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Belinda Thomson, ed., *Gauguin: Maker of Myth*. Catalog of an exhibition held at Tate Modern, London, from Sept. 30, 2010 to Jan. 16, 2011, and at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., from Feb. 27 to Jun. 5, 2011. London: Tate Publishing, 2010. 255 pp. Figures, plates, chronology, notes, bibliography, catalog of exhibited works, lenders, credits, and index. \$55.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-0691148861.

Review by Marco Deyasi, University of Idaho.

Although it might seem as though the many recent exhibitions of Gauguin's work have exhausted all the possibilities in his art, the new exhibition catalog, *Gauguin: Maker of Myth*, is a welcome addition to the scholarly literature on the artist. This is a catalog of an exhibition curated by Belinda Thomson that originated with the Tate Modern in London and the National Gallery of Art in Washington.

Gauguin and the Symbolists (sometimes called Post-Impressionists) seem to be the new Impressionists—at least in terms of blockbuster exhibitions designed to pull in large crowds. Among these recent exhibitions with accompanying catalogs are *Gauguin Tahiti* by George Shackelford and Claire Frèches-Thory (at the Grand Palais and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 2004) [1] and *Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Studio of the South* (at the Van Gogh Museum and the Art Institute of Chicago, 2001).[2] Thomson's choice of title appears calculated to appeal to a popular audience. However, the choice also signals the particular emphasis that differentiates this work from earlier efforts: the focus is on myth. Thomson and her colleagues explore the popular image of Gauguin (the "myth") through Gauguin's mythologizing of himself.

At the beginning of her introductory essay, "Paul Gauguin: Navigating the Myth," Belinda Thomson explains that by "myth," she and her colleagues mean "narrative strategies." That is, this exhibition explores the *rhetoric* surrounding Gauguin as artistic creator, especially his self-presentation or self-fashioning. As a result, the catalog addresses a key aspect of Gauguin's career that has not been adequately studied.

An especially important part of Thomson's approach is to historicize Gauguin in the colonial context of his time, the "increasingly fast-paced, globalised colonial world" (p. 10). As she describes it, the point is not to castigate the artist for his complicity with colonial discourse (indeed, I wonder how he could have avoided it), but to examine dispassionately the phenomenon of Gauguin.

Instead of a conventional biographical sketch, the bulk of Thomson's essay surveys Gauguin's life and career with an eye to examining the artist's identity as he saw it. She reviews Gauguin's self-fashioning throughout his career, largely focusing on textual evidence such as letters. She notes how the artist's persona seemed to differ depending on who his correspondents were. She draws the reader's attention to little-known facts or documents, such as a text by a certain "Mani the Hindu" that appears to have been Gauguin himself. Her survey of this information is well-written and insightful. Thomson's essay is an excellent introduction to Gauguin for graduate students or scholars who are beginning to study this difficult and mythologized character.

Tamar Garb's contribution to this volume, "Gauguin and the Opacity of the Other: The Case of Martinique," discusses the artist's rarely-studied visit to the Caribbean. Indeed, this part of Gauguin's

career has been obscured by his more famous association with Tahiti, but Garb's essay demonstrates that his visit to Martinique was a key moment where he developed strategies of self-presentation that he would continue to use throughout his career. She begins with the painting, *Martiniquan Landscape (Végétation Tropicale)* from 1887 and uses it to explore Gauguin's self-fashioning, both in terms of his painterly style and his identity as a "primitive" Other.

Garb advances the study of Gauguin both by drawing our attention to issues that emerge from the documentary evidence of his visit to Martinique and by linking them to aspects of his larger career. She notes how his trip was one of the first times that he attempted to live like a "primitive" in the colonies. For instance, he chose to live among the black Martiniquans in a "case à nègres," a significant choice in that segregated society. Yet this invention of himself as primitive was ultimately unsuccessful. Garb cites Edouard Glissant's argument that Gauguin had trouble understanding and dealing with the hybridity or *créolité* of Martinique and Martiniquans. Following Glissant, she contrasts Gauguin to Lafcadio Hearn. As she notes, Hearn appears to have taken great pleasure in the varied skin colors and facial features that he saw among the residents. Gauguin, however, repressed these aspects of Martinique both in his letters and in his art. Because of the complex intermingling of cultures and identities in the Caribbean, Gauguin's efforts to position himself as "primitive," that is, as the binary opposite of Europe, were stymied. As a result, his voyage to Martinique was less successful than his sojourn in Tahiti—both for the artist himself and for our traditional understanding of Gauguin as an artist. Thus, Garb helps reveal the limitations of Gauguin's rhetoric of the primitive and of his rhetorical invention of himself at the same time as she identifies aspects of his voyage that would be significant for his later career in the Pacific.

