



Primitivism and the other. History of art and cultural geography

Jean-François Staszak

University of Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, Paris, France

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Abstract

The article advocates an articulation of cultural geography and art history, and in this perspective focuses on the analysis of the primitivist movement and particularly on Gauguin's work and personal itinerary. Primitivism introduced artefacts of 'primitive' people into the history of Western art and signalled a change in the relationship between the West and the 'Other' and 'Elsewhere'. This reversal of values has a major geographical dimension. Primitivism manifests the contradiction-rife colonial ideology, but can also challenge colonization. Tourism, which is, in the case of Tahiti, directly linked to Gauguin and to his myth, inherited a lot from primitivism, in terms of hopes and ambiguities. Conversely, primitivism casts light on geographical features of these places, instituted as 'Elsewheres' by the West, and visited, even transformed by painters, colonizers and tourists.

Introduction

The use of telepathy not being widespread, cultural geographers are reduced, through lack of direct access to mental representations, to the analysis of objectified representations: texts, drawings, maps, photographs, gestures, words, etc., which one can only hope will adequately reflect mental representations of the group or individual studied, and inform us about the world in which the subjects live. However, it is rare that subjects spontaneously produce such representations to give accounts of the world in which they live. Researchers are often obliged to induce them, introducing notable biases. Furthermore, these representations conform to common codes, which ensure their transmissible character: not all individuals master them sufficiently to share their vision of the world; it is not certain that the codes are able to account for the more idiosyncratic components of inner worlds.

To avoid pitfalls, it would be necessary to use unsolicited representations by subjects talented enough to express them, master the codes or even to invent languages suitable to mirror their specific vision.

Works of art answer these criteria. Unlike history, social sciences, and particularly geography, have nevertheless used this type of source sparingly, in spite of several calls to do so.¹ In the pictorial arts, it is landscape painting more than any other which has attracted the attention of geographers, for obvious reasons, and numerous works have shown the interest of the conclusions drawn from their analysis.² If artistic sources, and particularly pictorial ones³, have not been systematically exploited by geographers, it is no doubt due to their coyness with regard to the field of art history, but probably also to more fundamental reasons.

The exceptional status of works of art, and particularly those produced by an *avant garde* of artists breaking with the

representations of their times, limits the conclusions that social sciences, particularly geographers, can draw from them: a work of art would only shed light on its author's universe. However the capacity of certain artists to be ahead of their times, the diffusion and the reception of the work of those who are recognized and appreciated as being great masters can make their artistic production a matrix of social representations. It is well known that representations of Provence and therefore its touristic success, owe to Cézanne and Van Gogh. Also, artists do not work in isolation, and their work is part of wider trends that manifest a research for a shared expression.

Need one add that works of art, in the same way but more so than all representations, realistic as they may aim to be, do not inform us about the world as it is but as it is represented? The many paintings of paradise do not inform us about the landscapes of the place but on the expectations of a society and on its view of Eden. Thus Gauguin did not paint Tahiti, but his Tahitian dream.

This article aims to examine, in this perspective, a branch of Western art, primitivism, which developed essentially between the years 1890 and 1940. Gauguin, Picasso, Matisse and the *fauves*, the surrealists, the German expressionists, Brancusi, Modigliani, Klee, Léger, Giacometti, the American abstract expressionists all have pride of place, among others, within primitivism.

A diverse and changing movement, primitivism was characterised by a rejection of canonic Western art, perceived as inauthentic, and by its quest for regenerative inspiration in alternative expressions, perceived as being truer because simpler and freer. Artists adopting these new references sought to free themselves from the conventions and ambitions of Western art, in particular those of the natur-

alists, the impressionists and the neo-impressionists, in order to grasp a deeper truth beyond deceiving appearances.

The alternative models these artists borrow from are those instituted by the West as archetypes of Otherness: the child, the insane, the dreamer, the woman, and the animal. But it's the Savage, the Primitive who constitutes the main alternative and source of inspiration. His Otherness is inscribed in time (he belongs to the dawn of Humanity), but also in space (he is exotic).

The invention of primitivism at the beginning of the 20th century arises from a new relationship with the Other, at least in the field of history of art. As this Other is situated in an Elsewhere, primitivism raises spatial issues. It resonates with political geography, in particular that of colonialism and of decolonization, but also with that of tourism. It allows for head-on tackling of the question of relationship of the West and the Other, which is central for postmodern and postcolonial geography.

It would be impossible to deal with the whole of the primitivist movement, therefore the work and itinerary of Gauguin were chosen as exemplary. A major influence on Western art, his universally popular work functions as a matrix of social representations. As a major figure, maybe even the inventor of primitivism, Gauguin is responsible for the changes in Western culture brought about by the movement, particularly in its geographical dimensions.⁴

Primitivism and 'discovery' of 'Negro art'

In the years 1905–1906 Western painters, and first Matisse, Picasso, Vlaminck, and Derain, 'discovered' 'Negro' art. These precursors all greatly admired Gauguin, which probably had to do with this 'discovery'. Both aspects contributed to the birth of primitivism. The interpretation of this movement, and especially Gauguin's primitivism, is controversial.⁵ Primitivism does not imply an inspiration directly drawn from the primitive arts. *Manao Tupapau* (Figure 1) owes more to the ghosts of Manet and of Ingres than to Tahitian mythology.⁶ *Where do we come from, what are we, where are we going* (Figure 2) recalls the frescos of Puvis de Chavanne more than Polynesian art. It is possible to draw a parallel between the taste for exotic and undressed scenes characteristic of orientalist painters and the search for a picturesque eroticism that is not foreign to Gauguin: *Manao Tupapau* reminds of the harems of Jérôme or of Fromentin.

Gauguin's aspiration to the savage owes more to Rousseau's 'good savage' than to the Maori people. Gauguin's debts to primitive arts are few and he more often refers to the arts of the great Eastern civilisations (Japan, Java, Cambodia, Egypt, Persia) than to tribal arts themselves (essentially from the Marquesas Islands). Thus the blue idol that appears in *Where do we come from* is much more Asian than Polynesian.

