The Quest for Spiritual Purity and Sexual Freedom: Gauguin’s Primitive Eve

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Paul Gauguin’s extensive body of work is marked by both its appropriation of religious motifs and subject matter, and—almost antithetically—its highly sexualized nature. Until his first Tahitian sojourn in 1891, however, Gauguin struggled to visually unite spirituality and sexuality in a manner that celebrated human physicality. Indeed, Gauguin shied away from eroticized works during the earlier portion of his career, very often selecting subject matters with expressly religious resonance and distinctively Christian iconography. Yet even in the instances when Gauguin attempted sexualized works, they were highly informed by Western associations of the erotic with shame and sin. Gauguin’s struggle to visually reconcile these two seemingly incompatible, competing forces was symptomatic of his own discordant nature; he was both the product of a Catholic upbringing that emphasized the dangers and defects of physical pleasures and a man whose carnal appetite has elicited characterizations as a “sexual outlaw.”

Gauguin’s voyage to Polynesia provided him with both physical and ideological distance from Europe and its pervasive cultural and religious traditions, allowing the artist to finally achieve the harmonious synthesis of religiosity and sexuality that had previously evaded him. This reconciliation was therefore firmly rooted in Gauguin’s brand of escapist discourse, which emphasized the exegetical power of exotic primitivism.

In the recurrent figure of the “primitive” Eve, Gauguin found a physical embodiment of the natural unification of sexuality and spirituality. Historically, Western imagination conceived of biblical Eve as a reminder of and testament to the dangers associated with the pleasures of the flesh—a view that only complicated Gauguin’s quest for a visual unification of the spiritual and sexual realms. Once in Tahiti, Gauguin was able to remove Eve from her traditional

cultural constraints in a gesture that constitutes a revision of this biblical figure; he effectively created a female nude situated in an Edenic paradise whose nakedness is meant to elicit pleasure without the sense that her overt sexuality is connected to shame and evil. Thus, it is through the recurrent deconstructed figure of Eve that Gauguin was able to challenge, at its biblical source, the Western notion that unabashed sexuality is sinful and dismiss it through his application of a primitive, non-Western perspective. It is important to note that this conception of primitivism refers to the prevailing European model of colonial discourse—disseminated by popular novels and guidebooks of the 19th century—which framed newly discovered, exotic locales such as Tahiti as earthly, sexual paradises completely free of the polluting effects of Western culture and religion. In his primitivized appropriation of the inherently religious figure of Eve, Gauguin was finally able to forge a peaceful coexistence between spirituality and sexuality.

Paul Gauguin’s perpetual quest for spirituality consumed his art throughout his career, and was very much grounded in his Catholic seminary training and education. As a young boy, Gauguin resided with his mother in Orléans, where he received his formal education. After some time as a day student, Gauguin continued his education as a boarder in a Catholic Seminary, the Petit Séminaire de La Chapelle-Saint-Mesmin, which was located near Orléans. It was here that Gauguin was exposed to—among other areas of study—Catholic liturgy and biblical literature. The Bishop of Orléans, the well-known educational reformer Félix-Antoine-Philibert Dupanloup, taught Gauguin’s courses in biblical literature. Dupanloup believed that education was the key to recapturing the minds of French youth for a Catholic Church severely shaken by the “dual menace of social revolution and excessive rationalism.” Gauguin’s tenure at the Petit Séminaire exposed him to Bishop Dupanloup’s renovated Catholic teaching, which alternated the indictment of a fallen world with a glorification of ascent to a higher realm.

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4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
Dupanloup emphasized a corrupted and transgressive human nature, and forewarned students like Gauguin of an earthly existence fundamentally grounded in “suffering, sorrow, and a dolorous reckoning with sin.”

According to Debora Silverman in Van Gogh and Gauguin: The Search for Sacred Art, Dupanloup was particularly concerned with “imparting to the children the dangers and defects of their own carnality.” These recitations of the impurity of sensual pleasures must have truly resonated with Gauguin, as much of his pre-Tahitian artwork presents a visual affirmation of carnality’s shameful consequences.

