

Guggenheim Museum Archives Reel-to-Reel collection
Hilla Rebay Lecture: "The Heritage of Gauguin" by Douglas Cooper, 1981

THOMAS M. MESSER

Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. This is the first — the second time, as a matter of fact, that I have the pleasure of welcoming you here for the annual series of Hilla Rebay Lectures. Hilla Rebay, as I'm sure you know, was the first director of this museum, which then was called the Museum of Non-Objective Painting, and we owe her a great deal. Not only some of the finest passages in our permanent collection, but in a sense the museum as a whole, because it was Hilla Rebay who persuaded her friend to be protector, Solomon R. Guggenheim, to build this museum in which we are finding ourselves tonight. So we are grateful to her and we are grateful to the [00:01:00] foundation that bears Hilla Rebay's name, the Hilla Rebay Foundation, for helping us to institute this lecture series, a series that is devoted to modern art history, in which we try to open up things of particular interest, introduce topics of importance, and we do so of course, in the only way one can, by reaching out for the most articulate or the most authoritative and brilliant speakers that we can find. Obviously, Douglas Cooper is one of the few to fit so high demand and we are very happy that he has [00:02:00] agreed to speak to us tonight.

Douglas Cooper is difficult to describe in a few sentences. We know him of course, as scholar and professor and exhibitionist director also, and as critic, and as trustee and as counselor. In other words, he is a man totally involved in the multiple aspects of modern art and is passionately committed to it, as you know. He has written a great deal and importantly, about cubism and about the leading painters and sculptors of that period, but we identify perhaps most, with impressionism, and with post-impressionism. At the moment, he is engaged in compiling a new catalogue raisonné [00:03:00] on Paul Gauguin, and it is this intense involvement in this subject that has made him to decide to speak to us tonight, on the heritage of Gauguin. I'm very, very happy that Douglas Cooper is going to speak to us tonight. (applause)

DOUGLAS COOPER

Ladies and gentlemen, in a century of highly individualistic [00:04:00] revolutionaries and creatively original artists, Paul Gauguin, the measure of whose importance is not generally recognized, was a major figure. His influence as an artist was extensive some ten years before the discovery of Cézanne, and it continued to be widespread for many years after his death in 1903. Gauguin was not, at the start, immensely talented, or drawn to art. In fact, he didn't start to paint before 1873, when he was 25, nor did he develop at all fast, with the result that for some 15 years, Gauguin remained an apprentice amateur painter, [00:05:00] a minor hanger-on of the impressionist group.

First slide please. That's a landscape of the suburbs of Paris, of 1879. Early in life, between the ages of 17 and 24, Gauguin sailed the seas in the Merchant Marine, and the French Navy. Then, on the 7th of July, 1867, Gauguin's mother died in Paris and he found, after his return and demobilization in 1871, that he'd been placed in the guardianship of her good friends, the brothers, Achille and Gustave Arosa, who were rich, lived in Saint-Cloud, and were both [00:06:00] passionately interested in art of many styles and indeed, many periods. They were good friends with Pissarro, to whom they introduced Gauguin in 1873, '74, and owned a fine group of his paintings. Corot, Courbet, Delacroix, Daumier, some Barbizon School artists, and Jongkind, were others represented on their walls. Then, Gustave Arosa had recently bought a phototype reproduction process, which he used for illustrating books of his, books on art, and

having subjects such as Trajan's Column in Rome, the temple sculptures at Borobudur. I will come back to that later. [00:07:00]

Next slide, please. I'll show you a temple façade, one of the panels from Borobudur, which is in the south of Java, and Gauguin knew these from photography. You will see, I mean these figures on the left for example, are typical of the Borobudur style and in the 1890s, when Gauguin was in Tahiti, several of these figures transformed, and you will see them in later paintings. Then, the Arosas also edited a book on Prud'hon and Puvis de Chavannes, and used the process also, for the sale catalogue of their own collection in the 1880s. Now, all of these fascinating and instructive [00:08:00] volumes were in Gauguin's possession by the early 1880s. He studied them eagerly and included a variety of their excellent plates in his baggage when he left Paris for Tahiti in 1891. Lastly, it was Marguerite, Gustave Arosa's younger daughter, an affluent painter, who first took Gauguin's artistic education in hand, led him off to outdoor motifs and taught him the rudiments of the technique of painting and drawing. Once launched on this cause, Gauguin, whose attitude was that of an enlightened amateur, found in painting at first, a satisfying recreation, though within ten years, this interest had developed into a passionate pursuit.

Gauguin saw all the impressionist exhibitions [00:09:00] and exhibited at the fourth, fifth, sixth, seventh, and eight group shows, between 1879 and 1886. In 1876, he also showed at the Salon, while in February, 1889, at the start of his first original stylistic phase, he was invited to contribute 12 works to the Societe de Voire in Brussels. This apparent success among the avant-garde was not entirely due, however, to the brilliance or stylistic innovations which distinguished Gauguin from his friends. The truth is that in the summer of 1871, his guardians, the Arosas, had found employment for the young Gauguin, as a broker's agent, through the firm of Bertin, on the Paris Stock Exchange, and Gauguin remained there [00:10:00] throughout the 1870s, until the financial crash of 1882, making a very satisfactory income in the meanwhile. This was a period of material prosperity for Gauguin, who needed the money because in 1873, he married a Danish girl, Mette Gad, by whom he had four children in the following eight years. At the same time, it enabled him to assist his artist friends; Pissarro, Cézanne, Degas, Monet, Guillaumin, and Sisley, by purchasing a rather impressive collection of their works for his own house. So while Gauguin was first known among the impressionists as a serious patron and budding painter, which brought him closely into their circle, [00:11:00] Gauguin himself derived professional benefit from being able to study their works hanging in his home, and from seeing some of his early canvases, hanging in their group shows. Moreover, during these same years, Gauguin made friends at Bertin, with another employee, Émile Schuffenecker, also a budding painter, who encouraged Gauguin to work in his spare time, in the free academies of Paris and such, Colarossi, to gain technical experience. While on the weekends, Gauguin would either work with Pissarro at (inaudible), or accompany Schuffenecker on painting excursions into the surrounding countryside. By January, 1883, after he'd lost his job on the stock exchange following the financial crash, [00:12:00] it was with genuine relief and conviction that Gauguin felt able to say, from now on, I shall be able to paint every day.