So what defines Gauguin's primitivism? Three components are visible in *Manao Tupapau*. Firstly, the painter uses motives that are local, natural (the phosphorescent flowers of *hotu*) or cultural (the *paréo*, the sculptures on the pillar), perceived as being savage or at least exotic. Secondly,

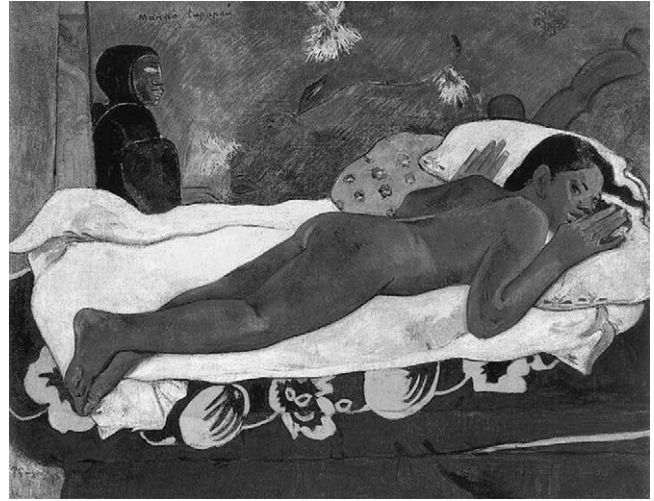


Figure 1. Paul Gauguin, *Manao tupapau (L'esprit des morts veille)* (*The Spirit of the dead keeps watch*), 1892, W457, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

the *tupapau* (spirit of the dead) represented is drawn from Tahitian mythology and beliefs: the subject of the painting refers to an ancient Maori cult, which fascinated Gauguin. Thirdly, the continuity of the pictorial surface, which does not distinguish the material (the young girl) from the spiritual (the *tupapau*), places them on the same level of reality, as though Gauguin were seeing and reproducing what is seen by the young girl (which caused Gauguin to be described as a symbolist). We have therefore primitivism of motives, of the subject and of the vision of the world. That does not mean that Gauguin paints like a primitive: there was never any Tahitian oil painting, or sculpted idols. The primitivism of the work reflects Gauguin's thought. Under the influence of *fin-de-siècle* anti-modernism, disgusted by a materialistic and hypocritical Western civilization, he aspired to a lost authenticity, to an elsewhere that is both geographical and spiritual, that the imaginary of the period makes him seek in the Tahitian Eden, in the *vahine* representing the primitivist figures of Eve, of the good savage, of the child and the animal.

It is not that primitive arts have *influenced* the work of Gauguin. Its autonomous evolution had the painter seize primitive motives and themes, in a logic that is that of Western art and quite independent of primitive arts. Primitive art, for Gauguin as well as for Picasso, was in the terms of the latter, a 'fulcrum', a 'justification',⁷ to appropriate, in Gauguin's word, 'the *right* to dare'⁸: to simplify the lines, distort the figures, saturate colours and contrasts, forget shadows, neglect perspective, represent the purely imaginary. . . . Gauguin owes no more to Polynesian art than Picasso to 'Negro' art, but no less. Primitivist art is not primitive art: the first has certainly borrowed from the second (although the actual references are fewer than was commonly believed), but mainly drew from what it had placed there.

In Paris, in 1919, the Devambez gallery opened the *First exhibition of Negro art and of Oceanic art*.⁹ It was the first time that objects of tribal art were exhibited not as curi-

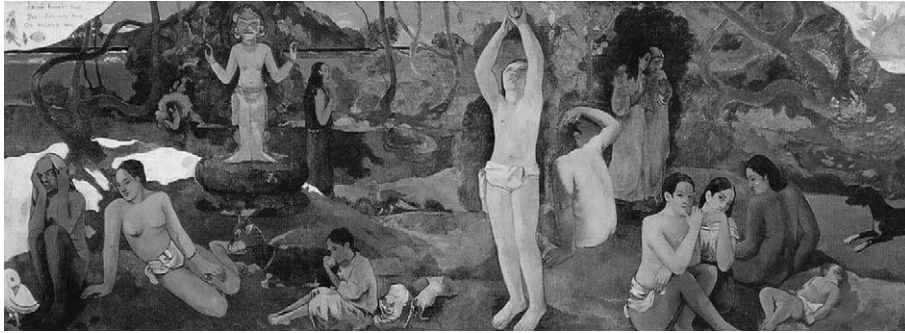


Figure 2. Paul Gauguin, *D'où venons-nous, que sommes nous, où allons-nous?*, (Where do we come from, what are we, where are we going?) 1897, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1.7 m × 4.5 m.

osities or as pieces of ethnological interest (Figure 3). In 1924 the first book devoted to primitive art was published.¹⁰ The exhibitions of the Trocadero Museum in the 1930s¹¹ showed objects of tribal art. This entry of primitive art into the history of art owes a lot to the cubists, to the *fauves* and to Gauguin's followers since 1906. In spite of the limited and ambiguous character of what the primitivists borrowed from 'Negro' or Oceanic art, it is them who, in the eyes of the public, transformed the savage into an artist. The wood sculptures of Gauguin (Figure 4), that he considered 'ultra savage'¹², owed little to Polynesia, but they did contribute to Polynesian and African artefacts' being considered as works of art.

The consequences were considerable: the capacity to create works of art is among the criteria differentiating human beings and animals (Figure 5). The view of the West on 'primitive' people changed because these were recognized as just as able of producing masterpieces as Westerners (or even more likely to do so, according to some primitivists). However, the entry of 'primitive' arts into the Louvre (2000 exhibition), which proposes viewing them from a purely aesthetic point of view, devoid of all ethnological considerations (for example in reference to their ritual use) continues to give rise to debate. Not that anyone denies their aesthetic value, but some fear that integrating them into the history of Western art and evaluating them on Western criteria may be succumbing (again) to Eurocentrism. The phrase 'Negro' art is no longer used, but those of 'primitive art' and 'first arts' remain highly controversial, as was shown by the polemic around the name to be given to the *Quai Branly* museum in Paris. This new institution is to receive objects from the *Musée des Arts Africains et Océaniens* and from the *Musée de l'Homme*. Artistic and museological issues still have political implications, of which President Jacques Chirac was fully aware when advocating the admission of 'first arts' into the Louvre and the creation of the museum of the *Quai Branly*. The current French head of state, an amateur of 'first' arts, is also the political leader who's come closest to making amends for France's colonial past.

