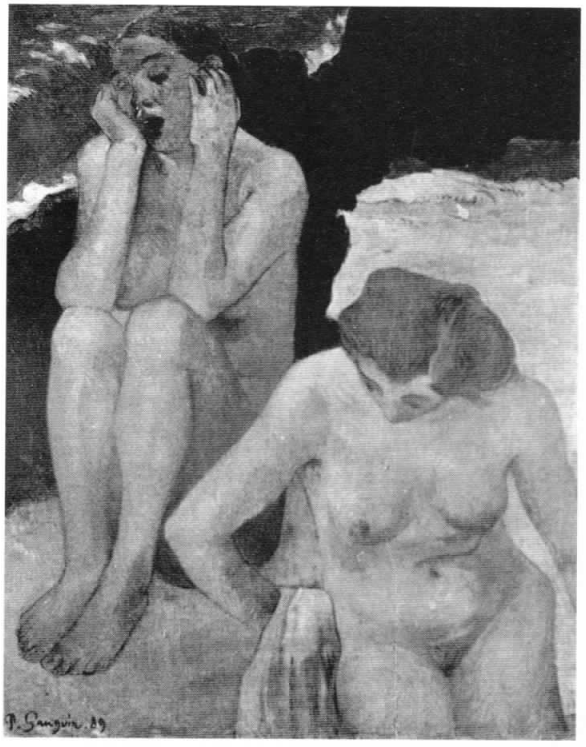

Plate 21 Paul Gauguin, *La Vie et la Mort, femmes se baignant* (*Life and Death, Women Bathing*), 1889, oil on canvas, 92 x 73 cm. Cairo, Mohammed Mahmoud Khalil Bey Museum. Photo: Chant Avedissian, by permission of the National Centre for the Fine Arts, Cairo.

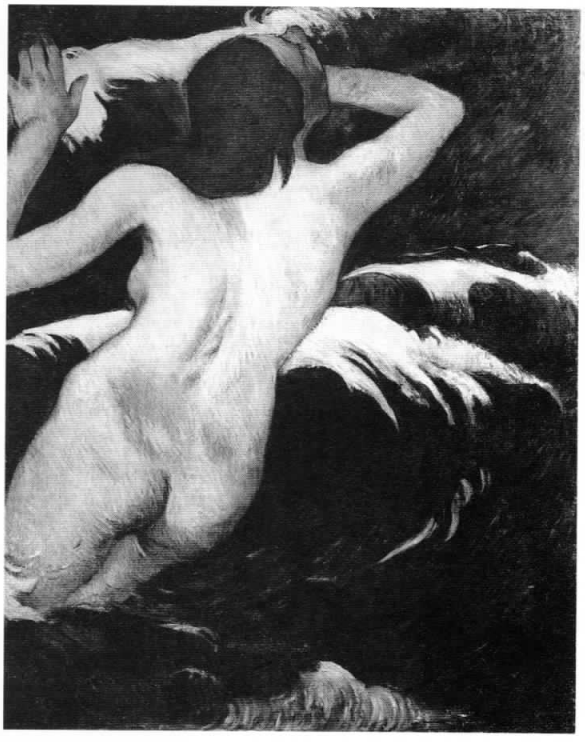

Plate 22 Paul Gauguin, *Dans les Vagues* (*Ondine*) (*Woman in the Waves, Ondine*), 1889, oil on canvas, 92 x 67 cm. The Cleveland Museum of Art Gift of Mr and Mrs Powell Jones 78.63.

