicates, a legacy that is multi-faceted whose ramifications are far from exhausted.[4] Certainly for this reader Hargrove’s *Gauguin* is not just a handsome book; it stimulated plenty of new thoughts and is to be recommended.

Belinda Thomson
Independent scholar and Honorary Professor, University of Edinburgh
thomsonbelinda8[at]gmail.com

Notes

[1] The reference comes in an article he wrote for the Tahitian newspaper, *Les Guêpes*.

[2] This letter, datable to 1892, is omitted from the 1946 Malingue edition. Lent by the Collection Jean Bonna, it was included in the Tate’s *Maker of Myth* exhibition (2010) and partially reproduced in its catalogue (141). It was recently published in full in Nathalie Strasser, *Dessins du XIXe au XXe Siècle, Collection Jean Bonna*, (Geneva: Silvana Editoriale, 2019), 208–11. In it, as a tit-for-tat preliminary to revealing his *modus vivendi*, Gauguin refers to Mette’s recent trip to Paris and her first meeting with Charles Morice, with whom she seems to have enjoyed, he teases, a flirtatious rapport.

[3] Norma Broude, “Flora Tristan’s Grandson: Reconsidering the Feminist Critique of Paul Gauguin,” in *Gauguin’s Challenge: New Perspectives After Postmodernism*, ed. Norma Broude (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018).

[4] One title understandably not listed in the bibliography as it appeared concurrently is Gavin Parkinson’s recent study *Enchanted Ground: André Breton, Modernism and the Surrealist Appraisal of Fin-de-Siècle Painting*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), which tracks André Breton’s reappraisal of Gauguin from a Surrealist perspective.