

DAVID & CONSTANCE YATES

EUROPEAN SCULPTURE, OIL SKETCHES AND DRAWINGS

PAUL GAUGUIN
(Paris 1848 - 1903 Hiva Oa)

Mask of a Savage

Patinated plaster
9 7/8 x 7 3/4 inches (250 x 195 mm)
Executed between 1893-1897

PROVENANCE:

Vollard Collection, Paris, France
John Rewald 1957-58
The Phillips Family Collection
Dr. Joachim Theye, Zurich
Private Collection, Switzerland

EXHIBITED:

Washington, D.C., National Gallery of Art, *The Art of Paul Gauguin*,
1 May – 31 July 1988; Chicago, Art Institute of Chicago, 17 September – 11 December 1988;
Paris, Grand Palais, 10 January – 10 April 1989, illustrated catalogue no. 210

Dallas, Dallas Museum of Art, on extended loan, 1991 – 1994

Baltimore, The Walters Art Gallery, *Gauguin and the School of Pont-Aven*,
20 November 1994 – 15 January 1995, illustrated in addendum

Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, 1995

Williamston, Massachusetts, Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute,
on extended loan 1997 – 1998

Martigny, Switzerland, Fondation Pierre Gianadda, *Gauguin*,
10 June – 22 November 1998, illustrated, catalogue no. 117

London, England, Ordovas, *Tales of Paradise Gauguin*,
4 February – 18 April 2014, illustrated p. 60

Riehen/Basel, Switzerland, Fondation Beyeler, *Paul Gauguin*,
8 February – 28 June 2015

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As were many symbolist artists, Gauguin was fascinated by the idea of a disembodied face or mask.¹ In 1893, at the very end of his first trip to Tahiti, Gauguin developed the essential characteristics of our mask in *Hina Te Fatou* (Fig. 1), now in the Museum of Modern Art, New York. It is interesting to note that Degas purchased this painting from the Paris exhibition of Gauguin's work held at the Galerie Durand-Ruel in the autumn of 1893. It remained in Degas's collection until his death in 1917.

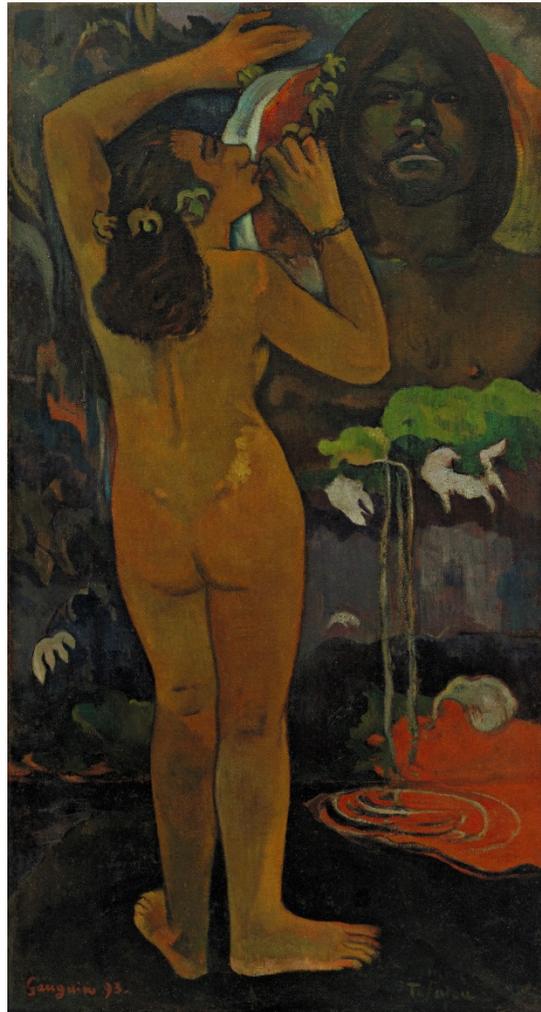


Fig. 1 – Paul Gauguin, *Hina Te Fatou (The Moon and the Earth)*, 1893, oil on burlap, 45 x 24 ½ in. (114.3 x 62.2 cm), The Museum of Modern Art, New York

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During the winter of 1894-95, while working in the Paris *atelier* of the ceramicist Ernest Chaplet, Gauguin produced an enameled stoneware mask based on the face of *Te Fatou* (Fig. 2). Most scholars consider this mask to be a self-portrait.² This strangely polychromed *Mask of a Savage* is in the collection of the Musée Léon Dierx, St. Denis de la Réunion, a gift of the Vollard family. Although published in the comprehensive Gauguin retrospective in 1988-89, it has never been exhibited in either Europe or the United States.



