

Audio Guide Transcript

Paul Gauguin: The Art of Invention

July 21–September 15, 2019

Main Exhibition Galleries

SAINT LOUIS ART MUSEUM

Gallery 241: Introduction to *Paul Gauguin: The Art of Invention*

Speaker: Brent Benjamin
Barbara B. Taylor Director
Saint Louis Art Museum

Hello, I'm Brent Benjamin, Barbara B. Taylor Director of the Saint Louis Art Museum.

Welcome to *Paul Gauguin: The Art of Invention*. Paul Gauguin's travels and his exploration of media, imagery, and ideas were central to his innovations in art.

Combining objects from both the Art Museum's collection and the renowned holdings of the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen, Denmark, this exhibition offers an exceptional array of art forms. While works of art by Gauguin illustrate the distinctive phases of his career, textiles and sculptures from South America and Polynesia represent the cultures and experiences that informed and inspired his artistic output as well as personal philosophies.

This audio guide offers expert commentary from Simon Kelly, curator of modern and contemporary art; Nichole Bridges, associate curator for African art and Morton J. May curator in charge; Abigail Yoder, research assistant at the Saint Louis Art Museum; and Elizabeth Childs, Etta and Mark Steinberg professor of art history at Washington University in St. Louis. From wood carvings to paintings and ceramics, these scholars will offer a deeper understanding of a number of works of art throughout the galleries, whose object labels include an audio icon to help you identify each stop. I hope you enjoy this audio guide and your visit to *Paul Gauguin: The Art of Invention*.

STOP 1
Gallery 242: *Landscape from Osny*

Speaker: Simon Kelly
Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art
Saint Louis Art Museum

Hello, my name is Simon Kelly, and I'm the curator of modern and contemporary art at the Saint Louis Art Museum. In his early work, Paul Gauguin focused on landscape painting, and this picture was made soon after he had left his career as a stockbroker to focus full-time on his art. Gauguin represents the small village of Osny, some 20 miles to the northwest of Paris that he visited repeatedly in 1883. His close friend and fellow Impressionist painter Camille Pissarro lived here, and Gauguin came to visit him on several occasions. The two worked together outdoors and often painted the same views and subjects around the village.

Gauguin's view here represents the entrance to Osny. He carefully depicts the thatched roofs and the figure of a woman carrying brushwood on her back. Such rustic subjects anticipate his later interest in rural themes far from the metropolis of Paris, particularly when he traveled to Brittany in the mid- to late 1880s. Nonetheless, the presence beneath a spindly tree of two figures, one in a straw hat—who are perhaps visiting tourists—suggests the relative proximity of the capital and reminds us that a railroad passed close by the village.

Gauguin showed at five of the eight Impressionist exhibitions, and *Landscape from Osny* highlights his interest in the capturing of transient weather effects. This was an

aim central to Impressionism, and Gauguin here shows swirling clouds above, signaling the onset of a storm. At the same time, his painting anticipates his later interest in abstraction and decorative pattern making. In representing the roofed houses, he creates a strong sense of vertical and horizontal geometry. He also creates a sense of flatness through his spatially disorienting representation of two paths, the larger of which turns to the right, while the smaller rises vertically on the left of the canvas. In contrast to the curling, vibrant brushstrokes in the sky, Gauguin represents these paths in short, uniform, and repeated marks. The painting also shows Gauguin's early interest in experimenting with color. Touches of pink and red offset the greens of the bushes, while the orange-tiled roof complements the openings of blue sky.

STOP 2

Gallery 242: *Woman Sewing, or Nude Study*

Speaker: Simon Kelly
Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art
Saint Louis Art Museum

For much of his career, Gauguin was fascinated with representing the human body, and *Woman Sewing* is his first large-scale nude painting. This was a picture that was highly radical in its time because of its extreme realism. Gauguin made no attempt to idealize his sitter, instead representing her hunched, full-bodied form as she sits on the edge of a bed, perhaps mending her own dress.