Linda Goddard's contribution, "Following the Moon': Gauguin's Writing and the Myth of the 'Primitive,'" examines Gauguin's books. As she notes, for an artist who disdained writing, Gauguin wrote a great deal. Naturally, his books were efforts to define himself and his art. One of the most significant features of Goddard's essay is her analysis of the artist's texts and illustrations together as a unit. In his texts, Gauguin was not only a writer; his manuscripts combined large and prominent illustrations around which he placed the words. He clearly intended his illustrated books to be seen as a whole unit, with text and images that interact with each other, and Goddard succeeds in her effort to examine them as such. She highlights the interplay of the images and text as well as the intertextuality (and sometimes just plain plagiarism) of the texts themselves.

Philippe Dagen's essay on "Gauguin's Politics" is a welcome effort by a French scholar to address the cultural politics of Gauguin's *oeuvre*. As he notes, most French art historians have resisted or disdained any investigation into the cultural politics of modern art. He begins by situating Gauguin in relation to the Marxist tradition of politics, arguing that Gauguin need not have read Marx and Engels in order to echo their critiques of modern, urbanized, industrial capitalism and its effects on art and aesthetics. Dagen follows by examining Gauguin's art for evidence of this influence. Not finding any, he proceeds to look more closely at the artist's writings and letters. Here, he declares that there is more evidence for Gauguin's decision to engage in cultural politics, for instance in *Aline's Notebook* where the artist explains his idea of a just society. However, Dagen concludes his argument by asserting that because Gauguin's primitivism was backwards-looking, it was politically aligned with aristocracy. This is an error in my estimation. Although he cites some of the artist's words in support of this interpretation, there is much scholarship that demonstrates that primitivism at the turn of the century was opposed to conservatism.[3]

Dagen's laudable effort would have been enhanced had his essay demonstrated a familiarity with the many art historical studies that explore how visual form and aesthetic discourse have political meaning, even in the absence of overtly Marxist or partisan rhetoric. For instance, there is not only the relatively recent influence of postcolonial theory and postcolonial studies on a new generation of art historians, but also the well-established tradition of social art history, itself emerging from art history's

engagement with Marxist insights into the relationship between politics and art.[4] Even the comparatively fewer studies of art and anarchism would have aided Dagen's argument. For example, in discussing the contemporary political meanings of Gauguin's art among Symbolist writers and critics, Dagen neglects to mention the influence of anarchist theory on some of those critics (especially Octave Mirbeau, a prominent critic whom he cites), nor does he consider how Gauguin's vision of a primitive society might have been influenced by the anarcho-communism of Peter Kropotkin, who was very influential on French anarchists like Elisée Reclus.[5] An especially noteworthy omission is any discussion of the politics of Theosophy, of which Gauguin was a sometime adherent. Theosophy not only promoted a primitivizing idea of the pre-modern world, but also was politically aligned with the radical left.[6] I suspect that Gauguin's words in apparent support of aristocracy are best interpreted as an expression in favor of a Nietzschean aristocracy of taste.[7]

Vincent Gille's essay, "The Last Orientalist: Portrait of the Artist as a Magician," links Gauguin to the literary tradition of Orientalism. In the scholarship on Gauguin, such a literary approach is rare and perhaps helps to counter some of the flaws in the study of primitivism in modern art. The study of primitivism within the discipline of art history has historically been conducted on different terms using an entirely different vocabulary. The author highlights the genre conventions behind Gauguin's rhetoric and discourse. Consistent with a literary approach, Gille explores the possibility that Gauguin's primitivism was an internal vision. That is, what he hoped to find could not be satisfied by any real experience, since reality would always fall short. In this way, there are echoes here of other studies that explore the nature and history of exoticism in literature, like that by Chris Bongie.[8]

Charles Forsdick examines the writer Victor Segalen and his importance for our understanding of Gauguin in his text, "Gauguin and Segalen: Exoticism, Myth, and the 'Aesthetics of Diversity'." Segalen helped rescue some of Gauguin's last art; he traveled to the Pacific to meet the artist, arriving very shortly after Gauguin died. Forsdick explores Segalen's motivations and his connections to the Parisian art scene, as well as the author's role in the burgeoning Gauguin myth. The author suggests that Segalen's larger project of studying and defining exoticism may hold lessons for postcolonial studies. In particular, Segalen's "aesthetics of diversity" suggests that exoticism is not merely ethnocentric, but bilateral, that the Western gaze on the non-Western can be reversed in order to see the Western as Other. And yet, despite this potentially chiasmic interrelation, different cultures are radically opaque to each other, and one must not underestimate how alien they are to us (or we to them, whoever "they" might be). These and related insights gleaned from Segalen's work may have the potential to destabilize established aesthetics and categories of identity, especially in relation to our post-modern globalized world. This is a topic that urgently needs further development.