"For a long time, indeed, the non-Western arts, those which were in a way outside the Indo-European crucible from which our own cultures have arisen, entered our collections, alas in painful circumstances, in a context of colonialism. This was, for Europe, a time of conquest

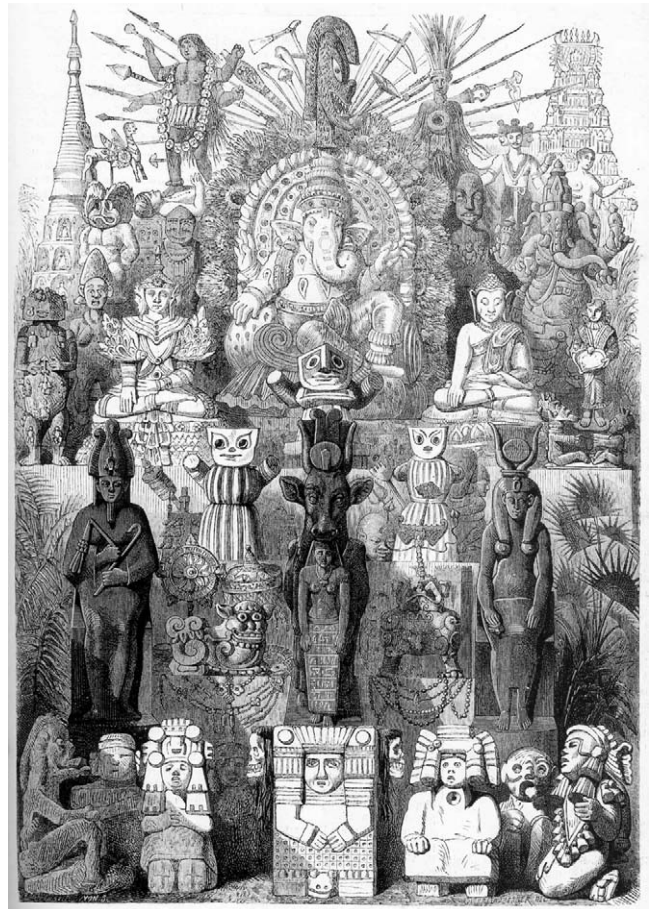


Figure 3. 'Les idoles au Champ de Mars. Dessin de M. Kreuzberger', Exposition Universelle, Paris, Dentu, 3 octobre 1867.

and of economic expansion, but it was also, for the colonized countries, a time of humiliation and of suffering, described by Jean-Paul Sartre as a 'gigantic nightmare'. Gradually, during the second half of the 20th century, we have constructed new relationships with these countries, step by step, on the basis of understanding, mutual respect, dialogue and exchange. Little by little, the West has taken the measure of the cultural dimension of these civilizations, in all its diversity, complexity and richness, a dimension long disregarded because of arrogance and ethnocentrism. The time had come to give greater visibility to these new relations, placed under the sign of



Figure 4. Paul Gauguin, *L'idole à la coquille*, wood and mother of pearl, h. 27 cm, 1893, Musée d'Orsay, Paris.

recognition, sharing and fraternity. That is why I have wished that the first arts find in the year 2000 their place in the museums of France" (President J. Chirac, inaugurating the 'Pavillon des sessions' and its first art collection, Louvre museum, April 13th 2000).¹³

In his presentation of the *Quai Branly* museum, Jacques Chirac did not fail to quote primitivist painters (Derain and Picasso) among '*les passeurs de rêves, men of heart and of spirit who (...) have wished for a true recognition, in the museums of France, of the forgotten civilizations of Africa, Asia, the Arctic, Oceania and the Americas*'.¹⁴ The transfer of the collections of the earlier *Musée des Colonies* and of the museum of ethnology of the Trocadero to a museum of art is the consequence and the late equivalent of the incorporation of 'Negro' art by certain Western artists in Paris, exactly one hundred years earlier. Or, to speak in geographical terms, the moving of these collections is a delayed consequence of Gauguin's departure to Polynesia and of the cubists' African tropism. Primitivism has therefore participated in the movement by which the West, which had opened the debate in the 16th century, finally, in the 20th century, accepted (or pretended to) the entry of other people into humanity.

'Do not visit the Colonial Exhibition', ordered a tract of 1931 signed by Breton, Eluard, Aragon, etc. *The Truth about the Colonies* was a counter-exhibition organised that same year by the CGTU¹⁵ and the surrealists, and received 5000

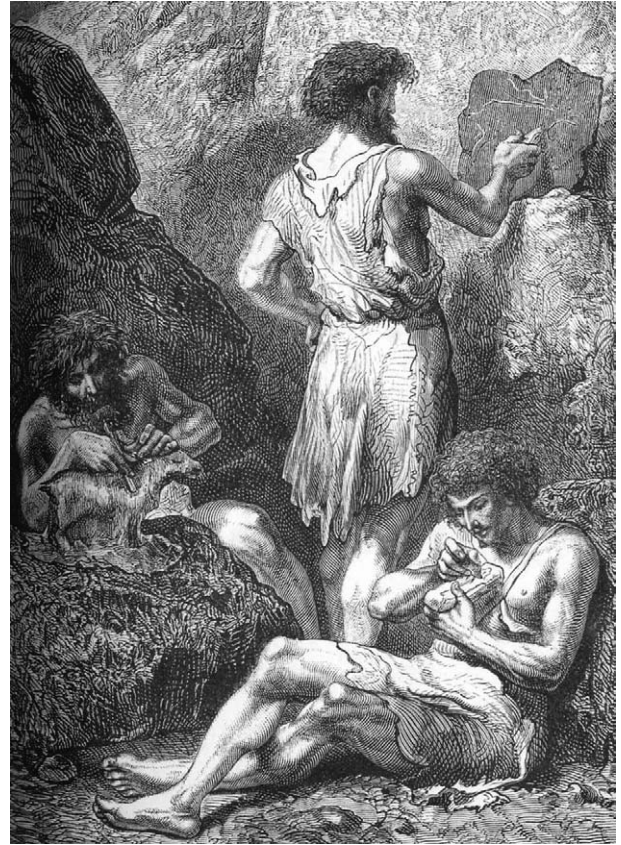


Figure 5. 'Les précurseurs de Raphaël et Michel-Ange, ou la naissance des arts du dessin et de la sculpture à l'époque du renne', engraving by Émile Bayard. In: L. Figuiet, *L'Homme primitif*, Paris, Hachette, 1870, p. 131 (detail). (*Rafaello and Michelangelo precursors, or the birth of the art of drawing and sculpting during the Reindeer Period*).

visitors.¹⁶ Along with rooms dedicated to the USSR and presenting the atrocities of the colonial conquests and the first movements of liberation, three sections were devoted to 'Negro', Oceanic and American art ('redskin'). Collections of primitive art belonging to Breton, Eluard, Tzara, Aragon and to some big Parisian merchants were on display. The mobilization of the surrealists and the use of the 'art of colonized countries'¹⁷ in one of the first anti-colonialist demonstrations show that primitivism is deeply involved with the political history of France and of her colonies.