Gauguin showed this painting at the sixth Impressionist exhibition in 1881, when it was entitled simply *Study of a Nude*. It attracted considerable critical controversy. Some praised the picture. The prominent critic Joris-Karl Huysmans, for example, noted that, among contemporary painters of the nude, none had produced an image that was, in his words, so “vehemently realistic.” The writer Gustave Geffroy, however, criticized Gauguin for painting the woman with what he called “cold cruelty,” and he went on to describe the sitter’s “weary flesh, skinny arms . . . shapeless belly.” Despite such characterization, Gauguin’s painting, in fact, has a tenderness to it as he focuses on a private moment as this woman is absorbed in her work. The sitter for the painting was probably his nursemaid, Justine, who looked after Gauguin’s children and was an important part of the Gauguin household in Paris. Gauguin offsets the pinks and reds of the illuminated areas of her body with greens and blues in the shadows. Careful examination of the line of her back suggests that it was reworked over time.

The setting for this scene is Gauguin's Parisian studio, which was decorated with various exotic paraphernalia. A mandolin hangs on the wall behind and, alongside it, a striped textile that has generally been identified as Peruvian in origin. Gauguin's mother came from a Peruvian family, and Gauguin himself had lived in Peru for several years as a child. He was proud of his Peruvian heritage and collected such textiles. The inclusion of this hanging can be seen as a symbol of his pride in his family background. In this exhibition we have included a comparable striped textile from the Museum's collection alongside Gauguin's painting.

STOP 3

Gallery 243: *Jug with Delacroix Motif of Algerian Horseman* and *Vase with Motifs from Cézanne's La Moisson*

Speaker: Abigail Yoder
Research Assistant
Saint Louis Art Museum

I'm Abigail Yoder, research assistant at the Saint Louis Art Museum. Gauguin achieved a wide variety of shapes and sizes in his ceramic works by modeling the vessels by hand rather than throwing them on a potter's wheel. This also meant that the works maintained rough, more heavily textured surfaces and lacked the refinement and uniformity that was characteristic of French studio pottery at the time. He also rarely glazed his pots, which was uncommon among contemporary ceramists. He opted instead to decorate his vessels with colored slips and sometimes touches of gold, which can be seen in these two examples. His works also often had modeled, three-dimensional forms or incised line drawings instead of images that were painted on the surface. Because of this, Gauguin's ceramics have a highly sculptural appearance; he even sometimes referred to them as "sculptures" rather than pots.

The two vessels here exemplify Gauguin's innovative approach to pottery. The jug on the left was shaped into an unconventional double jar with three handles, while the vessel on the right is a rectangular, three-handled vase. Both objects illustrate Gauguin's emphasis on sculptural elements, as seen in the three-dimensional human figures that embellish the sides.

These two works in particular are also interesting as they shed light on Gauguin's artistic

influences. The jug is decorated by the image of an Algerian horseman, a motif that Gauguin would have adopted from the great French Romantic painter Eugène Delacroix. Gauguin's guardian, Gustave Arosa, who raised him after the death of his mother, was a great art collector and owned works by Delacroix, so Gauguin would have known of this sort of imagery from the paintings in Arosa's collection, although this particular horseman doesn't seem to be a direct reference to a specific painting.

The vase illustrates a harvest scene based on a painting by Paul Cézanne, who was another artist Gauguin greatly admired. This image is slightly more difficult to see, but if you look closely on the flat side of the vase, you can just make out lightly engraved lines on the surface. They depict a man in a hat leaning to the right over a pile of grain; behind him are two women bending over, viewed from behind; and further back is a house and a cathedral on a hill. Gauguin knew Cézanne from his time working in Pontoise with Camille Pissarro and was impressed with Cézanne's individualized style, which influenced his own unique approach to painting. He actually owned several works by Cézanne, including the harvest painting he copied here.