I felt obliged to being this talk by discussing the formation and transformation of Gauguin, from an amateur into a professional painter. The real self-discovery did not occur until 1887, 1888, and even then, it was provoked finally, by Émile Bernard and Van Gogh, because it established a pattern which was go characterize Gauguin's whole career. While Gauguin was inventive in

transforming his discoveries, he was not, by nature, an imaginative artist, and so, we have to record, in addition to the styles and individuals I've already mentioned, with the influence [00:13:00] upon him, of Cézanne, of Japanese woodcuts, of Degas, of Greek sculpture groups, the temple at Borobudur, of Maori and other forms of Pacific art, which he discovered for himself, and ultimately, after 1895, of the classifying manner of Puvis de Chavannes.

In 1889, for example, he chose — slide please — he chose Holbein's *Portrait of Anne of Cleves*, which he probably knew from the Louvre, but in any case, he would have known it from the copy by Degas which hung in his studio. And he chose [00:14:00] these pictures, the composition of formula, of his famous portrait of Madame Satre — slide please — known as *La Belle Angèle*. You see that the pose, even to the headdress, the pose is extremely close to Anne of Cleves, it's absolutely modeled on that. You have the other symbol of Gauguin's own character, which is the savage, and that already in the 1880s.

Now, *Ta Matete*, which is the picture in Basel Museum, the line of female figures sitting on a bench in the market, has its compositional source in an Egyptian fresco of the 18th Dynasty, from a tomb house at Thebes, which Gauguin had seen in the British Museum in 1885, and of which he possessed [00:15:00] a photograph. And again, a sailing ship in a watercolor, of the 1870s, by Jongkind, from the Arosa collection, reappears in the late 1890s, in Tahitian waters, in this romantic Tahitian beach scene of 1899. Gauguin was thought not merely therefore, largely self-taught, but also eclectic in his tastes, and it was this unique combination which revealed in him, in the disastrous — revealed to him, the disastrous dead-end of the naturalistic fallacy, and the cult of technical sophistication which went with it. These, he came to understand, [00:16:00] were the false beliefs which had progressively suffocated art in his time. Now for Gauguin, who was not greatly gifted, painting based on these received images, the image received by an artist, I alone, have pleasurable, superficial and ineffectual effect.

As Gauguin learned as he matured, so he developed powerfully argued theories about what painting had meant to achieve and how this could still be done. The artist's heart and mind [00:17:00] had to be brought in, had to be brought back into paint. So he developed powerfully argued theories about what painting meant to achieve, and how this could still be done. The artist's heart and mind had to be allowed to play as great a role as his eye, which on the whole he distrusted. A painting for Gauguin had to be instinct, with emotion, and at the same time, charged with a message or symbolical riddle, which would have a widespread significance. Gauguin's principal messages were protests against the perversion of human society, by its increasing [00:18:00] material sophistication and competitiveness. Insistence on the solitude of each individual and a revelation of the erstwhile force of brotherly love still to be found, as he believed in primitive society. He learned this by living in Brittany and then ultimately in Tahiti. He extolled the beauty of the world for himself — slide please — in its primitive state, before modern man had desecrated it, and that is *Landscape at Le Pouldu*, of 1889. His first visit to Brittany was 1886.

Now, Gauguin extolled the beauty of the world [00:19:00] for himself, in its primitive state before man desecrated it, and lastly, Gauguin resorted to restating the Christian imagery in highly simplified terms of devotion — slide please — and suffering, as is symbolic of the spiritual evolution. This is the *Yellow Christ*, also in Brittany, a picture of 1888, 1889, which the

Christ existed elsewhere, but he took it as a symbol, put it in the Breton landscape and surrounded it with simple pious Breton worshippers.

Now, at this point, [00:20:00] we must recall that Gauguin was born of two hotheaded, radical parents. His father, being a journalist, employed under *Le National*, a left-wing Paris newspaper. His mother, born Alina Chazal, on the other hand, was a daughter of the notorious Flora Tristan, a leading feminist and female revolutionary who was half French and half Peruvian Creole. As a result of his ancestry, French and Inca blood flowed in his veins, Gauguin claimed also, to count among his forebearers, Borja of Aragon, who had been viceroy of Peru. This led Gauguin to claim later on, [00:21:00] that he therefore had two sides to his nature, the savage and the civilized man. Side-by-side, with the spiritual and emotional attitude to his subjects, which was a major personal innovation and greatly influential on his younger artist friends, Gauguin logically discarded the impressionist idiom and under the influence of stained glass, of unsophisticated forms of popular art, of medieval art and soon after, of Maori and other forms of Pacific Art, evolved a highly expressive primitivism in style, which was his own work.

Slide please. Now this is the famous *Vision After the Sermon*, of 1888. [00:22:00] This was the picture really, in which the great stylistic innovation of Gauguin's career occurred and as you see, any attempt at naturalistic illusion is completely banished from the picture. Now here we have the essence of Gauguin's most important personal contribution, at this first stage, to the development of painting at the end of the nineteenth century, which gave him considerable influence over other artists during the following 50 years. And it is for this reason that I've spent time on analyzing his expansive intellectual, spiritual and artistic growth, — slide please — for Gauguin was the most significant nexus figure in the 1890s, having [00:23:00] taken the stylistic gamut, not only of the nineteenth century French art, from Delacroix and Prud'hon, through Daumier to the impressionists, but also having looked carefully at various primitive idioms, and before inventing, in 1889, the anti-illusionist style with which he became famous as the leading symbolist artist.