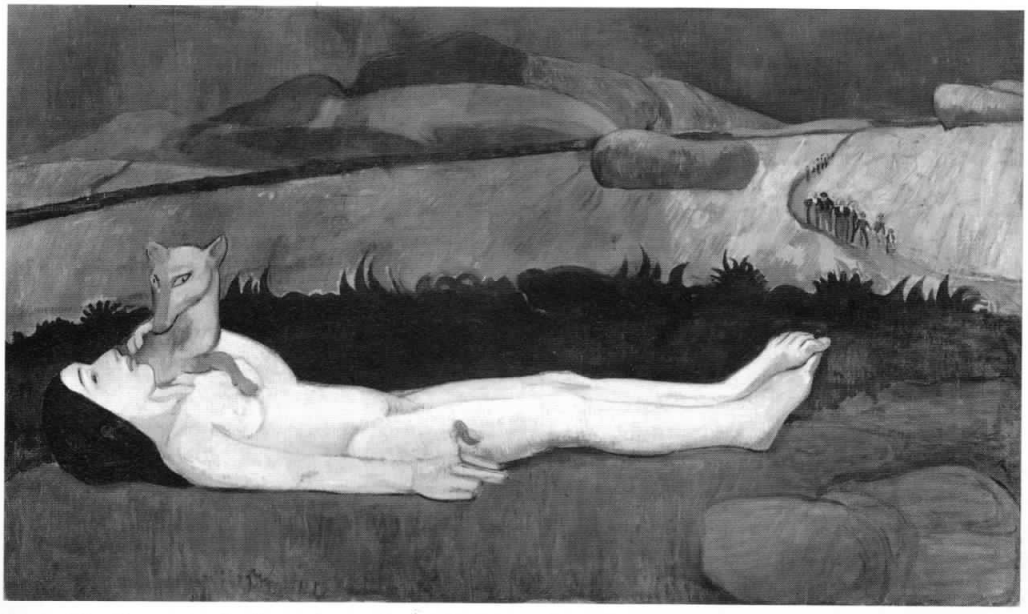

Plate 23 Gauguin, *La Perte de pucelage* (*The Loss of Virginity*), 1891, oil on canvas, 90 x 141 cm. © 1993, Chrysler Museum, Norfolk, Virginia. Photograph by Scott Wolff.

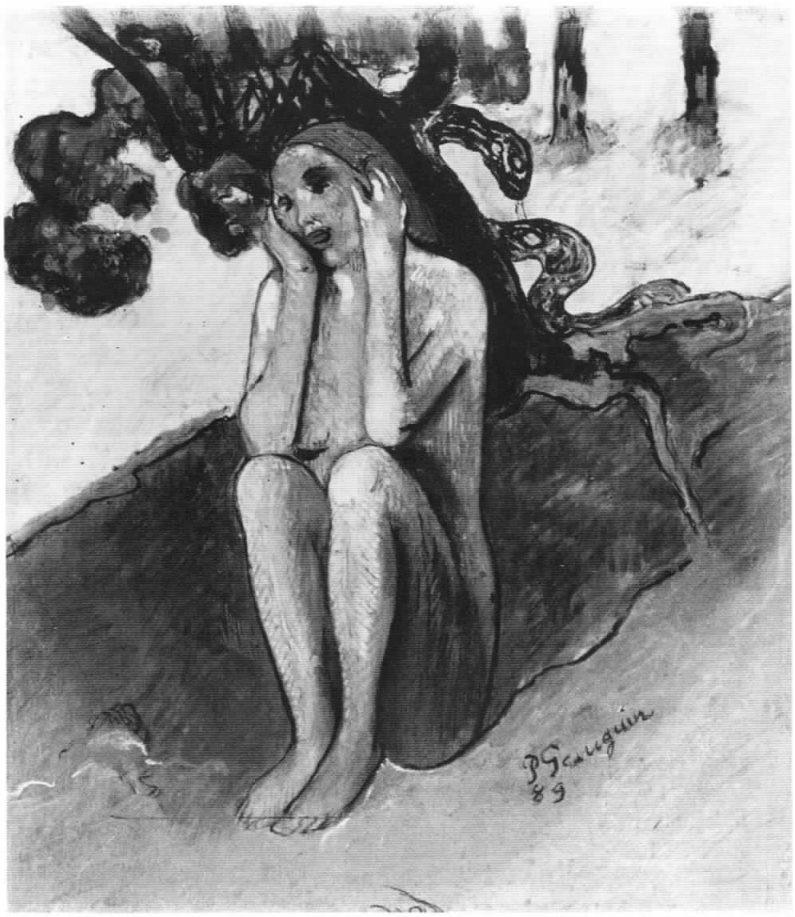

Plate 24 Paul Gauguin, *Ève – Pas écouter li li menteur* (*Eve – Don't Listen to the Liar*), 1889, pastel and watercolour on paper, 34 x 31 cm. Marion Koogler McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, Texas. The Bequest of Marion Koogler McNay 19590.45.

He wrote of woman *'qui n'atteint sa pleine individualité qu'au moment où elle se donne: c'est l'Ondine qui passe murmurante à travers les vagues de son élément'* ('who attains her full individuality only at the moment that she submits herself: it is Ondine, who moves whispering through the waves of her elemental force'; quoted in H. Dorra, 'Le "Texte Wagner" de Gauguin', pp.281–8). According to this Wagnerian representation of woman, then, the ultimate expression of the feminine is the abandonment of the self to the elements and to man; in it woman is supposed to reach fulfilment only in her most 'natural' and most submissive state.