Primitivism and colonization

The work of Gauguin was not presented in the 'counter-exhibition': it was displayed in the Colonial Exhibition itself. It seems that there are two ways of coming to terms with Gauguin's legacy, as there are two faces to primitivism. The relationship between this movement, colonization and colonial culture are profoundly ambivalent. This was obvious from the inception of primitivism, in the itinerary of Gauguin and in the reception, even in the production of his work.

Gauguin's geographical imagination, which motivated his departure for Tahiti in 1891 and is expressed in the Polynesian pictures, is typical of his time. His Tahiti is es-



Figure 6. the EFO (Etablissements Français d'Océanie) pavilion in the Colonial Exhibition in 1931, photography (*L'Illustration*, album hors-série 'L'Exposition coloniale', 1931).

entially and commonplace Western: it refers to the Golden Age of the Greeks, to the biblical Paradise. It owes much to Rousseau, Bougainville, Diderot and Loti.¹⁸ Gauguin's lifestyle in Polynesia was clearly that of a colonial and, in Tahiti, he poses as a stark defender of the interests of the French community.¹⁹

It would be exaggerated to set the artist on the front line of colonization, instead of the more conventional figures of the military, the missionary and the planter. But the systematic presence of draftsmen with explorers, the official missions for which painters were hired in the colonies (as was the case of Gauguin, on the occasion of his first stay in Tahiti) prove that they were expected to play a part. Also, aesthetic considerations cannot be disconnected from colonial and racist discourse. The hierarchy of races is also founded on that of the perceived beauty of the various people: significantly, the measure of the angle of the cranium, infamously used by the anthropometry and exploited by racist theories, started with painting and aesthetics. Its inventor, Petrus Camper (1722–1789), a famous medical practitioner and artist, aimed to help Western artists adequately to depict the African, instead of simply painting European forms with a dark skin, and to define beauty.

Gauguin did not display Polynesian savagery; he only celebrated the beauty of the people and cultural wealth. This was in no way original concerning Tahitians, and in particular the women. The daughter of the 'Nouvelle-Cythère' and of the Garden of Eden, conforming to Western canons of beauty (particularly feminine), the vahine was from the moment of her 'discovery' placed very high in the hierarchy of the peoples, unlike the 'Negro woman', who stood right at the bottom of the aesthetic and anthropological scale of 'races'. By painting magnificent Tahitian women, Gauguin only strengthened the flattering stereotypes that were already well established.

Gauguin consolidated Western representations of Tahiti by giving them a magnificent expression, largely distributed thanks to the rapid success of his painting. Tahiti and Tahitian men and women as depicted by Gauguin do not contradict the colonial imagination, which is why his pictures were exhibited at the Paris Colonial Exhibition in 1931 (8 million visitors)²⁰, in the Oceania Pavilion (Figure 6).

Along with souvenirs and the works of Loti and Ségalen, the pavilion contained Gauguin's works: two pictures,

a wooden panel, a monotype, at least five engravings, the palette of the painter and three letters. The 'primitive' art of the Marquesas Islands was represented by various objects of 'the prehistoric period', i.e. before the 1842 annexation: some small *tikis* 'in human bone' show the 'innumerable and pitiless gods' who claim 'human victims that were never refused to them'.²¹ So as to understand the logic of this exhibition, let's turn to the statement that the curator made to the *Figaro*.

"This Polynesian exhibition is placed under the sign of Loti and that of Gauguin, in the form of a tribute to each of them. Who else revealed to the over-evolved and complicated Westerners we have become, the simple and charming soul, the noble plastic beauty of a race that is slowly dying and of which the memory will last into the future only through the incomparable talent of Pierre Loti, the magnificent lyricism of Victor Ségalen and the genius of Paul Gauguin (. . .). It is the very memory of this silence that the traveller should bring back with him today from these islands where there lived a race of which, in 1774, Cook, estimating it at one hundred thousand individuals, thought that it was the most beautiful of the Pacific, perhaps the most beautiful of all peoples. Forty years after Cook, Dumont d'Urville calculated that they were reduced to twenty thousand souls; today, one hardly finds two thousand. A race condemned without appeal, a race that is dying; but some astonishing objects of art, carefully guarded in our collections, the pictures of Gauguin, the poetry of Ségalen and the novel of Loti will preserve for us the imperishable memory of its perfect and calm beauty". (J.-C. Paulme, assistant curator in charge of Oceania at the Colonial Exhibition in 1931).²²

Polynesian art, even if it is 'astonishing' and associated with a barbaric cult, is recognized as having undeniable value, as the Polynesian 'race' itself, whose foremost merit is its beauty. But this art and this 'race' are disappearing and even condemned to disappear. The European artists that have depicted them have not only produced good works of art, they also have the merit of saving from oblivion the Polynesian civilisation and people. This argument refers to one of the alleged justifications of the colonial enterprise: to save degenerating people, help them to recover their lost glory. In this perspective, it is logical to use the works of artists who pay tribute to this past and have accomplished a work of archaeologists, of prehistorians (since colonization marks the entry of these people into history). The direct or indirect responsibility of colonization, celebrated by the exhibition, for the disappearance of the culture and of the Polynesian people is obviously not touched upon.

The work of Gauguin was easily used as an instrument of colonial propaganda, also in other instances. In 1935, in the Exhibition for the bicentennial of the annexation of the West Indies and Guyana to France, which was held at the *Musée National de la France d'Outre-mer*, ten of his works executed in Martinique were displayed. It is possible, but not of much importance here, that this diversion

of Gauguin's work to serve a colonial point of view be based on a misunderstanding even on a betrayal of his intents.

Gauguin's legacy is paradoxical. On one hand, through the history of art and the primitivist movement, he is at the origin of a (re)habilitation of 'primitive' arts and of the 'primitive', thus providing material for anti-colonialism. On the other hand, his work reproduces and affirms colonial stereotypes and it is used without difficulty by colonial propaganda.