Now, this is a picture which was painted very shortly after the *Vision After the Sermon*, and it was painted in the time he was there with Van Gogh, and it's the *Old Women of Arles*, in the public park. You see the extraordinary simplifications and the lack of illusionistic space, and the flatness and the [00:24:00] deadpan characterization of the faces, and at the same time, the emotion, which is expressed through the gestures.

Now, having run the stylistic gamut, Gauguin looked carefully at various primitivizing endearments before inventing this anti-illusionist style with which he became famous as the leading symbolist. At that point, in 1891, he left Europe for Tahiti, in a disillusioned mood, because he couldn't sell his pictures and was therefore unable to earn a proper living. While his two most active admirers and supporters, the brothers Vincent and Theo van Gogh were dead, [00:25:00] Gauguin had many valid reasons for leaving France and had come to believe that a remote tribal society in Tahiti would offer him, as it did, the spectacle of essentially unspoiled, simple and graceful native population which knew no corruption and for which money had no meaning.

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Slide please. There you see a picture upstairs here in the gallery. I show it for two reasons. First of all, because it's one of the early Tahiti landscapes and secondly, I will talk later about Greek art and the horses of the Parthenon, where there you see one of the horses of the Parthenon set. The picture is called *In the Vanilla Grove* and you see the mysterious [00:26:00] women in the trees behind vanilla. The picture has been called the *Vanilla Grove*. It isn't at all a grove of course, because vanilla is a climbing plant of the orchid variety and therefore — I mean, it's growing up the trees in the background and it's not a field.

Now, on the point of this latter score of the primitive natural population, in less than two years, Gauguin had become disillusioned with Tahiti because again, his possibilities for selling were extremely limited and he ran out of money, [00:27:00] and therefore was pressing the French governor to repatriate him. But after various disastrous experiences in France, whether he returned between 1893 and '94, and a much lesser degree of professional success in Paris than he had begun to know before leaving in 1891, Gauguin saw no alternative than to return to Tahiti in 1895. There, he felt more at ease and could live less expensively. Moreover, he entrusted a large number of his paintings to friends and minor dealers in Paris, to sell for him in his absence, intending thereby, to provide himself with a regular income, but again, he suffered disillusionment, for Gauguin was largely betrayed by his friends and received all too few [00:28:00] of the promised payments from Paris. At the same time, articles praising his work were published in the French press, his fame grew, his work attracted a group of new collectors and within two or three years, in 1898, '99, Vollard began to buy, amassing a large stock of his works for very little money and organizing exhibitions in his gallery. The name of Gauguin thus became known in Paris, where a group of his disciples took advantage of his stylistic innovations, and the public at last saw some of his paintings in exhibitions, and with Gauguin's plaintive letters regarding payments evoked no response and he was left [00:29:00] to rot in the remote Pacific isle of his choice. In short, the irony of Gauguin's situation between early 1895, when he left Paris the second time for Tahiti, and his death from gangrene, at Atuona, in Hiva Oa, in May, 1903, despite a large exhibition of mostly Tahitian works at Durand-Ruel's gallery in November, 1893, immediately after his return to Paris, and a relatively unproductive sale of pictures from his studio in February, 1895, when he had to buy in a great many of his own works.

The date when he left Tahiti for good, which was a few months later in 1895, Gauguin's reputation as a leader of the modern movement was fairly firmly grounded, [00:30:00] yet by comparison with his first sale of four years previously, the prices fetched now by his works were lower and no new major collectors appeared. It was to be 1898, '99, before the dealer Vollard and the collector, Gustave Fayet, a friend of Daniel de Monfreid, began to buy extensively. Then some ten years later, the two Russian collectors, Shchukin and Morozov, became very active buyers, acquiring between them some 30 canvases before 1914. Gauguin of course knew virtually nothing of all this, because he was in Tahiti and was largely uninformed, yet by 1906, 1907, three years after Gauguin's death, [00:31:00] and at the moment when a large exhibition of his works was organized at the Salon d'Automne, and when Cézanne's influence first became widespread in Paris, most notably through Matisse, Braque and Picasso, Gauguin's artistic achievements were already appreciated and were exerting influence on a younger generation of creative painters.

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We cannot, I think, sufficiently admire Gauguin for his courage in abandoning a profitable business career, in order to be able to paint every day, and for his determination to make progress on his own, for this was the most fatal decision he ever made and the terrible consequences of his decision, which were to continually affect the course of his life during his remaining 20 years of activity, included [00:32:00] the shattering of his way of life, a profound change in his views of mankind and also of European civilization. Gauguin's home was broken up within three years and his peace of mind destroyed. He became haunted by penury and his health was undermined. He became separated from his well-to-do, uncomprehending bourgeois wife and their children, and despite the mutual affection that existed in effect between them, she continually reproached him for failing to provide her with a steady income. Thus, Gauguin became an outcast from the society to which he belonged and never succeeded in establishing himself in any other. Yet Gauguin [00:33:00] never wavered in his resolution and refused to renounce his artistic vocation, even though this meant selling up the treasured canvases of his collection and accepting charity from friends. Small wonder therefore, that money was a continual topic in his letters and his conversation.

A view of Gauguin, especially in the second half of the 1880s, should be confounded of respect and admiration for the heroic efforts which he made to overcome a series of innate artistic gifts and a lack of professional training, which would have enabled him to live up to the compelling creative urge within himself. Gauguin, like Van Gogh and Toulouse-Lautrec, [00:34:00] who became his friends, took to painting because he had to, because he knew that he had something urgent to communicate. It was this impulse which drove him to make of himself, at whatever cost, a proficient artist, for he soon developed great ideas and was determined to express them forcefully as artistic images. The remarkable progress that Gauguin made in an impressionist idiom is easy to follow, yet as he realized, something vital was still lacking; a sense of color. This was the discovery he was to make in 1886, at the Eighth Impressionist Exhibition, where his own pictures hung beside those by Seurat and Signac. He was subsequently to revile the [00:35:00] neoimpressionists, but the fact is that his first experiments with color were made under their influence, while his first revolutionary ideas about its pictorial role, derived from harmonic laws which they initiated.