The influence of such attitudes is easily read out of many of Gauguin's Breton and later Tahitian work. As in *The Loss of Virginity*, completed after his return from Le Pouldu, the Breton village in which he worked in 1890, such associations are often veiled in complex symbolism. Flattened areas of bright colour and the simplified, distorted forms of the figure and the landscape conform to the idea of simpler forms supposedly expressing purer, unmediated thoughts. However the meaning of the symbolic references, such as the fox (a traditional symbol of cunning and perversity, and possibly an ironic self-portrait), and the drooping cut flower (a symbol of lost virginity), could only be sorted out with access to a more sophisticated literary culture. Gauguin was perhaps recognizing the appeal of his work to a Symbolist audience, and reshaping his primitivism to broaden its potential market.

Other features of this work would have modified its 'primitive' meanings for a contemporary audience. The composition is related to that of Manet's *Olympia* (another reclining female nude with an animal), which Gauguin had copied in the Luxembourg

museum earlier in 1891 (Plate 25), although the pose and the theme of *The Loss of Virginity* convey a more passive image of the female nude. The sexual connotations and the emphasis on a woman's 'loss' would have been reinforced to an audience familiar with Bernard's Symbolist work on a similar theme, *Madeleine au Bois d'Amour* (Plate 26), in which Madeleine lies in a similar pose with her feet touching. But while Madeleine lies fully clothed, apparently chaste, with a wistful expression on her face, Gauguin's subject (probably based on the model Juliette Huet), naked, 'deflowered', with a blank, almost dead expression on her face, embraces a symbol of the active masculine, the cunning fox.

In the Breton work of Gauguin and some of his contemporaries the discourses of primitivism can be seen to be functioning on several interrelated levels. Firstly we have seen that Gauguin's art and writing participates in reconstructing Breton culture as essentially backward, savage and superstitious, as the 'other' of sophisticated urban Paris (a culture of *'Bretonisme'*). Secondly, there is a further level of meaning in Gauguin's adoption of certain technical devices. It involves the idea of the superior expressive potential of distorted and simplified forms, and the associated idea that modern, vanguard artists were distinguished by their creative ability to produce such non-naturalistic distortions, to somehow recapture some 'primitive' essence or mode of expression. As we have seen, such assumptions ignore some of the contradictions inherent in the production of a 'modern' artistic language, addressed to a sophisticated avant-garde audience. Finally, the construction of a 'primitive' art often (though not always) involved a *gendered* concept of nature and the natural. In Gauguin's work, the female peasant and the female nude were often employed as literal and metaphorical equivalents for nature, the natural cycle or even the 'essence of a race'.

Plate 25 Paul Gauguin, copy of Manet's *Olympia*, February 1891, oil on canvas, 89 x 130 cm. Private collection. Photograph by courtesy of Prudence Cuming Associates Ltd.

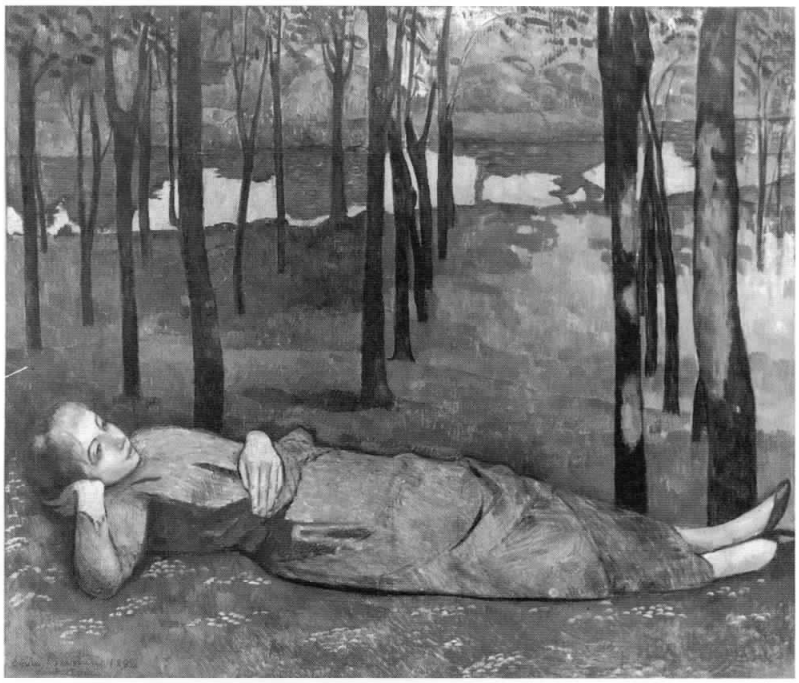

Plate 26 Émile Bernard, *Madeleine au bois d'amour* (*Madeleine in the Forest of Love*), 1888, oil on canvas, 137 x 164 cm. Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Photo: Réunion des Musées Nationaux Documentation Photographique.