The very concept of the primitive accounts for this ambivalence. Ranking peoples and societies on the path of progress towards the most elaborate (Western) civilization tends to legitimize colonization, presented as the right or the duty of the strong with respect to the weak. Colonization is only possible or justified to the extent that the home country is 'in advance' over the colonies, and able to impose 'progress' to them. Racial doctrines (*L'Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* of Gobineau was published in 1853) and the burgeoning discipline of anthropology (the fundamental book of Taylor, *The Primitive Civilization* was translated into French in 1877) provided a 'scientific' basis to the legitimization of a *de facto* and *de jure* superiority of the West. Exploration literature, then colonial literature, represented the primitive and savage character of peoples that had been or were to be colonised, and ensured the diffusion of such notions. The primitive, presented negatively, called for the colonizer to come and civilize him. However, the insistent descriptions, both horrified and fascinated, of the barbarity of the indigenous peoples, also testified to an 'obscure temptation'.²³ In relation with *fin-de-siècle* anti-modernism, the idea of progress was questioned, the superiority of 'civilization' contested, and societies 'left behind' by History were rehabilitated as the primitive character was reconsidered, as virtuous and authentic. Primitivism, though it claimed to invert the hierarchy between the primitive and the civilized, to show the former had much to teach the latter, maintained and even reinforced the dichotomy between the West and its Others. Colonization was no longer justified as an enterprise of civilization of barbaric peoples, but as an attempt to regenerate a West gone astray and on its last legs.

This rejuvenation could not take place in contact with a primitive society in full glory. The balance of power established by the colonization implied that the 'primitive' should be dominated, the utopian character of the regeneration project always led to believe – a *topos* of orientalism – that one was arriving too late, that the Golden Age had already passed, the primitive societies already fallen. Their decline, obvious for the colonialists who observed it without thinking (or wanting to think) that they caused it, justified the colonial project, exonerated of its responsibility, and offered a reassuring explanation of the failure of the regeneration that one was expecting. A good primitive is a dead primitive, not only for the colonialist who sees him as a savage to eradicate, but also for the orientalist and the primitivist who places his hopes in him.

It might seem surprising to place primitivism and orientalism on the same level, while art history has reserved

them very different fates and the links between orientalism and European imperialism have been evidenced. The Orient, as a Western construction of a spatial otherness, assembles all 'elsewheres', all exoticisms. The dictionaries of the period include Oceania in their definition of the Orient, and Gauguin explicitly inscribed his Tahitian project in an oriental quest. As oriental otherness is conceived in opposition to civilization, 'primitivity is inherent to the Orient, is the Orient'.²⁴

A negative view of the primitive leads the missionaries, the teachers and the engineers into the colonies, a positive one brings the orientalists. . . and Gauguin. The two aspects are in fact connected. On the one hand, the seduction exercised by the Orient lays in a hope of renewal, and that of the Oriental woman in her exotic and savage sensuality. On the other hand, the conquest of the Orient and the Oriental is possible and legitimate only in relation to Western superiority. This ambivalence is blatant with Gauguin. As a settler, he endorses Western superiority, and also, despite his claims, that of Western art, by borrowing elements from 'primitive' arts. At the same time, his leaving Europe and his artistic project testify to a profound and revolted dissatisfaction with his (urban, capitalistic, Christian) society and modern art (realism, impressionism).

From the 1920s onwards, the work of Gauguin was widely reproduced, exhibited and celebrated. How was it integrated into the colonial discourse, what was its effect on the colonization of Polynesia? It was not instrumental in encouraging many to leave for those remote islands, which never received many settlers: for the entire colonial period (1842–1960), only 401 are recorded, 295 of which came from French mainland.²⁵

Primitivism and tourism

Gauguin may not have sent any settlers to Tahiti, but many Western visitors, either in the past or the present, followed in his footsteps. His work constitutes more an invitation to undertake the voyage than a call to colonization or to life in the wilderness. He praises the charms of Tahitian life and women, but it is not a reason to go to the other end of the world. But his work was quickly granted recognition, and its success, in line with what Gauguin himself had said, was attributed to his Tahitian experience: therefore painters in quest of inspiration or especially sensitive to the work of Gauguin were tempted to relive his adventure. Emil Nolde and Max Pechstein, linked to the *die Brücke* expressionist movement, left for the Palau Islands in 1914. Henri Matisse, after his trips to Algeria and Morocco, spent three months in Tahiti in 1930.

Many novelists were also drawn towards the South Seas, particularly by the work of Gauguin. One after another, they travelled there from the 1920s onward, setting an editorial trend.²⁶ Somerset Maugham stayed in Tahiti for one month in 1917 and in 1919 published *The Moon and Six Pence*, of which Hollywood made a film in 1942. This romanticized life of Gauguin was to greatly assist in establishing the Gauguin 'myth', particularly in the English speaking world,

in the same way as the texts of V. Segalen had done in the French speaking world. Many film directors were to follow suit.²⁷

Gauguin is by no means solely responsible for this media outburst, also influenced by Bougainville and Loti. This explosion was also the result of the opening of the Panama Canal (1914) and of the first regular steamship connection with Tahiti (1924). The island gained in accessibility, but also increased its capacity to fire the imagination due to this artistic production. Tourism began to develop in such a way that the Papeete Chamber of Commerce created an Office of Tourism in 1930. At the beginning of the 1930s, about 700 tourists visited the island each year. It was not until the opening of Faaa airport in 1961 that tourism really took off, and the number of visitors per year only exceeded 250,000 in the year 2000. Hawaii was receiving more than 5 million at that very time.

In 1921, for the first time, an administrator mentioned (with a hint of embarrassment) what a touristic attraction Gauguin had turned into: his tomb 'has become a sort of place of pilgrimage for foreign tourists'.²⁸ The painter, unlike Jack London²⁹, had never been personally involved in the touristic promotion of Polynesia. Even if all of the tourist guides deal with Gauguin about Tahiti and the Marquesas Islands, Polynesia has in fact little to offer to the amateurs of painting, apart from the visit of the Gauguin museum in Papeari and the places where the painter lived in Tahiti. The few tourists who make the effort to go to the Marquesas do not fail to visit his tomb at Atuoana, and they see the *Espace Culturel Paul Gauguin* of Atuoana, inaugurated on May 8th, 2003 for the centenary of the painter: this replica of the painter's house does not include any original work of his. In the Tahiti Museum, inaugurated in 1965, only a few etchings and three sculpted spoons are the work of Gauguin.