When Gauguin left Paris in late July, 1886, it was for Pont-Aven in Brittany, impelled by the idea of finding an unsophisticated backward region, where living was cheap and he could concentrate on working and thinking about certain stylistic problems which filled his head. He remained almost four months. A year previously, in January, 1885, Gauguin had written to his friend Schuffenecker, "For me the great artist is a formulation of the greatest intelligence. [00:36:00] He is the recipient of sensations which are the most delicate, and consequently, the most invisible expressions of the brain." This affirmation that the artist's brain is superior to his eye shows that Gauguin was already disposed to challenge the unreasoning vision of the impressionists, and he began to effect his transformation in Pont-Aven. Then, in Paris, in the winter of 1886, he received encouragement to continue in his new manner, from Vincent van Gogh, who was passing through a similar phase in his own work. In no time, this led to Gauguin's departure for the tropics.

Slide please. For the tropical lands of Panama and Martinique, of which we see here, a landscape, [00:37:00] of 1891, and it was in April '87 that he went to Martinique. There were

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very few pictures painted in Martinique, and the total that I have discovered which are genuine, is 13. Gauguin himself said, in a letter at the time, "I shall be bringing back about 12 pictures," and this was about two weeks before he left the country. Curiously enough, he wrote the truth.

Now, there at last, in Martinique, Gauguin found strong color, luxuriant tropical vegetation and a simple negro civilization, living a natural life. Though Gauguin was still not equipped to render fully, this brilliance, [00:38:00] he absorbed the experience and expressed the light and color to the best of his ability. In particular, his sense of composition was loosened at this time. "Never has my painting been so right in color, so lucid, though with plenty of fantasy," he told Schuffenecker. Already we find, in his paintings, a certain degree of stylization, with the reduction of figures to an expressive silhouette, the use of multiple perspectives learned from Degas and Seurat, all of which led to pushing the horizon line up to the top of the canvas, and so helping him to flatten the composition. You saw that in the Arles landscape of the old ladies in particular, which was painted the year after [00:39:00] his return.

Now, already the incur in his nature was asserting itself and Gauguin's growing awareness of the materialism of the society in which he had to live and work, without recognition, eventually led Gauguin to dismiss what he believed were the false canons of post-renaissance European art. Where art was concerned, Gauguin was an original thinker, and gradually, between 1887 and 1888, he realized that the art which meant most to him, the Peruvian idols he had known in his youth, Romanesque carvings and the stained glass and folk art which he encountered in the neighborhood of Pont-Aven. The Egyptian and Syrian and far eastern art which he knew from the Louvre, the British Museum, [00:40:00] and of course the Arosa photographs, and the Japanese Prints, of which he owned quite a collection himself, had an emotional force and vitality, resulting from simplification and directness approach which had been lost in European art through over-refinement and the pursuit of truth to nature.

Throughout the spring of 1888, Gauguin, having to find his aesthetic, was searching for a new idiom to communicate his view of life and his feelings, as simply and directly as possible, but ultimately, the revelation of how this could be achieved came in August, 1888, through a friendly visitor, Emile Bernard. Now, Gauguin had taken preliminary [00:41:00] steps towards the simplification and the primitivism of his art before the arrival of Bernard. One cannot attribute to Bernard, the invention of Gauguin. On the other hand, one can say that Gauguin saw, when he was ready for it, what Bernard was already doing and Gauguin, being the greater painter, did the great improvement and put the ideas to the greatest artistic use. Now, Bernard was a romantic youth of 20, with a love of medieval art, but in no sense inclined to conscious primitivism. He'd studied manuscripts, illumination, tapestry, medieval [00:42:00] carving and the stylistic means of stained glass. When Gauguin discovered how a pictorial image could be built up in non-imitative terms, with areas of pure color isolated from each other by heavy outlines, the style known as cloisonnism or synthetism, was born.

Slide please. This is a portrait of 1889, of his friend, Mayer de Haan, and you see the simplification and the sharp perspective, and the flattening, and the general primitivation, and you see the use of the lines which I'm talking about, the expressive lines, particularly in the face. [00:43:00] Now, this discovery taught Gauguin that he could disregard detail and generalize, as earlier artists had done. (French), he wrote, for Gauguin had come to the conclusion that art

should not be concerned with concrete reality, but should evoke the inner life of man. You see, the symbolization in the books on Meyer de Haan's table. "Primitive art," he said, "proceeds from the spirit and makes use of nature. The so called refined art proceeds from sensuality and serves nature. Nature is the servant of the former and the mistress of the latter. She demeans man's spirit by allowing him to adore her. That is the way [00:44:00] by which we have tumbled into the abominable era of naturalism. So in our present misery, there is no salvation possible, except through a reasoned and frank return to the beginning, that is to say to primitive art." Sarkicism was Gauguin's first step towards a frank return to the beginning, and it involves a break away from the artistic canon of reason and reality, which was the heritage of the Greco Roman tradition, towards an image which did not appeal to the eye alone, but struck the imagination and roused the soul of man. It was in the fulfillment of Gauguin's rejection of impressionism, on the grounds that (French). Thus, Gauguin abandoned [00:45:00] imitative forms in favor of ideated forms, to transmit his experience of the world and inevitably, at the same time, these figures were endowed with a symbolic significance. As early as 1885, Gauguin had told Schuffenecker that, "Although lines and colors suffice to reproduce what the eye sees, they are also endowed with an innate emotive power which enables an artist to conjure up in the spectator, whatever spiritual state he desires."