'Pillaging the savages of Oceania': Gauguin and Tahiti.

Gauguin's literal and metaphorical use of the female to represent the primitive also became an important feature of his Polynesian and Tahitian works from the 1890s. But as with his Breton primitivism, his attempts to reproduce or parallel the 'savage' life he identified in Tahitian life and culture reveal contradictions, derive from heterogeneous sources and connect with potent Western myths about life within what was then a remote colonial outpost.

By 1890, Gauguin had already become preoccupied with the idea of emigrating, with removing himself to the 'uncivilized' margins of society. He had considered two other French colonies, Indo-China and Madagascar. But after an unsuccessful application for a post in the French colonial service in Indo-China, in 1891 he finally decided to leave for the remote Polynesian island of Tahiti, returning to France only once, in 1893, for two years. On his final visit he settled on the Marquesas islands, where he died in 1903.

Tahiti: historical and colonial context

The island of Tahiti, explored by the French in 1767, had been turned from a protectorate into a colony in 1881. The wealth of literature and travel-writing following this extension of French political interests revealed a complex synthesis of colonialism and romantic primitivist ideas, both of which informed Gauguin's own 'flight' from civilization. The plan to emigrate had originally included Émile Bernard, who withdrew at the last minute. Both artists had absorbed the prevailing mythology of Tahiti as the ultimate primitive paradise. It was often represented in contemporary literature as the home of an exotic sensual culture. Pierre Loti's sentimental novel *Le Mariage de Loti* (*The Marriage of Loti*, 1880), encouraged this view, and the official travel literature represented the island as an unspoilt Eden, rich in colonists' privileges, including cheap and abundant food, and (as the imagery of the travel guides suggested) sensual native women.

Since the eighteenth-century explorations of Polynesia by Cook and the French explorer Bougainville, a variety of writings on the 'primitive' and the 'noble savage' had focused on the island of Tahiti. Bougainville had overlooked the less pleasant aspects of the local culture, such as cannibalism and infanticide, when he represented the inhabitants as a handsome, peaceful race, pursuing sensual pleasures: 'Venus is the goddess one feels ever present. The softness of the climate, the beauty of the landscape, the fertility of the soil ... everything inspires voluptuousness. Thus did I name the place La Nouvelle Cythère' (*Le Voyage autour du monde*, quoted in Varnedoe, 'Gauguin', p.188).

Bougainville's description of the island as 'La Nouvelle Cythère' fused the idea of the primitive with the myth of the antique, identifying Tahiti as the harmonious and peaceful island of Greek mythology, where Venus had emerged from the sea. A Classical myth was thus appropriated to somehow validate the newly discovered 'primitive', to remove its barbaric element, and to establish it as an (implicitly) critical alternative to Western civilized society. During a period of rapid French colonial expansion, such myths were often reworked to justify various political and imperialist interests. Relying on such images, much of the official rhetoric represented colonization as a means of avoiding cultural degeneration. Colonizing was frequently described as a mutually invigorating process through which European culture could be 'replenished', and 'primitive' culture gain through the introduction of trade, Western religion and technology. Many of Gauguin's statements about the appeal of Tahiti echo this notion of 'replenishment', of being nurtured on a fertile soil. In a letter written to J.F. Willumsen in 1890, he wrote:

> As for me, my mind is made up. I am going soon to Tahiti, a small island in Oceania, where the material necessities of life can be had without money ... There at least, under an eternally summer sky, on a marvellously fertile soil, the Tahitian has only to lift his hands to gather his food; and in addition he never works. When in Europe men and women survive only after increasing labour during which they struggle in convulsions of cold and hunger, a prey to misery, the Tahitians, on the contrary, happy inhabitants of the unknown paradise of Oceania, know only sweetness of life ...
> (quoted in Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art*, p.79)

Gauguin also uses the notion of 'fertile soil' as a metaphor for his desired artistic context, one that would replenish his creative instincts. In an interview published by the *Écho de Paris* on 23 February 1891, he wrote: 'I only desire to create a simple art. In order to do this it is necessary for me to steep myself in virgin nature, to see no one but savages.'