Despite his boyhood engagement with Catholicism and its guiding principles, Gauguin did not remain an adherent of the Church doctrine as an adult. In fact, Gauguin openly defied conventional religion and issued “biting polemic attacks on Catholic hierarchy and authority.”

Yet Gauguin’s rejection of institutional religious practices—the Catholic Church more specifically—must have coexisted with a mentality permanently shaped by the religious values and theological maxims imparted upon him in his youth. Gauguin’s artwork serves as the primary testament to the endurance of such institutionalized theological frameworks; his Catholic education made him fully conversant with both the practice and iconography of Christianity and provided him with a frame of reference for his Symbolist pursuit of spirituality.

Gauguin’s The Vision After the Sermon: Jacob Wrestling With the Angel from 1888 exemplifies his expropriation of Christian motifs in his pursuit of symbolic meaning. The symbolist and Gauguin promoter, G.- Albert Aurier, would claim that such religious subjects are irrelevant in that they merely serve to express the underlying idea by means of forms that are generally understandable. Still, it remains important to note that it was through religious meditation and biblical allusions that Gauguin chose to engage and transmit his Symbolist vision. In The Vision After the Sermon, Gauguin has imagined a vision induced in minds of

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6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 For images referenced within this work, see www.paul-gauguin.net.
powerful and simple faith by a sermon. In the foreground, peasant women stand with their backs to the viewer, completely immersed in their shared apparition. In the background, the symbolic struggle rages between Jacob and the angel—an expressly biblical allusion. Spatially, Gauguin’s composition is rather nonsensical. In the absence of a horizon line, Gauguin’s un-modulated crimson is near impossible to decipher; while it may represent a field, it may just as viably constitute uninterrupted sky. In this way, Gauguin has achieved a method of representation that coincides with his subject, which is emblematic of a spiritual moment not rooted in reality. It is also interesting to note the utter absence of men in this painting, save for what is interpreted as Gauguin’s self-portrait in the painting’s lower right-hand corner. It is through women almost exclusively that Gauguin attempts to access the spiritual realm in this painting, yet in doing so, he completely neglects the seemingly inherent sexuality with which he imbues women in other less religiously informed works from around the same period and following it. It is as though sexuality and spirituality cannot coexist for Gauguin during this period, though he relies on women in order to access both forces separately. Regardless, we may read Gauguin’s Vision After the Sermon as a testament to the lasting impact of the Catholic tradition on the artist.

While many of the paintings Gauguin undertook prior to his Tahitian sojourn, like The Vision After the Sermon and The Yellow Christ, are relegated exclusively to the spiritual realm, there exist a few key visual examples of Gauguin’s futile endeavor to merge spiritual purity with sexual freedom while residing in Europe. In The Vision, Gauguin depicted peasant women ecstatically transfixed by the sacred illusion of Jacob wrestling the angel. In his Vendages à Arles: Misères humaines from 1888, however, Gauguin’s nude female subject is “riveted not by the projection of an exalted vision but by the dejection brought on by knowledge of human delinquency.” Like the peasant women featured in The Vision After the Sermon, Gauguin’s primary female subject in Vendages is deeply engaged in a moment of interiority. Seated at the

12 Silverman, Van Gogh and Gauguin, 228.
front center of the painting, the figure rests her head on her hands, seemingly unaware of the women who surround her, each absorbed in their own quiet task. To her left stands a woman cloaked in black, partially cut off by the edge of the painting, gathering unknown objects in her basket. Directly behind the seated woman, enclosed in hilly mass of reddish-purple, are two peasant women hunched over as they engage in some unknown labor. The seated figure’s idleness and isolation are sharply emphasized by the activity surrounding her. Furthermore, the somber, dark clothing and covered heads of the peripheral female figures stand in stark contrast to the seated woman’s lightly colored garments and her vivid orange hair, which remains exposed. In this way then, the central figure’s impiety is suggested through a natural comparison to the women around her. Moreover, the brooding face of the figure at the center is cast in an unnatural, almost sickening greenish hue, which seems only to enhance her vulgarity. As suggested by Silverman, the source of this brooding woman’s apparent sin lies in her indulgence in temporary physical pleasure. Female sexuality is tainted by religiously based connotations of shame and corruption.