In 1888, at Pone-Aven, Gauguin put his theories to the test, deliberately cultivating the simplification and primitivism and heavy outlines, because (French). At the same time, he colored his image [00:46:00] with a carefully orchestrated, but simplified harmony of pure lines, accumulated to endow the underlying idea with a greater intensity. Nor did Gauguin overlook the decorative effect of the whole, because he felt that a picture had to be pleasing to the eye to ensure that its message was communicated to the brain and soul of the spectator. Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, writers, arts and poets, had been fighting against the spiritual suffocation of the age and increasing advocating an abstract, symbolical language. *Stimmung*, that mystic German word so dear to Novalis and his contemporaries, [00:47:00] became a keynote. The artist was expected to yield to *Stimmung* and forget reality. The romantic movement was the first answer of those who yearned for the great elsewhere. *Stimmung* implies something antirational, which cannot be explained. Novalis says in fact, that it indicates and portends psychic conditions of a musical nature. This conception of a musical form of painting can be followed through the nineteenth century. In painting, music was soon equated with color. Delacroix speaks of the connection between a color harmony and a spiritual state. Baudelaire pointed to the correspondence between perfumes, colors and sounds. The opposition of art and nature and concrete reality is frequently reiterated [00:48:00] and Baudelaire says that, "The modern conception of pure art is the creation of a suggestive magic which contains simultaneously, the object and the subject, the world outside of the artist and the artist himself," to which Odilon Redon, a friend of Gauguin, added, "My drawings inspire and are not to be defined. They determine nothing. They place us, as does music, in the ambiguous realm of the undetermined, they're a kind of metaphor." Gauguin, who was aware of all this discussion, deliberately resorted to primitivism and simplification, and to reveal his message while using line to make this more explicitly. He then chose a simple harmony of pure tones to compliment and reinforce, with its music, the basic idea [00:49:00] behind his image.

The language that Gauguin employed was high flown and symbolic, but in simple terms, when we say, from the summer of 1888 onward, Gauguin sought to penetrate man's blindness, and

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reveal some of the causes of his spiritual suffering. In short, his art was a protest against bourgeois materialism. Civilization that makes use of barbarism, which is to me, rejuvenation, as he wrote to Strindberg, and it was this conviction that soon pushed Gauguin to escape to unsophisticated, primitive parts of the world, such as Brittany, Martinique and ultimately Tahiti, — next slide please — where he could live among natural human beings, with a lack of inhibitions, with their own fears, faiths, myths, [00:50:00] superstitions and untamed passions. Now, this is also a painting which is upstairs in this building and is a Tahitian landscape and in the background you will see a woman, you will see the Tahitian houses, and she's calling to the two black pigs in the foreground, and the title is *Haere Mai*, which means "come here." Curious language to employ to pigs.

Now, I mentioned the myths and that of the superstitions and myths of the primitive peoples, and in fact, when Gauguin reached Tahiti, there was virtually no trace of any of this at all, and he had a book or two [00:51:00] showing Maori ornamentation and the tikis, he had a book on Pacific culture. There were no idols populating the landscape of Tahiti. Gauguin dug out this background of myth, he pretended that it was all told to him by his native girlfriend, but in fact it came straight out of a work of literature. And to bring the primitive and simple and uncommercial and unmaterialistic civilization to life, Gauguin imagined the entire spectacle of the original dances and the idol worship, and this picturesque landscape with idols in it, this is all pure imagination. [00:52:00] He didn't see any of it because it wasn't there. I think it's awfully important to see that I mean even there, he took the imagery out of a book and he used it to bring the native population, to give it coherence and to give it an existence in terms of its own beliefs.

Now, in his first Breton pictures, painted at Pont-Aven and in Le Pouldu, between 1886 and 1890, Gauguin was to strain the technical milieus in order to achieve his desired effect and endow it with the mark of his own personality. It was the commanding nature [00:53:00] of his personality, the originality of his vision, and the artistic conceptions which he expounded, that drew a first group of disciples around him. Slide please. Filiger, Laval Schuffenecker, Sérusier, of whom this is an essentially Gauguinesque. I'm sorry, it's back to front, please imagine it turned around. It makes no difference. But this is a picture of Sérusier, of 1892, and you will see, I mean it's absolutely straight out of Gauguin. Gauguin had this enormous power. First of all, he talked brilliantly, everybody was very impressed, and then there was this commanding personality, and he taught everybody by example and by talk, [00:54:00] and conveyed his ideas and implanted them in this group of disciples, who were collectively known as the School of Pont-Aven. I'm not going to say that any of them were great artists or highly distinguished, but it was the first group of disciples around the master, and through their presence and their movement among others, this all helped to build up Gauguin's reputation for original and for power and for color.

Now, Gauguin briefly discussed his own methods and their progress, and on one occasion, — slide please — in the summer of 1888, he obliged Sérusier to paint, under his supervision, this river landscape, which came to be known [00:55:00] as the *Talisman*. As you see, it's painted virtually without definition of forms, and with the simplest, in the simplest and broadest application of color. Now, throughout the 1890s in Tahiti, Gauguin reduced the aggressive element of primitivism in his earlier drawing, the Breton drawing and the Breton pictures. His line became more sinuous and his forms more rounded. Slide please. He introduced a certain

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degree of modeling. His images became more luxuriant and decorative, in effect as the influence of [Ernst?] and Puvis de Chavannes, added to that, a primitive carving, [00:56:00] and folk art, sorted themselves out.