The 'going away' to Tahiti was steeped in the contemporary culture of colonialism. Like the retreat to Brittany, it also participated in the myth of a simple alien culture which could provide an ideal context for the avant-garde artist. The Impressionist Pissarro had for some time been sceptical of Gauguin's artistic ambitions, and characterized his taste for 'going away' in cynical terms when he wrote to his son Lucien in 1893: '[Gauguin] is always poaching on somebody's land, nowadays, he's pillaging the savages of Oceania' (J. Rewald, *Camille Pissarro – Lettres à son fils Lucien*, p.217).

We should note here that Pissarro had always held an ungenerous view of Gauguin as an unscrupulous plagiarist 'pillaging' from other artists and cultures and presenting them as his own innovations. Gauguin was unquestionably an efficient and egotistical self-promoter, who in his writings consistently emphasized his own missionary role and creative potential, and his style was, in part, made up of derivative elements. But he does seem to have sustained the deeply held belief that by placing himself, as an artist, within a 'savage' environment, he could somehow recover from himself a more basic, primeval mode of artistic expression. Clearly there are several possible explanatory models for the motivation behind Gauguin's 'going away', and they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. However, I want to focus on the realization of 'primitivism' in Gauguin's paintings, and what that reconstructed primitivism would have signified to a contemporary audience familiar with the various artistic languages competing for the label 'modern'.

The Tahitian canvases do not provide straightforward answers to these questions. *Ia Orana Maria* (Plate 4) was one of the earliest Tahitian canvases in which the themes of religion (both Christian and pagan) and the primitive intersect in a curious and confusing way. This is neither exclusively a tropical paradise, nor simply a scene of (Christian) religious piety. The Madonna and Child theme, embellished with haloes and a Western angel, has been transposed onto a Tahitian setting, and the religious elements function as part of the decorative design and as symbols of some kind of primitive Christianity. The composition is dominated by rich colours and archaic poses: the two central women adopt ritualistic gestures derived from those in Javanese reliefs on the Buddhist temple of Borobudur. Gauguin owned a photograph of these.

This odd fusion of pagan and Western religious imagery may have been Gauguin's response to the reality of Tahitian life as he found it. By the time Gauguin arrived on the island, the local community had virtually abandoned its own pagan religion with its symbolic imagery, adopting Western Christian rituals, attending missionary schools and often wearing Western clothes.[9] At the time he painted *Ia Orana Maria*, Gauguin was living in Mataiae, in the south of the island, where there was a well-attended Catholic church. But there are also many aspects of this image which could be seen to reinforce the romantic notion of a lush tropical paradise: the richly coloured tropical vegetation, the bowls laden with fruit and the sensual, partly-naked women. In fact, the image of woman in this painting functions as a kind of symbolic focus for both its primitivism and its religious meanings. She is both the Madonna and a 'natural' mother. Her semi-nakedness and simplified features emphasize her closeness to nature, and the fruit – a symbol of her fecundity and nature's – suggests an organic relationship between the two. The imagery of sensual, fertile women echoes the concept of 'replenishment' that was so central to many contemporary literary and colonial texts on the subject of Tahiti.

Symbolism and Gauguin as 'decorator'

This reading of some of the possible ideological associations of *Ia Orana Maria* is, of course, a modern one, partly informed by feminist art history. Among those contemporary critics who supported Gauguin's work we find some rather different emphases and explanatory models. Gauguin's Symbolist friends (among them Aurier) and many fellow artists associated with the avant-garde identified in his paintings an innovatory artistic language which was the antithesis of Impressionism. Although this support did not ensure financial success (an exhibition of Tahitian works in 1893 sold only eight pictures), Gauguin's work appealed to many critics seeking a new language for the 'modern'. And it was precisely the supposedly 'primitive' aspect of Gauguin's work that seems to have qualified it for this *modern* status.