Amy Dickson's contribution to the collection, "Gauguin: A Very British Reception," is an archeology of Gauguin's reception in Britain via an exhibition organized in 1910 by Roger Fry. Fry is a noteworthy figure in the context of this catalog, as it reconsiders the popular "myths" around Gauguin and his place in modern art. It was Fry's show of Impressionist and post-Impressionist art, the subject of this essay that originally coined the historically misleading term "post-Impressionism." Dickson's essay demonstrates exemplary research, reconstructing in detail both the show itself and the range of public responses especially through newspaper reports and other printed media. She goes further and traces the earliest occasions when Gauguin's art was shown in Britain. She concludes by examining W. Somerset Maugham's book *The Moon and the Sixpence*, arguing that it was a significant influence on the public reception of Gauguin's art in the English-speaking world via its fictionalized treatment of the artist.

The remainder of the book is a lavishly-illustrated catalog of the exhibition, organized into thematic sections, each with an unsigned introduction, presumably by Thomson. Both the introductions and the selection of illustrations are comprehensive and impressive, covering a wide range of media including sculpture, prints, and books, and highlighting works that are not often seen or discussed in the

literature. Among the sections are Gauguin's self-presentation in self-portraits, his use of Christian imagery, rural life, depictions of women, and use of his own texts. While most of the illustrations are reproduced well, some of the paintings appear to have the colors distorted by the printing process and are oddly subdued. This is an unfortunate flaw in an otherwise well-printed volume.

Despite the challenge of adding to our knowledge of Gauguin, this volume succeeds in both synthesizing the vast literature on the artist as well as advancing the scholarship in new and fruitful directions. Even with some of the unevenness characteristic of any anthology, *Gauguin: Maker of Myth* is an important contribution to the study of both Gauguin and the broader issue of primitivism in modern art.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Belinda Thomson, "Paul Gauguin: Navigating the Myth"

Tamar Garb, "Gauguin and the Opacity of the Other: The Case of Martinique"

Linda Goddard, "'Following the Moon': Gauguin's Writing and the Myth of the 'Primitive'"

Philippe Dagen, "Gauguin's Politics"

Vincent Gille, "The Last Orientalist: Portrait of the Artist as Mohican"

Charles Forsdick, "Gauguin and Segalen: Exoticism, Myth and the 'Aesthetics of Diversity'"

Amy Dickson, "Gauguin: A Very British Reception"

NOTES

[1] George T. M. Shackelford and Claire Frèches-Thory, *Gauguin Tahiti: The Studio of the South* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004).

[2] Douglas Druick and Peter Kort Zegers, *Van Gogh and Gauguin: Studio of the South* (Chicago, Ill.: Art Institute of Chicago, 2001).

[3] See for instance, Frances S. Connelly, *The Sleep of Reason: Primitivism in Modern European Aesthetics, 1725-1907* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995) and Patricia Lighten, "Colonialism, l'art nègre, and Les Demoiselles d'Avignon," in Christopher Green, ed. *Picasso's 'Les Demoiselles d'Avignon,'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 77-103.

[4] Social art history can be traced at least as far back *Block*, published between 1979 and 1989 by Middlesex Polytechnic, in East Barnet, UK. A representative example of more recent scholarship, among many, is Robert Herbert, *Impressionism: Art, Leisure and Parisian Society* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1991).

[5] See Richard D. Sonn, *Anarchism and Cultural Politics in Fin de Siècle France* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989).

[6] Among recent studies that discuss the cultural politics of Theosophy are John Warne Monroe, *Laboratories of Faith: Mesmerism, Spiritism, and Occultism in Modern France* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell

University Press, 2008) and Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

[7] Among the early studies of Nietzsche's influence on modern art is Ron Johnson, "The 'Demoiselles d'Avignon' and Dionysian Destruction," *Arts*, 55 (October 1980): 94-101.

[8] Chris Bongie, *Exotic Memories: Literature, Colonialism and the Fin de Siècle* (Stanford, Cal.: Stanford University Press, 1991).

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