Now this is a picture of 1893 and you will see, you can see, the extraordinary development in the decorative field in his makeup of composition. This was all the great work of the 1890s, and as you see, the basic symbolism is suggested. This is a very idealized version, I need hardly add what the population must have been like. It's a good example of how much Gauguin's imagination was at work, to make the people appear according to the image he'd formed of them, and their way of life. [00:57:00]

Now, Gauguin's greatest strength during these years was the marvelous sense of rich color which he developed, and with which he affected total harmonies, once varied, luminous, expressive, and eminently personal. He told his friend, de Monfreid, later in 1907, that his purpose in painting Tahitian subjects and in writing *Noa Noa*, was to *se voire*, (French). And his (French) — slide please, — and artistic testament, [00:58:00] painted in 1897, in the belief that he would be dead before it was shown to the world, bears the title, *D'où Venons Nous / Que Sommes Nous / Où Allons Nous*, "Were Do We Come From? Who Are We? Where Are We Going?" And as you see, it is a cyclical image, from youth to old age, and you have the Tahitian, the primitive, the rich landscape, and here is an example, on the right-hand side, of an idol which Gauguin totally imagined and put into the composition. Now, this opulent, tranquil, glowing, and enticing native fable, fable and parable, [00:59:00] instinct with philosophical speculation, was offered to the world as a counterpart to the New Testament Doctrine.

Gauguin's special achievement and incidentally, after painting it, he attempted to commit suicide, Gauguin's special achievement was his ability to hold a mysterious balance between idea, perception, and painted image. His pictures work on the spectator visually by virtue of their formal and tonal harmony alone. Slide please. Therefore, we accept his primitivism. The expressive distortion of much of Gauguin's drawing, and even his shortcomings, because Gauguin maintained his art pure and never fell victim to admitting literally overtones. This is [01:00:00] again, a case of Gauguin's imaginative imagination at work. This is a painting of 1892 and it's called, *Speak of the Devil*, and you see the devil is appearing. But I mean, he never saw a scene like that, it was I mean probably told to him that they had that sort of suspicion and that sort of superstition, but Gauguin didn't witness that scene. It's an imaginative evocation of the type of thought and myth and superstition and life of this, to his mind, ideal native population. [01:01:00] It was already without any question, over-colonialized and degenerating rapidly, as he himself discovered.

Now, Gauguin was a great revolutionary in his own time and his work continued to exert a profound influence on the art of others, from 1895, for the ensuing 30 years. At all periods, his significances depended more on the great stylistic (inaudible), which he carried through by sheer force of will, and on what he had to say about civilization and mankind, that one has to remember the work of the Brücke artists, and — slide please — and realized that Nolde, Kirchner, Heckel and Schmidt-Rottluff, were [01:02:00] influenced more by the social commentary, almost than by the stylistic inventions of Gauguin. This is the Nolde, *Maria Aegyptica* of 1912. I put it on because the whole Oriental and Negroid influence is incarnate

there. Nolde actually went and lived in the South Seas and worked there for several years. His works, I mean particularly negro works, had come rather earlier than that, but this is a rather typical example. Then, in others, you get again, under direct influence from Gauguin, particularly, and [also Miller?], you get it also in Kirchner, [01:03:00] the early works of Kirchner. You get the direct influence of Negroid and primitive art, and this was Gauguin's great initiation. It was he who brought this awareness of negro art and Pacific art, to the knowledge of Parisian artists. And he was the first person to initiative that character.

Now, Gauguin, as he wrote, dared to put the artistic clock back by some two-thousand years. As a symbol of that, first of all, I showed you the picture upstairs, of the vanilla grove, and there on the right [01:04:00] is that man holding that horse. That is a horse of the Acropolis. Gauguin used that as a symbol. He saw that to rediscover man and produce images which would reflect and act directly from the spiritual side of his nature. He had to sweep away the concept of ideal beauty. For this, the artist had to make a conscious effort to subordinate his eye to his brain, his sensuous to his emotional nature. Gauguin was not insensitive to the beauty of Greek art, nor to the great achievements the naturalistic art and the naturalistic tradition, yet he did not hesitate to call it the greatest error of all. This attitude was quickly decisive, for the artistic [01:05:00] evolution of the twentieth century, and Gauguin was one of the first to reject the idea that a picture should be a mirror like reflection, a visual evidence, and to turn from an empirical to a conceptual form of representation. He alone was responsible for launching the cult of primitive art. Slide please. Here is your primitive society and through that, I mean he interprets the piety, he interprets the Christian imagery, in terms of native life and again, you see the enormous effort to produce the decorative effect.

Now that's back to front but nevertheless. [01:06:00] Now, he reasserted the importance of man's primeval instincts as a fit subject for art, and he it was who buys emotional thematic approach to color, inspired subsequent experiments in abstract art. However, it's false to imagine. He inspired these attempts towards experiments in abstract art, through his own nonrepresentational use of color in patterns and interpretation of shadows and very free forms, nothing precise, and these zones of mysteriously evocative color. That's one of the origins. I'm not suggesting it was the origin of Kandinsky, because of course he took it [01:07:00] very largely from his own Russian heritage first of all, but the form he gave it was, to some extent for a brief moment, influenced by Gauguin.

Now, it's false to imagine that when Gauguin wrote (French), that he had in mind, an art of squares, circles, or a free rhapsodic, nonrepresentation or image. All that Gauguin meant was that art should not be a copy of nature but should be a formalized evocative image which conveys directly, the sense and emotions provoked by the original experience. In other words, that the artist should forget about imitation and extract, through his memory and his mind, should extract the essential meaning [01:08:00] and expression of a form and give it that significance in terms of his own composition.

It was all that he meant, was that art should not be this copy but should be a formalized evocative image, which conveys directly, the sense and emotions provoked by the original experience. In these respects, Gauguin was one of the most decisive artists for the evolution of art during the first half of the twentieth century. He was the first artist to abandon this empirical for conceptual

idiom of painting, and he alone was responsible for launching the cult of primitive art as an aesthetic experience. He reasserted the importance of man's fundamental instincts as a fit subject for art, and it was Gauguin's emotional, thematic use of color [01:09:00] that inspired much twentieth century art. He prepared the way and made possible, the early years of the twentieth century.