However, the link between the painter and the Polynesian tourist industry is strong. All of the tourists who come and who will come to Tahiti have seen the paintings of Gauguin, which have taken part in the elaboration of an attractive image of the island. The imagination of present tourists owes little to Loti, virtually unread nowadays, but still owes to Bougainville and to Rousseau who, even unread, still give form to the Tahiti of our dreams. Gauguin holds a central place in the campaigns of tour operators in order to promote Tahiti: he is inevitably present in tourist brochures. His paintings or adaptations of them are abundantly reproduced (Figure 7). But beyond direct references, all images, even words, owe something to Gauguin.

Even if it is difficult locally to organize one's stay around the figure of the painter, an active merchandizing offers substitutes. Tourist shops in Papeete are full of objects in the image of Gauguin's Tahitian paintings. An historian or an amateur of art can, no doubt, be shocked by this consumerist way-laying of the work of the painter. But from the point of view of cultural geography, there is poetic justice in the matter. Gauguin was not so unlike the present-day tourist in that he had also come to Tahiti in search of the exotic and the picturesque, often represented in his work the scenes of the photographs and postcards on sale in the curio shops

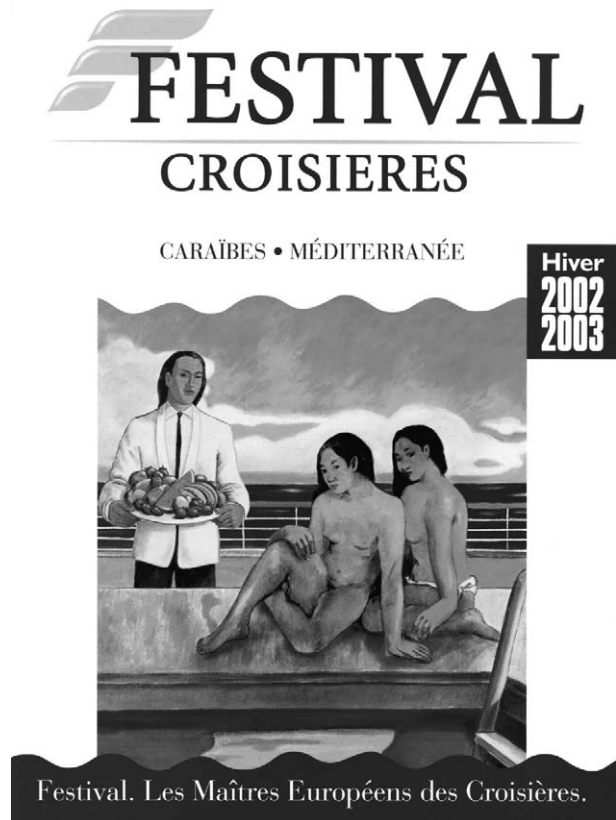


Figure 7. Catalogue *Festival Croisières* 2002/2003 (front page).

of Papeete, and now his work functions as an incentive to tourists to flow into Tahiti. His work was never intended for Tahitians: it is therefore not surprising that it should be on offer for the Western public to whom it was intended in the first place and which flocks to Tahiti indirectly because of him.

It is certainly not the primitivism of Gauguin that attracts tourists to Tahiti, but rather the blue lagoon, the white sand... and the naked beauty of Tahitian girls. However, these expectations were fostered by the Eden-like images produced by the painter, regardless of whether they referred to Tahitian motives and myths or not. However this enchanting vision of the tropical island is also dependent on the idea of a preserved nature where the indigenous people live an easy, harmonious and authentic life. This nostalgia for a lost paradise is not so distant from the spirit of primitivism, which confronted the failure of civilisation and of Western art with the model of 'first' arts and societies. One can trace a continuum from the Greek Golden Age, the biblical paradise, the good savage of Rousseau, the primitivist Tahiti of Gauguin to the tourist's dream of the tropical beach.

'Ethnic tourism', which lures *blasé* or weary Westerners with a promise of rejuvenation in sources of original wisdom and happiness, in the pristine environment of preserved nature, among first peoples who have so much to teach us, is a spiritual heir to primitivism, its worldview, disillusion and hopes. It is not very developed in Tahiti, even if a number of tourists try Tahitian dances and show a sincere and benevolent curiosity for Maori culture. Ethnic tourism is obviously

not free of ambiguities. It has been taunted with inauthenticity, neo-colonialism, folklorization of indigenous cultures, and furthering of misapprehensions: these very reproaches are addressed to primitivism by that certain art historians.

As seen from Tahiti

Primitivism, tourism and even the work of Gauguin are concerns for Westerners. What do Tahitians think of the painter and of his work?

According to Tahitian writer Chantal Spitz, they are not interested in the painter. His work, which in no way concerns the present of the Tahitians and which has no relationship with their past, leaves them indifferent, or causes a degree of irritation. Gauguin 'had no particular influence on our people. He is only one among numerous Western voices who robbed us of our expression'³⁰, she stated at a conference held in Papeete to commemorate the centenary of the death of the painter, stirring up a commotion among certain European academics.

Gauguin was a colonialist and a European artist. As a settler, Gauguin is no more responsible than another. As an artist and producer of discourse, he cannot be exonerated so easily: his work plays a major role in the perpetuation of misunderstandings between the West and Tahitians, due to the myths that they uphold. Reducing Tahiti to 'the island of Gauguin' diverts attention from the realities and the problems specific to Polynesia. However, Gauguin represented Eve and Mary as Tahitians (Figure 8); he celebrated Maori myths; he placed Polynesian artefacts in his work and recognized their artistic value. He deplored that 'one does not seem to imagine in Europe that there has been either with the Maoris of New Zealand, or in the Marquesas a very advanced art of decoration' and that 'the administration has not for an instant thought of creating a museum of all Oceanic art in Tahiti, though it would have been easy'.³¹

Are the ambiguities of primitivist art such that they should relativize, even obscure, its celebration of the arts of 'first' peoples? The administrator of the Marquesas Islands and through him, this young lady from Bordeaux who is looking for pen-friends in the archipelago, gives us an interesting counterpoint.