Fig. 2 – Paul Gauguin, *Mask of a Savage* (the present plaster mask is shown between the examples in the Musée Léon Dierx and the Musée d’Orsay, as illustrated in the comprehensive Gauguin retrospective catalogue, 1988-89)

In December of 1896, after his return to Tahiti, Gauguin wrote to his friend Daniel de Monfried and asked after his “*tête de sauvage émaillée*”,³ indicating it was not in his possession at that time. Shortly thereafter, in April 1897, Gauguin wrote to Vollard and proposed that his mask be cast in bronze.

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“And the mask, Head of a Savage, what a beautiful bronze it would make and not expensive. I am convinced that you could easily find thirty collectors who would pay 10 francs apiece, which would mean 3,000 francs, or 2,000 after deduction of expenses. Why don’t you consider this?”⁴

As Richard Brettell has elsewhere noted, *“This is the only time that Gauguin explicitly sanctioned a bronze edition of one of his works”*.⁵ In fact, Vollard did cast the mask sometime after 1900, but – to date – only two bronze versions are known to exist. One is in the Musée d’Orsay, Paris and the other is in an American private collection.

Early in 1901, Gauguin revisited his idea of the mask self-portrait/savage in a pair of wooden reliefs that he created for a new client, Gustave Fayet. These reliefs entitled *La guerre et la paix* were inherited by Léon Fayet, Gustave's uncle in 1925. By 1961, they were purchased by Mr. & Mrs. Laurence K. Marshall who, in 1963, gifted them to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (Fig. 3). Brettell also posited that Gauguin must have had an example of his mask with him while working on these two wooden panels, as the similarities are striking. He further surmised that, since the exact date of Vollard's two bronze masks is not known, Gauguin must have utilized our unique plaster as an inspiration for one of his last private commissions.⁶



Fig. 3 – Paul Gauguin, *La guerre et la paix: La guerre (War and Peace: War)*, 1901, painted tamanu wood, 17 ½ x 39 3/16 in. (44.45 x 99.53 cm), Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

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This mask was entirely unknown until John Rewald purchased it for the Phillips Family Collection in 1957 from the descendants of Ambrose Vollard. In fact, in the first comprehensive catalogue raisonnée of the sculpture and ceramics of Paul Gauguin by Christopher Gray, our mask is published in the negative form. Since the object was a new discovery, Gray confused it for one of the existing examples in bronze. It was not until the Gauguin retrospective exhibition in 1988-89 that our plaster was exhibited and properly described alongside the related stoneware and bronze masks (Fig. 2).

FOOTNOTES

1. Brettell, Richard, *The Art of Paul Gauguin*, exh. cat. National Gallery of Art, Washington, The Art Institute of Chicago, 1988-89, p. 368.

2. Brettel, Richard, Personal communication, 1999.

3. Rewald, John, "The genius and the dealer", *Art News*, May 1959, p. 62.

4. Brettel, Richard, 1999, Op cit.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.

LITERATURE:

Bodelsen, Merete, *The Burlington Magazine*, April 1967, pp. 217 and 221

Brettell, Richard, Cachin, Françoise, Freches-Thory, Claire, and Stuckey, Charles F. with assistance from Zegers, Peter, *The Art of Paul Gauguin*, exh. cat. National Gallery of Art, Washington, The Art Institute of Chicago, 1988-89, p. 368

Gray, Christopher, *Sculpture and Ceramics of Paul Gauguin*, Baltimore, Johns Hopkins Press, 1963, no. 110

Johnson, David, *Gauguin and the School of Pont-Aven* (addendum), The Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore 1994, illustrated

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Johnson, Una, *Ambroise Vollard, Editeur*, Museum of Modern Art, 1977, New York, p. 169, No. 217

Pickvance, Ronald, *Gauguin*, Fondation Pierre Gianadda, Martigny, Switzerland, 1998, illustrated exh. cat. no. 117

Rewald, John, "*The genius and the dealer*", *Art News*, May 1959, pp. 30-31, 62-65, illustrated p. 31

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