The art critic Maurice Denis had published an article in 1890 in which he identified Gauguin as a leading figure of what he labelled 'neo-traditionism', in contrast with 'Neo-Impressionism'. Denis's arguments were rooted in Symbolist theory and were close to Aurier's ideas about the need for a non-naturalistic art close to 'the primitives'. Denis's arguments were reformulated in an important article, 'From Gauguin and Van Gogh to Classicism', published in the journal *L'Occident* in 1909. He argued that 'progressive' artists had replaced the Impressionist idea of 'nature seen through a temperament', with a 'theory of equivalence'. In this theory, artists used distortions, signs or symbols to produce pictorial *equivalents* for their *emotions* or *feelings*. Denis was thus formulating a theory of expression which privileged the artist's *feelings* as the source of meaning of the work. Such a theory provided a rationale for some of Gauguin's own claims, particularly in its implication that these *equivalents* were not merely to be *found* in the local culture and its artefacts, but would emerge independently through the artist's experiences and his refined

[9] This has now been well documented by Daniellson among others (B. Daniellson, *Gauguin in the South Seas*).

sensibility in an uncivilized context. Denis asserted that the 'equivalents' could be produced without the artist executing a 'copy' of what he saw:

> Art is no longer just a visual sensation that we set down, a photograph, however refined it may be, of nature. No, art is a creation of our imagination of which nature is only the occasion. Instead of 'working outwards from the eye, we explored the mysterious centre of thought', as Gauguin used to say. In this way the imagination becomes once more the queen of the faculties, in accordance with Baudelaire's wish. And thus we set free our sensibility; art, instead of being a *copy*, became the subjective deformation of Nature.
> ('From Gauguin and Van Gogh to Classicism', p.53)

In this essay, Denis distinguishes between 'subjective' and 'objective' deformations, claiming that the latter somehow parallels a 'Classical' method. According to him, 'objective deformations' involve the application of intuitively apprehended rules about what gives 'pleasure to the eye', a set of aesthetic controls. This notion is central to his characterization of Gauguin's work. Denis sometimes uses the term 'decorative deformations' to describe Gauguin's harmonious mode of arranging his compositions, which he separates from the more exaggerated, seemingly less controlled 'subjective' deformations of Van Gogh. And the idea of Gauguin the 'decorator' is crucial in his characterization of the artist's primitivism:

> [With Gauguin] we are dealing with a decorator: the man for whom Aurier in the past so imperiously demanded walls! The man who decorated the living room of the inn at Le Pouldu, as well as his gourd and his clogs ! The man who, in Tahiti, in spite of worries, illness and poverty, cared about nothing so much as the decoration of his hut. Italian critics call him the *'Frescante'* [Fresco painter]. He liked the matt appearance of fresco, which is why he prepared his canvases with thick layers of white distemper. Yet he knew nothing about the Quattrocentists; and we sense that like them he made use of the flat application of colour and the precise contour. His art has more in common with tapestry and stained glass than with oil painting ....
>
> We are indebted to the barbarians, to the primitives of 1890, for bringing certain essential truths back into focus. Not to *reproduce* nature and life by approximations or by improvised *trompe-l'oeils*, but on the contrary to reproduce our emotions and our dreams by *representing* them with harmonious forms and colours – that, I continue to believe, was a new way of posing the problem of art.
> ('From Gauguin and Van Gogh to Classicism', p.54)

Denis follows Aurier, then, by representing Gauguin as the archetypal modern 'primitive'. The man who decorated his own clogs (Plate 27) is also the man capable of evoking through his art 'certain essential truths'. The term 'Frescante' ties Gauguin's work to a muralist tradition which Aurier had already identified with a positive concept of the 'decorative'. Denis uses the terms 'barbarians' (*barbares*) and 'primitives' to represent

Plate 27 Paul Gauguin, pair of wooden shoes, 1889, 33 cm long. National Gallery of Art, Washington, Chester Dale Collection, 1963.10.239 a + b.

Gauguin and the Symbolist painters. In the process he makes an important association between the idea of the 'decorator' and the modern 'barbarian', an association which (as I shall argue) is later reworked and modified in criticism of Matisse and the Fauves. Notions of the 'decorative' and the 'barbarian' were appropriated by critics and painters with different interests, and were used to signify both a positive idea of the 'modern', and a more pejorative one of degeneration into superficiality.

Decoration and innovation

In formulating his view of Gauguin's work, Denis had another axe to grind. At the time of writing 'From Gauguin and Van Gogh to Classicism', he was a supporter of the extremist right-wing group, l'Action française. Underlying the article is his view that Gauguin's innovatory technique – his 'decorative deformations' – were evidence of some kind of revived Classicism, of the rediscovery of an underlying order and harmony in art, albeit one mediated or filtered through 'individual feelings'. This argument was extended by Denis to suggest that this form of modern art could be seen to parallel a contemporary political return to order, a revival of French traditionalism, with which l'Action française was associated.