"I regret to inform you that there does not exist in the Marquesas an individual of either sex that could correspond with you. Public instruction here is not widespread and the inhabitants of the Marquesas are, from many points of view, inferior to the Central African Negro, placed at the very bottom of the social scale; their immorality is beyond imagination. Besides, in general, I do not believe that it is of any interest in establishing a correspondence on a footing of equality between young French girls and the indigenous people of our colonies: the first have nothing to gain, quite the reverse, from such a contact, and the others, whose dominant fault is the lack of measure, immediately lose the sense of hierarchy, or even propriety. My guess is that you have been abused by romantic poets, Loti perhaps, who sometimes paint

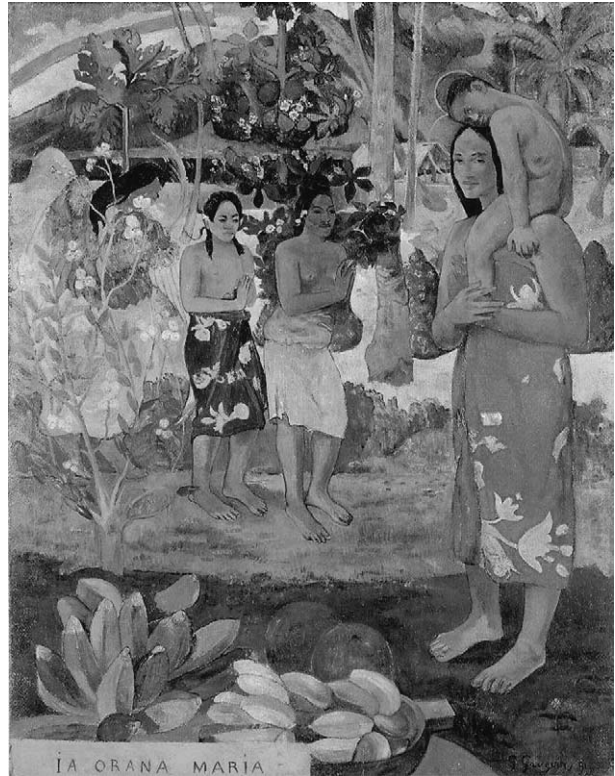


Figure 8. *Io orana Maria (Je vous salue Marie)*, 1891-1892, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art (*Hail Mary*).

the tropical countries with much talent, but mostly deceptively. My long experience of colonial matters and of life enables me to advise you: you should seek, Miss, to cultivate in your country and in your social sphere, the friendships that your generous heart aspires to. There you will find the serious guarantees that you are unlikely to meet with elsewhere. The wise proverb: 'Marry in your city, if you can in your street, and if you can in your house' still applies exactly to social relations. Yours faithfully. . ." (Leudet de Lavallée, administrator of the Marquesas, 9th January 1921, reply to Miss Mimi Baurens, Bordeaux).³²

The administrator who gives Mimi Baurens this blunt refusal clearly discerns in her request the influence of those 'who paint the tropical countries'. The naive expectations of Mimi can amuse, in the same way as tourists who try to understand Polynesian culture in ten days may amuse. But let us appreciate the attitude of Mimi and the tourists compared to that of the administrator, who refuses 'that a correspondence should be established', or to that of the visitors who consume only the lagoon in their barricaded hotel.

Gauguin has placed, according to his terminology, 'the civilized and the barbarian face to face'.³³ Beyond the nature and the unclear motivations of this confrontation, an encounter takes place and is transmitted. Of course, it is not Tahiti that one sees in his canvases, but it is nevertheless a Tahiti, his own. The debates that are still fired by the painter and his work today provide an opportunity to deal with the history of Tahiti and also the relationships between the European and Tahitian communities. In this more pos-

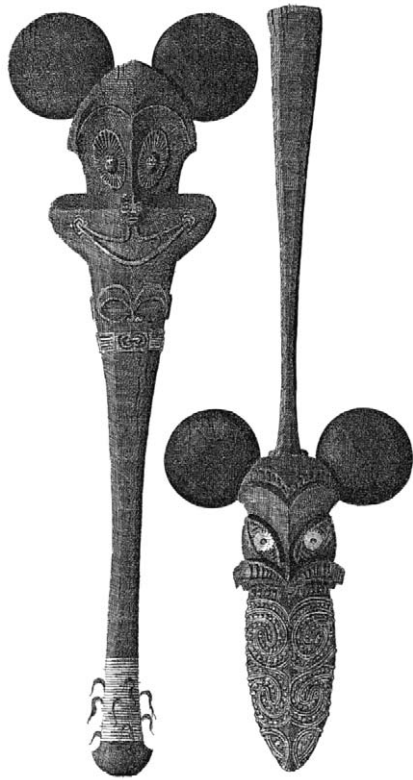


Figure 9. Andreas Dettloff, *Planche ethnographique n°2*, 1997.

itive perspective, at odds with the views of Chantal Spitz, Flora Devatine, another Tahitian writer, sees Gauguin as a place from which to speak and discuss.³⁴

In Gauguin Street in Papeete, the boutique *Gauguin Tissu* presents its wares (fabrics) on a sign: *paréo, tapa, batiks, provençal*. There is a quite primitivist logic in putting on the same level Tahitian cottons, beaten mulberry bark that is typical of Polynesian traditional craft, Indonesian weaving and prints from the South of France: these are the geographical horizons where Gauguin picked his travel destinations and his primitive resources. The ambiguous status of the *paréo* calls for a few details.

The *paréo*, unlike the *tapa*, is not Tahitian: these cotton fabrics, printed in Manchester, are an import linked to the British presence in Tahiti during the first half of the 19th century. However, the *paréo* has become the official costume of the islanders, and even a symbol of Tahitian identity, at least for the tourists. Gauguin, who liked his models to wear the *paréo*, did not realize the hybridity of the garment. Which is not to say that the *paréo* is inauthentic: it shows how the British textile industry adapted to Tahitian motives and to the local demand, but also how the Tahitians claim and spread their culture in a context shifting from pre-colonial to colonial and from colonial to postcolonial. The taste and the versatility of the Polynesians means their adoption of the *paréo* cannot be reduced to a process of acculturation: they should not again be denied the role of actors in their own history. Today, the *paréos* come from Eastern Asia, but they are also made by Tahitian firms with motives created by local artists.