Now, Gauguin no less than Cézanne, from whom he had learned early on, so much, was one of the true pathfinders of twentieth century art. After Sérusier had shown the *Talisman* to friends in Paris, it was acclaimed for its simplification by the Nabis; Bonnard, Vuillard. Slide please. Maurice Denis, Sérusier and Filiger. Well you see, this is an early Vuillard, of 1897, and it shows indirectly, [01:10:00] through the simplification of the decoration, it shows immediately, the influence that Gauguin was having. Now, then Gauguin of course became briefly, a major influence in the formation of their style. Slide please. There, I take, as an origin, I mean contrast with the woman I was showing just now, by Vuillard, there you have the Seurat, women of Tahiti, of 1892, and it's the origin of so much, that the early Nabi painting contained. Now, none of this first group of followers became profound or great painters, who can really [01:11:00] be said to have carried on Gauguin's style and conceptions, and to have given them new meaning. But when we come to Matisse, the picture changes. Matisse, like Gauguin, did not begin to paint before he was 22 years old, in 1891, '92. From then on, he had to work incessantly, to master the techniques of painting and drawing, both in the academy of Gustave Moreau, who told him that his role was to simplify art, and of course he discovered that Gauguin had been there before him. And, among the old masters in the Louvre and in the mid-'90s, you find copy of the Raphael, *Baldassare Castiglione*, of which I couldn't find a slide, but that was done in the [01:12:00] Louvre and was acquired by the French state at that date.

Now, until after 1897, Gauguin really saw virtually no French art of the modern date, and then, in 1897, he discovered it in the Luxembourg. Quite early on, Matisse decided that he would not become the follower of anyone, because he wanted to be able to express, as directly and fully as possible, his personal vision and emotions. Moreover, he knew that to achieve this, he had to experience many different forms of art, taking from each, whatever suited his purpose. Between 1891 and 1899, Matisse worked in [01:13:00] (inaudible), and seems to have been unaware of the painting of his immediate contemporaries. Then, in 1897, he became friends with the Australian artist, John Russell, a friend of Monet and Van Gogh, who opened his eyes to modern art. Suddenly, Gauguin became aware of the direction in which painting was moving, and this made a great impression on his. Then in 1897, he became friendly with Pissarro, who told him with the modern exhibitions with Vuillard and well galleries, directed his interest towards impressionism, sent him to London to look at Turner, and talked to Matisse, Cézanne and Gauguin, who had worked beside him in 1881, '82. This phase culminated in 1899, [01:14:00] with Matisse's purchase from Vuillard, of *Bathers* by Cézanne, a plaster bust by Rodin and a head of a young Tahitian by Gauguin. It's a painting still in this country, which belongs to the baseball player called Hank Greenberg. It's a historic painting, really, for the succession of owners. It's not a particularly important Gauguin, nor is it decorative, just a simple male head.

Most commentators have claimed that Matisse was primarily influenced by Cézanne, and so at first he was, but in the long run, the influence of Gauguin — slide please. The influence of Gauguin, which came a bit later, in 1905, [01:15:00] 1906, '07, was to be an important as

Cézanne, and to have a more lasting effect. Now, this is a sketch for the big painting of 1905, called *La Joie De Vivre*, and I need hardly emphasize the obvious relation to Gauguin, and the arrangement and placement of the figures in the landscape, and this extraordinary use of color, which was a discovery of Matisse then. There's no major color in Matisse before then. Now, we see this influence of Gauguin in major compositions, such as *Le Bonheur De Vivre*, or *Le Luxe*. Slide please. [01:16:00] *Le Luxe* of 1905, 1907, I'm sorry. Where the loose composition, the bold simplifications, and the emphatic linear rhythms, represent an innovation in Matisse's work. This was the period of fauvism, you've already seen *Le Bonheur De Vivre*, in its sketch, which is a pure fauve picture, and fauvism was of course led by Matisse and in it, the achievements of Cézanne, Gauguin, and Van Gogh, are compounded. It marked the end of impressionism, it was the final flourish of flame, and the adoption of a much simpler, forceful manner of painting and drawing, with which light, space and tangible reality [01:17:00] were evoked by the juxtaposition of pure unmodified tones.

By 1908, we find Matisse reformulating the ideas of Gauguin, in a discourse to the pupils of his own private art class, where he said, "A work of art must carry within itself, its complete significance, and impose that upon the beholder, even before he recognizes the subject matter." Slide please. Now, from Gauguin, Matisse learned the principle of a loose arrangement of figures, and the decorative value of free motifs, like these leaves, which form one of the stained glass windows in the chapel de Vence. You find, particularly in the late, blue, cutout paper, [01:18:00] you find compositions. I couldn't actually find one, but where you have the figure and you have that sort of leaf or flower motif scattered, maybe stars, maybe flowers, maybe leaves, but they're scattered across the background in a very loose arrangement. This spreading of this loose arrangement of floral motifs. or leaves or whatever, comes from originally, Gauguin.

Slide please. I give this example of this self-portrait of Gauguin, of 1888, and you see that free placement. I mean, it suggests wallpaper, but the flowers are actually stronger than the background, and [01:19:00] that's the self-portrait which he called *Les Misérables*, and described at great length in his letter to Van Gogh. There, you see the principle of this free decoration. There's no relation, it's a purely ornamental motif behind the figure, emphasizing the tragedy of the figure. Now, from Gauguin too, must have come, Matisse's delight, in evoking the richness and the blessings of the good, idyllic life, which I showed you two minutes ago, in *Le Bonheur De Vivre*. Also, of the good fortune of the natural man, who Gauguin visions leading an untrammled existence. Living off nature's bounty, producing only what he needed, and able to relax and feel free of the eroding [01:20:00] worries of a developed, materialistic civilization. This belief involves Gauguin in a flight from Western Europe, to an illusory dreamworld, into the tropics, where as Matisse, without traveling, was content to evoke that longed for, but imaginary paradise, large door, and evocation of a more perfect state of bliss than we are privileged to know on earth. Maybe they did in Greek days.