There were other contemporary critics who agreed on the importance of the 'decorative' as a feature of Gauguin's modernism, but attempted to explain this aspect of his work differently. In 1904, the writer and critic Victor Segalen wrote the first in a series of 'Textes sur Gauguin et l'Océanie', in which he described aspects of Gauguin's Tahitian works and life in terms of his (Segalen's) concept of the 'exotic'. The late nineteenth-century culture of colonialism had encouraged a European notion of the exotic as a remote, sensual quality found in oriental and non-occidental art and life. In the writings of contemporary French authors such as Pierre Loti and Claude Farrère, 'l'exotisme' had connotations of a rich sensual culture to be found in 'uncivilized' non-Western nations.[10] Thus the dominant concept of the 'exotic', like that of the 'oriental' (with which it was closely associated) had more to do with Western ideas of an alien culture at odds with the civilized West than it did with the Orient itself. From 1908 onwards, Segalen wrote a series of essays (later published as *Essai sur l'exotisme*) in which he sought to rid the concept of its 'colonial sunhelmet' (*casquĕ de colonial*) and its associations with the 'tours of Cook's travel agency' (*Essai sur l'exotisme*, p.36). These insights, however, did not prevent him from contributing to some of the mythologies which surrounded the life and work of Gauguin in Tahiti, and for Segalen 'Gauguin's savage genius' was still a point of reference (p.123).

The meaning of Gauguin's Tahitian primitivism then, and its associations with notions of the decorative and the exotic, were not fixed for his contemporaries. Many of the Tahitian canvases from the 1890s, like *Ia Orana Maria*, were confusing images. Works such as *The Spirit of the Dead Watching*, or *Faa Iheihe* also combined complex religious imagery and symbols with decorative motifs and ritualistic gestures from a wide range of sources (Plates 28, 29, 30). But it was not just the 'primitive' meanings of these works that were contested; their status as *innovatory* was also under scrutiny. Although Gauguin had the support of many Symbolist critics, in 1891 Pissarro gave a predictably cynical explanation of the appeal of his work:

> It is a sign of the times ... The bourgeoisie, frightened, astonished by the immense clamour of the disinherited masses, by the insistent demands of the people, feels that it is necessary to restore to the people their superstitious beliefs. Hence the bustling of religious Symbolists, religious socialists, idealist art, occultism, Buddhism etc. etc. Gauguin has sensed the tendency.
>
> (B. Thompson, *The Post-Impressionists*, p.176)

[10] Pierre Loti was a naval officer whose novels included *Désenchantées*, *Derniers jours de Pékin* and *Le Mariage de Loti*. Claude Farrère was known for famous colonial novels such as *Les Civilisés* and *Fumée d'opium*.

Plate 28 Paul Gauguin, *Manao tupapau* (*Spirit of the Dead Watching*), 1894, lithograph, 31 x 24 cm. British Museum, Department of Prints and Drawings.