STOP 4

Gallery 244A: *Landscape from Brittany with Breton Women*

Speaker: Abigail Yoder
Research Assistant
Saint Louis Art Museum

This painting, *Landscape from Brittany with Breton Women*, captures the rustic nature of Pont-Aven, with its hilly landscape, dirt roads, and small cottages. The women in the foreground wear traditional Breton costumes of dark frocks and vivid white coifs, or headdresses.

Gauguin spent a great deal of time traveling around France, often visiting smaller regional towns with agrarian populations. These travels instilled in Gauguin a yearning for an escape from the industrialized modern world. He began seeking out locations and subjects that illustrated what he considered to be a supposedly “primitive” way of life. In 1886 Gauguin traveled for the first time to Brittany, a region on the northwest coast of France. He went in part out of fascination for the culture—the inhabitants there spoke a blend of French and Welsh and practiced a medieval form of Catholicism that incorporated pagan elements—but he also went because it was inexpensive to live there, and he was struggling financially. He stayed in the small town of Pont-Aven, where Gauguin worked with younger artists in developing a new abstract painting style that emphasized color and flat patterns instead of realistic depictions of form and space. This style was influenced by stained glass and Japanese prints. Gauguin became one of the leaders of this group, which was known as the Pont-Aven school.

The painting marks a transition between Gauguin's earlier Impressionism and his developing new style. He is still using somewhat loose brushstrokes and varies the tones in the green grass, pink earth, and blue dresses, all reminiscent of his earlier paintings. However, he compresses the space in the painting in unexpected ways and simplifies the figures into flattened silhouettes. If you look closely at the headdresses worn by the two Breton women, you can see they are outlined in deep blue pigment. This was one of the traits associated with Gauguin's new abstract style—having dark, heavy outlines around forms, like in stained-glass windows—and was a technique that Gauguin continued to use as his paintings became more and more abstract. Later works from Brittany, such as *Breton Girl* and *Two Children*, both from 1889 and both on view nearby, show Gauguin's increasing emphasis on flatness and color.

The great irony of Gauguin's paintings of rural life in Brittany is that, by and large, this way of life was already disappearing, and the region was becoming a tourist spot. Gauguin first fled Pont-Aven, which was becoming overrun with artists, and traveled to the nearby coastal village of Le Pouldu, but soon found that even this tiny hamlet was not remote enough. This eventually led him to leave France altogether in 1891 and travel abroad to Polynesia.

STOP 5

Gallery 244A: *Reclining Woman with Fan* and *Woman with Mangoes*

Speaker: Simon Kelly
Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art
Saint Louis Art Museum

Gauguin considered his wood carvings as a very important part of his output and sometimes priced his sculptures higher than his paintings. As a child, he had carved wood dagger handles on his return to France from Peru. Later, during his travel in the merchant navy in his late teens and early 20s, he picked up the idea of sculpting flotsam into meticulously worked forms.

The two intricately carved wood panels here were made around the same time, in the late 1880s, when Gauguin was staying in the small village of Le Pouldu in Brittany. The colorful *Woman with Mangoes* depicts a reclining woman picking the yellow mango fruit while a goat grazes at her feet. Two monkeys are also present, while two floating heads, to left and right, add a surreal sense to the scene. At bottom right, Gauguin inscribed the word “Martinique,” indicating that his panel was a memory of his four-month trip to this Caribbean island in 1887, a visit that he considered pivotal in his artistic development. His panel suggests that, for him, the island was a place rich with nature’s bounty but also contained elements of the supernatural. Gauguin made a practice of painting his sculptures and here used his preferred bright colors in reds, greens, yellows, and white.

Gauguin's second wood panel, *Reclining Woman with Fan*, also treats the same theme of a reclining woman, although here the setting is unclear. The woman's fan, painted in red, acts as a halo. To her right are a group of leering male figures who spy on her, while above in the sky is a strange, unidentifiable, hovering animal. To the bottom right is the monogram PGO, which Gauguin often used as an abbreviated signature.