The themes of desolation and resignation to carnal sin embodied by the central female figure in Gauguin’s *Vendages à Arles: Misères humaines* began to inform his work even more heavily in early 1889. Gauguin translated such recurrent themes through the production of numerous derivations of the original *Misères humaines* figure from 1888. Gauguin’s *Breton Eve* from 1889 is quite significant in that it represents both a variant of the *Misères humaines* figure and one of the first of many instances in which Gauguin exploits the biblical Eve as a conduit for reflections on art, women, and civilization.¹³ Still, as evidenced by *Breton Eve*, Gauguin’s pre-Tahitian Eve was very much plagued by the Western dichotomy between “the asexual and the over-sexed, the pure woman and the femme fatale.”¹⁴

In his *Breton Eve*, a small pastel and watercolor, Gauguin positions his Eve in a stance quite reminiscent of the seated woman in his earlier *Vendages à Arles: Misères humaines* but with

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important differences that “intensify the allegorical character of the image.” This new variant is presented as a crouching nude figure, clutching her head in her hands as she sits in a vague patch of space beneath what can only be assumed to be the Edenic Tree of Knowledge. Behind Eve, party obscured by the tree, hovers a threatening snake. Much like the Vendages figure, Breton Eve’s skin is marked by an unnaturally putrid green flesh tone—a device that physically attests to her impending sin. The figure’s nudity, not altogether common in Gauguin’s work predating his first trip to Tahiti, here serves a dual purpose—it helps to identify the figure as biblical Eve prior to the fall, while simultaneously functioning as an indication of human sexuality. Titling her Eve signaled, as noted by Silverman, Gauguin’s symbolic ambition as well as an evocation of the fall and resignation to sin.

When Breton Eve was first exhibited, it bore the inscription “Eve: Pas écouter li. . . li. . . menteur,” which roughly translates to “Eve: Don’t listen to the. . . the. . . liar.” Thus, it is clear that at this particular moment, Eve, with hands clamped tightly over her ears, is attempting to resist the temptation that will ultimately doom her and, as the Catholic Church believes, mankind. Gauguin’s conscious decision to depict this particular moment suggests a desire to evince the universal triumph of material temptation over devout resistance. While it is apparent that Gauguin recognizes man’s inherent carnality, he is still clearly burdened by a deeply ingrained, religiously informed belief that sexual pleasures are merely transient and ultimately yield only putrefaction and degradation. Gauguin’s appropriation of an expressly biblical subject matter, as well as his reproduction of an earlier figure afflicted by the shame and desolation born of sexual transgressions, indicates his struggle to reconcile spiritual purity with sexuality free from dishonor.

In tracing Gauguin’s revision of Eve, the artist’s attempt to rethink key elements of Christian mythology in terms of Tahitian primitivism is at once visually apparent. Indeed, it seems that the evolution of Gauguin’s Eve from Western to primitive was largely informed by

Ibid., 273.
his vision of Tahiti as an earthly, sexual paradise unfettered by the polluting effects of Western culture and religion. This version of the myth of Tahiti does not differ from that which had fascinated the European imagination from the moment of the island’s discovery in the eighteenth century. Especially in France, from the moment Louis-Antoine de Bougainville returned in 1796 from his voyage around the world to report his discoveries, Tahiti was “I’lle de Cythère,” the new abode of Venus—an exotic island where the pleasure principle dominated without censorship. Novels like Pierre Loti’s overblown Tahitian romance, Le mariage de Loti, and popular guidebooks perpetuated the prevailing notion that Tahiti was a sexual paradise free from Western influence. Given the nature of the available literature on Tahiti, it is not surprising that Gauguin was soon under the spell of a cultural version of primitive exoticism created by European, and especially French, writers and artists. The Exposition Universelle of 1889, to which Gauguin was directly exposed over a period of several months, only concretized the artist’s dreams of flight to an exotic locale through its Pavilion of the Colonies, which included a Javanese village and a Tahitian hut. Gauguin had already resolved to make his life anew in Tahiti by 1890, as evidenced by a letter he wrote to his estranged wife, Mette Gauguin, in which he fantasized about his Tahitian sojourn: “There in Tahiti, in the silence of the tropical nights, I can listen to the soft murmuring music of my heart in loving harmony with the mysterious creatures surrounding me. Free at last, without worry of money, I will be able to love, sing and die.”