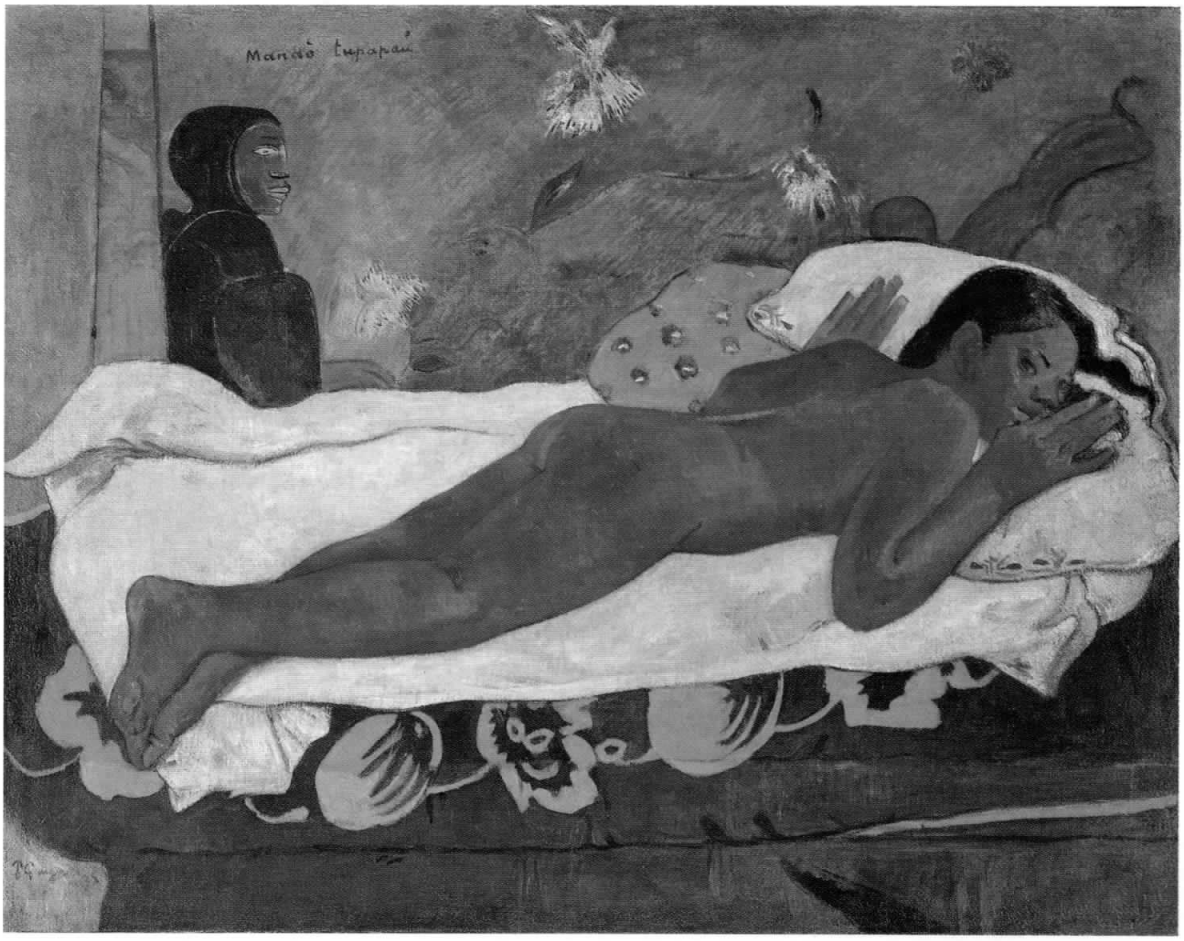

Plate 29 Paul Gauguin, *Manao tupapau* (*Spirit of the Dead Watching*), 1892, oil on burlap mounted on canvas, 72 x 92 cm. Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, New York. A. Conger Goodyear, 1965.

Plate 30 Paul Gauguin, *Faa Iheihe*, 1898, oil on canvas, 54 x 170 cm. Tate Gallery, London.

Pissarro is suggesting that Gauguin has jumped on a fashionable bandwagon, and is producing not original works but paintings he knew would appeal to a bourgeoisie who were rediscovering various religious and spiritual cults. Pissarro had a point, and these new interests were clearly fed by the discourses of colonialism. On one level, the confusing and *seemingly* unreadable aspects of works such as *Spirit of the Dead Watching* could be seen to reinforce a Western view of the alien superstitions and religious rituals of a 'primitive' culture.

But as paintings they are complex texts which do rather more than merely 'pillage' and misappropriate a local culture. According to Gauguin's account in his (somewhat unreliable) manuscript *Noa Noa*, this work was inspired by an incident with his young Tahitian girlfriend Tehura, when he had returned late one night to their hut to find the light had run out and that Tehura was lying naked in a state of superstitious terror. If *Spirit of the Dead Watching* was *based* on this incident, the work also echoes sources which were closer to home for its Parisian audience. The theme of a reclining adolescent girl is reminiscent of his Breton work *The Loss of Virginity*, and like that work it suggests a debt to Manet's *Olympia*. And the richly coloured, decorative design of the bed and the foreground figure are reminiscent of the rhythmic compositions of Symbolist painters such as Bernard or even Puvis de Chavannes.

While on the one hand this work suggests a frightened 'primitive' in a state of fearful superstition in front of the forces of nature, it would also have been seen in relation to a Western anti-Academic tradition which was Manet's legacy, and to a Symbolist influenced cult of decorative – even arcadian – imagery, more often than not structured around the theme of the female nude.

Primitivism and Kulturkritik: *Worpswede in the 1890s*

In Germany around the turn of the century the cult of the 'going away', of leaving urban centres and their art institutions in favour of rural artists' communities, was an important feature of both avant-garde art and of some more traditional forms of artistic life. Such activities were nurtured on various myths of the 'primitive' and associated nature cults, in particular a cult of the local peasant 'Volk', a term widely adopted by contemporary critics to signify an indigenous German peasant community. In his book on German artists' communities, Gerhard Wietek lists over eighteen organized groupings of artists who worked in peasant villages or remote rural contexts around the turn of the century. The better-known communities were Worpswede near Bremen and Neu-Dachau, near