In both of these panels, Gauguin chiseled and gouged his oak wood, creating self-consciously rough, unfinished surfaces that subverted the accepted conventions of high, polished finish for sculpture in the late 19th century. Gauguin's experiments with wood carving would continue, not only in his sculptures, but also in his woodcut prints, many of which are on view later in this exhibition, and which were made from blocks of wood that he had gouged out.

STOP 6

Gallery 244B: *Tahitian Woman with a Flower (Vahine no te tiare)*

Speaker: Abigail Yoder
Research Assistant
Saint Louis Art Museum

Gauguin traveled to Tahiti in the hopes of finding an untouched paradise, free from the influence of modernity. When he arrived in the Tahitian capital of Papeete in June 1891, after a two-month voyage at sea, he was dismayed to find himself in an established town, surrounded by Europeans. In reality, Tahiti had been annexed by France 11 years earlier, and for even longer, it had been under the influence of Westerners. Even so, Gauguin still sought to escape civilization and soon traveled to a remote coastal village, where he hoped to experience local traditions more directly. This painting, *Tahitian Woman with a Flower*, was one of the first pictures he painted there. Gauguin described in his journal how he wished to paint a portrait of one of his neighbors, a young woman. She initially said no, only to return later in her finest dress with a flower in her hair.

This portrait underscores the reality of life in Tahiti at the time. The woman is clearly a native Tahitian; Gauguin made no attempt to westernize her features according to European standards of beauty. Yet she wears a distinctly European missionary dress. This reflects the suppression of the native culture begun by Western missionaries in the early 1800s. The Tahitians were forced to give up their traditional gods and rituals; sacred spaces and representations of Polynesian gods were destroyed, as there was a mass conversion to Christianity. Traditional costume was also suppressed, as the local

population was required to cover their bodies. High-necked dresses like the one seen here were meant for church, while the white collar meant it was for special occasions.

The painting appears to be a rather straightforward portrait. In fact, the half-length orientation, combined with the woman's folded hands and enigmatic expression, calls to mind one of the most famous Renaissance portraits, even in Gauguin's time: Leonardo da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. Yet it also emphasizes Gauguin's ever-increasing abstract painting style. Rather than placing his model in a recognizable landscape or interior setting, she is seen in front of a bright, flat background. The color palette is reduced almost exclusively to primary colors of red, yellow, and blue, and we still see dark outlines around the forms, a technique he started to use in Brittany. The flower motifs around her suggest patterning on a wallpaper, but also relate to the flower in her hair. They seem to float around the woman, making us wonder if they are real or imaginary.

STOP 7
Gallery 244B: *Bowl*

Speaker: Nichole Bridges
Associate Curator in Charge, Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas
Saint Louis Art Museum

Hello, my name is Nichole Bridges, and I am the associate curator in charge of the arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. At the turn of the 18th to 19th century, European explorers reported observing Marquesans serving food with wooden containers carved with figural imagery. The objects they saw would have differed from the containers on view here. Those older containers were likely much larger in size than these. The carved designs would have been more spare, limited to borders, other defined areas, or a single sculptural element, such as a handle. Further, the wood would have been a dense, dark wood, which Marquesans call *toa* (from the genus *Casuarina*). The Marquesan war club and stilt step on view in this gallery are made of *toa*.

Created during the late 19th to early 20th century, the three containers on view here are portable in size, made of coconut or lightweight and lightly colored wood, and feature incised designs covering their entire surface. Items such as these were largely produced by artisans working in Fatu Hiva, the southernmost of the six inhabited Marquesan Islands. Beyond their physical differences from the wood containers described almost a century before, another important distinction is who the users of these objects were. While these containers were created by Marquesans, objects such as these were largely made for export to Tahiti, where most were purchased by foreigners. Gauguin collected similar objects while living in Tahiti, and the containers' carved surface designs inspired his work.