Gauguin’s dreams of this Tahitian paradise most definitely informed his Exotic Eve, which he painted in 1890, just before his departure for Tahiti. Unlike his earlier Breton Eve, Gauguin’s Exotic Eve accentuates the positive side of the temptation as well as its positive

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18 Mathews, Passionate Discontent, 169.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid., 52.
22 Solomon-Godeau, “Going Native,” 323.
results. In this painting, Eve, who still appears European, is depicted nude in a tropical Garden of Eden, yielding to temptation as she plucks a fruit from the Tree of Knowledge. However, instead of emphasizing the sinful nature of this act, as he did so effectively in *Breton Eve*, Gauguin appears more optimistic. This is made perhaps most apparent by Gauguin’s inclusion of a copulating rooster and hen on the right side of the painting. From the egg-shaped shadow cast by this pair springs egg and chick-like forms. While this group initially seems entirely random, its relation to Eve is born of its placement in the painting’s time sequence. Indeed, when read left to right, the painting emphasizes the fruitful results of the Fall as opposed to its negative consequences. The snake on the right represents temptation in its physical form, as Eve, picking fruit at center, is emblematic of the Fall. The rooster and hen at right therefore symbolize sex and fertility, the importance of which is further emphasized by Eve’s gaze, which is fixed firmly upon the bird pair and their offspring. In this way, *Exotic Eve* is representative not of original sin, but of fertility sprung from sexuality. Eve’s new function for Gauguin is further emphasized by the fact that the head of *Exotic Eve* derives from a photograph of Gauguin’s mother, Aline Chazal. According to Abigail Solomon-Godeau, this inclusion stems from the recollection that Eve means mother, and that, biblically speaking, Eve is the mother of us all. Thus, Eve’s surrender to material temptation is framed here in much more positive terms than those employed by Gauguin in his *Breton Eve*. This newly formed perspective is no doubt inextricably linked to the Tahitian paradigm Gauguin had already begun to adopt, in which sexuality was free from the shame and sin inherent in Western civilization. Still, Gauguin is unable to fully extricate Eve from the Western association of sex with sin, as evidenced by her apparent reticence and the overt biblical rendering of the scene.

It is no surprise then that upon his arrival in Tahiti in 1891, Gauguin’s reconciliation of spiritual purity and sexual freedom reached its pinnacle. While Gauguin’s Tahitian painting is full of references to traditional Christian scenes and iconography, a complex interplay between

26 Ibid., 178.
28 Ibid.
these Christian motifs and a primitive, Eastern spirituality abounds. Essentially, it seems that Gauguin’s exposure to Tahitian culture facilitated a revised version of spirituality infused with the notion that sexuality is natural rather than shameful. The figure of primitive Eve produced by Gauguin while in Tahiti is emblematic of this unification of spirituality and sexuality.

Gauguin’s first attempt at a primitive Eve, his *Exotic Eve* from 1890, is fully realized in Tahiti in 1892, with his painting *Te nave nave fenua*. Here, Eve has become truly “native,” her setting exotically paradisiacal and her nudity finally presented boldly, free from the coyness that characterized Gauguin’s earlier nudes. This primitive, Tahitian Eve—probably modeled from Gauguin’s lover Teha’amana—is tempted not by a snake, but a black lizard with enormous red wings. Additionally, instead of plucking a piece of fruit from a tree, as Western Eve is traditionally depicted, Gauguin’s primitive Eve grasps the blossom of a fantastical flower, which most closely resembles a peacock feather. According to Ziva Amishai-Maisels in *Gauguin’s Religious Themes*, the peacock is a symbol of Paradise, and thus, the flower Eve plucks stands for Paradise, and serves to reinforce the biblical rather than Tahitian setting.