Gauguin's influence lingered on in the work of Matisse throughout his life. It was through the paintings of Gauguin that Matisse, like many of his friends, first became aware of the aesthetic value of African and Polynesian art, of which he made a small collection after 1900. [01:21:00] Gauguin opened up to Matisse, the stylistic devices in Japanese prints. Again, Matisse's sense of the exotic is indebted to Gauguin. Slide please. Is indebted to Gauguin. Here, I give, as an

example, a picturesque example of *Odalisque* of 1928. Gauguin's influence underlies this long series of odalisques and women in native costume, fancy dress, which Matisse painted throughout the 1920s and '30s. And lastly, it was memories of Gauguin that directed Matisse's steps towards Tahiti in 1930. I am not suggesting that the pictures he painted in Tahiti owe anything to Gauguin, but [01:22:00] clearly, the idea of going to Tahiti has its origins in Gauguin, whom Matisse knew and admired.

Now, after Matisse, we come to Picasso, — slide please — whose figures of the blue and rose period of 1901 to 1906, were considerably influenced as here, by Gauguin. It's true that (inaudible) was also an early influence, but the influence of Gauguin very quickly became much stronger. Slide please. While in 1907, 1908, this is a second example of the Gauguin influence, it's the *Donkey Driver* of 1902. Now, in 1907, 1908, Picasso was struck by the native carvings [01:23:00] and the Negroid idols that appear in Gauguin's paintings. Slide please. I hope you can see it. The primitivism of these Negroid elements, which Gauguin was the first to introduce and gave currency to in Paris, in his absence, so to speak, these Negroid idols and Negroid images of Gauguin, produced a primitivism which led Picasso through this Negroid phase, which was short-lived, to new simplifications and ultimately, to the first stage of [01:24:00] cubism.

Now here's it's important to emphasize that Gauguin's work, since one wonders how he managed to have so quickly, so much influence while not being a painter who was widely bought at the time, Gauguin's influence lingered on in the work of Matisse throughout his life and then you get Picasso, and now it's important to emphasize that Gauguin's work became widely known, through a long succession of major exhibitions that were enjoyed by any other young painter of his generation. First, Gauguin is showing with Les XX in Brussels in 1889, 1894, 1897, and 1904. Then, in Paris, [01:25:00] in 1889, with the group, (inaudible), which was his own exhibition of himself and a few friends, and it was held in a café within the grounds of the international exhibition of that year. It wasn't very popular with the public, but on the other hand, it introduced Gauguin to a number of Parisian personalities, who were, for the first time, aware and moved by the paintings they saw. Then, in 1891, Gauguin had an exhibition at the Hotel Drouot, before his first auction sale on his departure for the first time, to Tahiti.

In 1893, there was a big exhibition called the (inaudible), in Copenhagen, followed by another, [01:26:00] at Durand-Ruel in Paris, in the fall. And in 1895, again, there was an exhibition before Gauguin's second auction sale in Paris, on the eve of his departure, re-departure, to Tahiti. Then in 1898 and 1899, Gauguin had exhibitions at the Galerie Vuillard in Paris. In 1901 and 1902, he had shows at Béziers, where his friend de Monfreid lived and was chairman of the local art society, and Gauguin sent even, works directly from Tahiti, to Béziers, for the occasion. In 1903, Gauguin was included in the Salon d'Automne, followed by another exhibition at Vuillards, and again at Vuillards in 1905. Then, in 1906, [01:27:00] the first major commemorative exhibition of his work was held at the Salon d'Automne, with major loans from a number of private collectors, including of course Vuillard. Thus, a very wide audience of artists, writers and other, had easy access to Gauguin's work during at least the 15 last years of his working career, and several unexpected figures fell under the influence of the expressive content and style of Gauguin's imagery. For instance, you get it in the case of Edvard Munch in Norway, and you get it in Switzerland — slide please — in the work of (inaudible), the artist, [01:28:00] the writer, including Kandinsky, and you get a vague and incompetent echo in the

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work of some English painters called Gilman and Bevan. Nothing to do with content but to do with style. We can therefore say that during the first quarter of the twentieth century, artists of virtually every group except the Italians, owed an essential part of their stylistic formula to Gauguin. Nor was Gauguin unaware of the far-reaching importance of his achievement and indeed of its spread, for he wrote to Daniel de Monfreid, one of his disciples, in October, 1902, barely six months before he died, "You have known for a long time, what it has been my aim to vindicate the right to dare anything. My capacities and the peculiar difficulties in my life have interfered greatly [01:29:00] with the carrying out of the task, have not allowed me to achieve a great result, but the mechanism has been set in motion nevertheless. The public owes me nothing, but the painters of today, who are benefiting from this new freedom, do owe me something. However, I expect no recognition from them, and I can find my reward in my own conscience."

Gauguin is perhaps technically not of the stature of Degas and Cézanne, though he certainly is inventively, an equal of money and Van Gogh. And we cannot have too great a respect for his immense artistic understanding, for his revolutionary vision and for his courage to bear [01:30:00] everything while pursuing his original creative aims. Gauguin did more than anyone, to change the course of art by the example of his own work. By the time he died, the worn out renaissance tradition had been swept away and the new simplified artforms were being created by all those who had fallen under his influence. Gauguin was a great and influential personality, a truly inspired and inspiring primitive, who stated that he had had to take the artistic idiom back to the horses on the Acropolis, and further still, to the old rocking horse in the nursery. He thus provided a springboard of stylistic inspiration, which left the artists of the twentieth century free to create a new tradition. [01:31:00] (applause)

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