By the early 1880s a San Francisco–based American shipping firm called Crawford, which owned trading posts in the Marquesas, established a monthly route bringing mail, supplies, and commercial items to San Francisco, the Marquesas, and Tahiti. In addition, the German-owned Société Commerciale de l’Océanie, which owned trading posts throughout the Marquesas, operated three small vessels that sailed regularly between Tahiti’s capital and the Marquesas Islands.

Yet foreign contact and the exchange of Marquesan arts for foreign goods predates these activities by hundreds of years. The first European to reach the Marquesas was the Spanish explorer Alvaro de Mendaña in 1595; however, continuous contact began with the British Captain James Cook’s arrival in 1774. British officers often traded items in exchange for cultural objects made and used by Marquesans. Some scholars have suggested that such objects as the Marquesan war club and stilt step in this gallery may have been produced for foreigners. As early as the late 1810s, the musket had replaced the war club as a preferred weapon and prestige object, and there are few eyewitness accounts documenting the stilt steps in use.

Regardless of their intended audience, the elaborate surface designs and imagery, for which Marquesan carvings are celebrated, are deeply rooted in traditions-based, Marquesan motifs. The elaborate patterning echoes motifs for body tattoos. The oblong, lidded bowl here combines a European-based form with Marquesan-inspired tiki on the lid’s handle. The rich designs and imagery of Marquesan art have inspired Marquesans and foreigners alike for centuries.

STOP 8

Gallery 246: *Reclining Tahitian Women, or The Amusement of the Evil Spirit (Arearea no varua ino)*

Speaker: Simon Kelly
Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art
Saint Louis Art Museum

The painting in front of you is one of Gauguin's most complex and enigmatic works. Although it has often been entitled *Reclining Tahitian Women*, Gauguin's original title is inscribed at the bottom left in Tahitian, "*Arearea no varua ino.*" This translates as "Amusements of the evil spirit" and provides greater insight into the meaning of the picture. The evil spirit to which Gauguin referred is the statue at the back left of the canvas who imperiously looks over the scene. Gauguin often included such spirits in his Tahitian paintings and was fascinated by the Tahitian islanders' belief in the everyday presence of the spirit world on the island. The malevolent spirit here seems to be playing with the emotions of the two women who rest on the beach, one rendered in striking profile, and the other with head in hand in some kind of despair or torment. Both women wear the pareu, the wraparound skirt that is the native dress of Tahiti. A tree in the middle ground compositionally divides the scene. In the background are two dancing figures, while a floating blue mask also suggests the presence of the spirit world.

Perhaps surprisingly, this picture was not actually painted in Tahiti, but rather in Brittany in 1894, following Gauguin's return to France. The red inscription at the center base, in curving lines that echo those in the rest of the painting, indicates that he dedicated the picture to his landlady Madame Gloanec, who owned an inn in the village

of Pont-Aven. At a time when he was lacking in funds, Gauguin apparently gave the painting to her as payment for his stay.

Gauguin's picture is notable for its color and sense of abstraction, particularly in the pink sand of the foreground, offset by curving violet shadows. Bushes in the background are also rendered in flat colors of red, orange, green, and yellow. The pattern making and sense of decorative flatness here help us to understand why Gauguin's painting has often been seen as anticipating 20th-century abstraction. Paintings like this were a considerable influence on later artists, from Pablo Picasso to Henri Matisse to the German Expressionist painter Paula Modersohn-Becker.

STOP 9

Gallery 246: *House Wall Panels (Poupou)*

Speaker: Nichole Bridges
Associate Curator in Charge, Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas
Saint Louis Art Museum

On this pair of relief-carved panels, called *poupou* in Maori, we encounter dramatic figures with luminous eyes and richly patterned bodies. Hone Taahu, the Maori artist who carved the panels around 1870, earned a reputation for the ways he accentuated his figures' dynamic expressions and poses with distinctive stylistic flourishes. Notice on three of the main figures, a hand appears to weave behind and then through the mouth. On the panel to the left, the lower figure's body takes a serpentine form, and each face features great variation in the style of the tongue. Hone Taahu was one of six master carvers and their apprentices, recognized as the Iwirakau school, which produced work from around 1850 to the 1920s on the east coast of Aotearoa's North Island. With a career that spanned over 30 years, Taahu solidified his reputation through not only his sculpture, but also by training the next generation of carvers.