Still, the painting’s overt Christian iconography is fused with a heightened, primitivized sexuality that borders on animalistic. Gauguin’s Tahitian Eve displays dark skin, black pubic hair, and is marked by unusually large hands and feet. According to Stephen F. Eisenman’s *Gauguin’s Skirt*, the figure’s large hands and feet prompted contemporary critics such as Achille Delaroche to compare her to a “quadrumane”—a simian with feet adapted for use as hands. It is through this apparent animality that Gauguin is able to remove Eve from her traditional cultural constraints and produce a figure that is at once innocent and pure and sexual. As Gauguin stated in an interview in 1895, “My chosen Eve is almost animal; that’s why she is chaste although naked. All those Venuses exhibited at the salon are indecent, odiously

31 Eisenman, *Gauguin’s Skirt*, 66.
lubricious.” Thus, the figure of primitive Eve enabled Gauguin to infuse a universal symbol of Christianity with a brand of sexuality free from Western associations with evil and pain.

In a letter written to August Strindberg in 1895, Gauguin described the differences between the civilized Eve and the his primitive Eve:

> Before the Eve of my choice, whom I have painted in the forms and the harmonies of another world, your chosen memories perhaps evoked a painful past... The Eve I have painted (she alone) logically can remain nude before our eyes. Yours in this simple state couldn’t walk without shame and, too beautiful (perhaps), would be the evocation of an evil and a pain.

This contrast between the two Eves emphasizes Gauguin’s belief that civilizing influences, such as the institution of marriage, tainted the Western Eve. The primitive Eve, conversely, is free from the polluting effects of Western culture and religion, enabling her to remain both spiritually pure and sexually free.

These ideas are perhaps best visually translated in Gauguin’s *Nafea Faa Ipoipo (When Will You Marry?)*, from 1892. This painting depicts a primitive Eve in the foreground, dressed in native clothing. Behind her lurks a Westernized Tahitian woman, recognizable by her high-necked collar and missionary garb. This Westernized woman, eyes fixed on the primitive Eve as her mouth curls in a calculating smile, is meant to represent the corruption of purity that comes with a knowledge of Christianity. She poses a question to the primitive, innocent Eve, asking, “When will you marry?” as the painting’s title indicates. For her, sexual freedom is considered sinful and must be eradicated through marriage. Through this painting, Gauguin acknowledges the existence of Western cultural beliefs and practices in Tahiti, and laments its impact on the Tahitian way of life. In this way, Gauguin suggests that it is only in the absence of Western civilization’s influence that spiritual purity and sexuality can peacefully coexist.

In examining the evolution of Gauguin’s body of work—and the figure of Eve more specifically—it becomes apparent that he saw Western culture and practices as problematic to the reconciliation of spiritual purity and sexual freedom. Although Gauguin renounced

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32 Brooks, “Gauguin’s Tahitian Body, 64.
33 Ibid., 63.
35 Ibid., 170.
institutional Catholicism in a series of polemic texts written in the summer of 1897, he sought to explore, through his art, the “doctrine of Christ in its natural and rational meaning.” In seeking to unify spirituality and sexuality, Gauguin therefore intended to rethink Christian mythology in terms of Tahitian primitivism. After all, his notion of spirituality was very much informed by his Catholic education and was not so easily abandoned despite a growing interest in a more universal notion of religion. In Tahiti, free from the constraints of Western culture, sexual freedom and spirituality coexisted, and thus, through contact with this place, Gauguin was able to forge his own unification of spiritual purity and sexuality free from shame through his art. Still, it is interesting to note that this seemingly harmonious synthesis was predicated upon a racist view of Tahitian natives as intrinsically animalistic. Thus, despite his willingness to accept and incorporate Tahitian culture into his own worldview, Gauguin was ironically guilty of maintaining a distinctly Western view of the Tahitians as somewhat inferior—an attitude typical of colonialism.