These examples are just 2 of 46 panels that were carved for a meetinghouse that Taahu was commissioned to execute for Karaitiana Takamoana, the wealthy chief of the Ngati Kahungunu tribe and member of the New Zealand House of Representatives for Eastern Maori from 1869 until his death. Although Taahu and his workshop completed at least 60 carved components for the structure, the meetinghouse was never assembled. Following the sudden death of chief Takamoana in 1879, the carvings were exhibited 10 years later in the South Seas International Exhibition, which took place in the city of

Dunedin on the South Island.

In completed meetinghouses, called *wharenui* in Maori, the carved panels alternate with lattice open-worked panels to decorate the interior of the meetinghouse. The *poupou* figures represent ancestors, and an entire meetinghouse may be named after a specific ancestor of the chief as an anchor for tribal history to guide descendants' behavior. The *poupou* are also functional; they support the meetinghouse's rafters. As pillars, the *poupou* reinforce the importance of the lineage and ties to the land. Key concepts of tradition, sacredness, and power are embedded within the architecture of the *wharenui*. Reinforcing the building's connection to a specific ancestor, the structure of the meetinghouse echoes the human figure: the ridgepole is the backbone; the rafters and side posts are the ribs; gables, the arms; and the veranda, the head. A *wharenui* is positioned within a marae, a communal and sacred meeting ground, which serves as a site for hospitality, discussion, teaching and learning, mourning, and celebration. The meetinghouse is the center of the local community and a powerful symbol of identity.

By the 1870s meetinghouses replaced the war canoe as a principal expression of communal identity, pride, and mana, or spiritual power within each tribal community. With the conclusion of the New Zealand wars in 1872, war canoes became less essential. Full-scale war canoes averaged around 60 to 70 feet in length. There is a small-scale model war canoe on view here, between the carved panels. Although not much is known about the journey of this specific example from Aotearoa to the United States, Maori communities often presented model canoes as prestige gifts to visiting foreigners. This example bears stylistic similarities to one in the British Museum, given to the Duke and

Duchess of Cornwall and York, or the future King George V and Queen Mary, during a royal visit in 1901.

The art of wood carving has played an important role in Maori culture. The rich symbolism of the carvings narrates communal histories and reinforce genealogical connections for future generations.

STOP 10

Gallery 247: *The Creation of the Universe*

Speaker: Abigail Yoder
Research Assistant
Saint Louis Art Museum

This woodcut is from the print series *Noa Noa*, a group of 10 prints made in Paris after Gauguin's return from Tahiti in 1893. The *Noa Noa* print series is based somewhat loosely on Gauguin's own semifictional account of his time in Tahiti (also called *Noa Noa*). Most of the imagery in the prints comes directly from paintings, drawings, and sketches he made while still living in Polynesia that explored a broad range of native spiritual beliefs. *The Creation of the Universe* illustrates the Tahitian creation myth, based on an account Gauguin essentially plagiarized from an earlier ethnographer's book on Polynesian traditions. The imagery seen here comes from watercolors he had made in his notebooks from Tahiti and derives from the book's description of the creation myth: "The skies turn, the skies are raised, the sea fills its depths, the universe is created." Gauguin illustrated the realms of sky, sea, and earth within this single image.

On the right, in the sky or spirit realm, the creator god Ta'aroa resides in an oystershell, from which the Tahitians believed the universe was born. The divinity is depicted as the masklike face that peers out toward the right. The upper portion of the image represents the sea, where three figures, depicted very faintly, struggle against the waves. Two more figures have made it to the shore in the left foreground, and they recline as they watch the tide rise. This represents a separate part of the myth, in which the Tahitian sea god was angered and caused a flood that destroyed most of humanity, but he allowed a

fisherman and his family to live. In the central foreground is a rather strange image of a figure walking along the shore with a fish creature beside him. A lotus blossom emerges from the fish's mouth. This imagery is not Polynesian in origin, but rather is based on Egyptian tomb frescoes, which Gauguin knew through photographs. This highlights Gauguin's interest not only in the local culture, but also in comparative world religions.

Printmakers typically made uniform editions of prints in which the impressions were all the same. However, Gauguin's printmaking method was complex and involved printing, reworking, reprinting, and hand-painting the images, which resulted in a great deal of variation from one impression to the next. Early impressions were printed by Gauguin himself, and he experimented with different inks and papers to achieve specific effects. In some examples, he hand-painted the areas of color with watercolor in a variety of tones, which was readily absorbed by the thin Japanese paper he used.

After printing several impressions this way, Gauguin apparently sought more standardized results and enlisted the help of his friend Louis Roy, a printer in Paris. The color woodcut seen in this exhibition comes from this edition of 25 or 30 impressions printed by Roy under Gauguin's direction. Gauguin and Roy incorporated color into these impressions by printing color blocks in yellow and orange, then applying additional colors with stencils. The resulting images capture the vivid, flat coloring seen in Gauguin's paintings, but lacks some of the subtlety of his own hand-colored impressions.

STOP 11

Gallery 247: *Modern Thought and Catholicism*

Speaker: Elizabeth C. Childs
Etta and Mark Steinberg Professor of Modern Art History, and Chair,
Department of Art History and Archaeology, Arts and Sciences,
Washington University in St. Louis

Hello, I'm Liz Childs. I'm the Etta and Mark Steinberg professor of art history at Washington University in St. Louis, and I'm here to talk a bit about this extraordinary object. This is one of the most important manuscripts created by Paul Gauguin, who was both a very serious writer as well as an artist. And what you see is both the manuscript itself, which is 91 handwritten pages, mostly without illustration, and then both the cover and the inside cover of this manuscript. It was encased in a very ordinary notebook, but it was made extraordinary both by the cover drawings and by the content inside.

On the front cover you see the title, *Modern Thought and Catholicism*, and you see at the top, on the left, a small fleur-de-lis design, and on the right, a small tiki. That is key to the content of the manuscript, which places the culture of the Marquesas, and Polynesia more generally, in conversation with the culture and heritage of France. The tiki design on the right is a kind of abbreviation and stylization of the large religious tikis, which are found throughout the Marquesas Islands and that deeply interested Gauguin, as evidence of the indigenous religion that had survived the relatively recent arrival of the French in those islands.

Like many artists of the 1880s, Gauguin was deeply interested in world religions, and he encountered these through the writings of important writers of the time, such as Édouard Shuré, a French author who published the *Grand Initiates* in 1889, as well as the writings of an English spiritualist, Gerald Massey. By drawing on these writings, Gauguin felt empowered to weave together stories of global religion, including, on the one hand, what he saw as the best of the Christian religion and, on the other hand, important matters drawn from ancient Egypt, Polynesian theology, Buddhism, and other world religions. To him this mixture was a more engaging, more powerful way of addressing the life of the spirit, which to him was deeply important and, for him, art was a mediating factor between the thought and the life of the spirit and the material world in which the artist works.

It's also important to note that this manuscript comes toward the end of Gauguin's life, at a time when he had worked for many years on objects that brought together hybrid aspects of European and Polynesian culture and also at a time when his own health was failing. So to engage in these questions at this time was, for him, an important culmination of ongoing thought about the place of the soul, the place of the spirit, and the way that mankind engages these matters throughout the course of a rich lifetime. That is what makes this such an extraordinary object, and it's what adds so much to our understanding of Gauguin.