The *paréos* are very popular with tourists. Quite naturally, shopkeepers offer magnificent examples printed in fine colours with motives of the Tahitian canvases of Gauguin. A parallel may be drawn between the fabric of the *paréo* and Gauguin's canvases: beyond the decorative exuberance of their colours, both belong as undeniably to the West as to Tahiti, they are loaded with erotic and exotic connotations, are linked to Tahitian identity and so constitute a call product for tour operators as well as a souvenir for tourists. On this basis both can claim a status of Oceanic icon of postmodernity and of primitivism.

It does not follow from there that the painter is a post-modern hero opening the path of multicultural dialogue. For the artists working in Tahiti nowadays, Gauguin is both a reference and an anti-model.

The work of Dettloff, a German-born artist who works in Tahiti, illustrates a form of primitivism that claims its own artificial nature, by mixing and obscuring references. He borrows from hypothetical Polynesian arts, ostensibly approached via their Western, even colonial, interpretation (etchings of the 19th century, fantasies of decorated skulls). He refers them to a junk imaginary (stereotyped tourist products, icons of the sub-culture of the Western consumption society: Coca-Cola, Disney, MacDonald). He draws Maori tattoos on a Barbie doll (*Miss Marquises*, 1993), transforms tikis into Manneken Piss (*Männeken Piss in Tahiti*, 1992; *Le Déluge*, 1992) and statues from the Easter Island into Mickey Mouse (*Sacred Site of Easter Island*, 1994), engraves Polynesian motives on tyres (*Traces of Culture*, 1998) and disguises the German flag as a *paréo* (*Here-mania*, 2001). His *Planches ethnographiques* are presented as 19th century illustrations, but the Marquisian clubs wear Mickey Mouse ears (Figure 9).

Gauguin's approach is subverted by the exposure of the contradictions of primitivism and exoticism. The extremely postmodern hybridization and irony of these works functions less as a criticism of the primitivism of Gauguin than as an outcome, accepting and rejoicing in its contradictions. These works present a postcolonial Tahiti (and a West) that have fully come to terms with their history and account for the geography of a world no longer hierarchical and fragmented, but where different cultures coexist, are able to gaze at each other and thereby to destabilize – that is, to enrich and to put into perspective – their respective values. Is that not what Gauguin was hoping for – as well as Mimi?

Conclusion

This paper aimed to show how primitivism casts light on the relationship of the West with the Other and Elsewhere. Because this artistic movement illustrates and expresses a vision of the world very influential in Western culture and behaviour, it is of interest to cultural geography. The displacement or the decentering operated by primitivism, so clearly exemplified by Gauguin's work and itinerary, draws attention to their obvious geographical implications. But one can reasonably assume that this dimension is also present, in a less obvious and more complex way, in other movements:

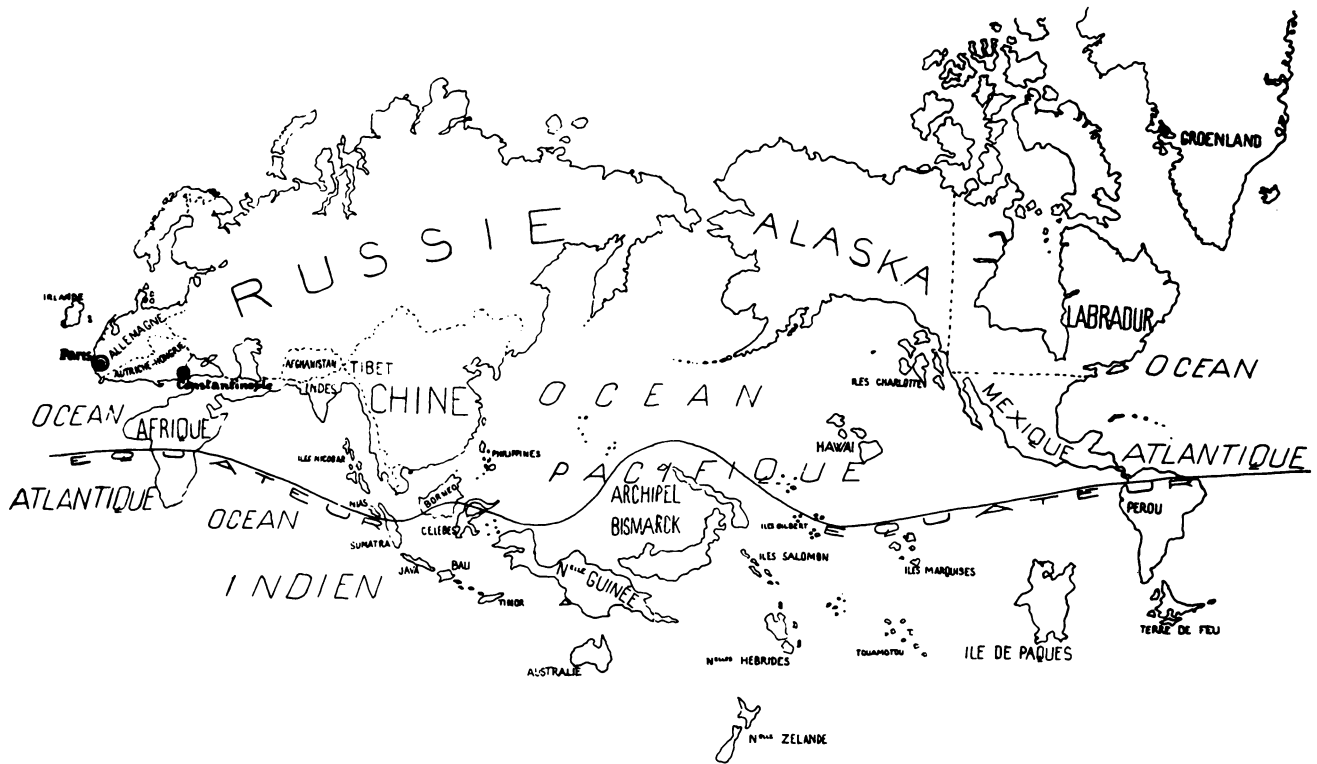


Figure 10. Surrealist map of the World, *Variété*, juin 1929, hors-série.

romanticism, naturalism, orientalism, impressionism, cubism, surrealism (Figure 10), etc.

The history of art overlaps a history of representations of the world. Historians have abundantly exploited this perspective, but geographers have not done it systematically. Views of the world that the artists of the past expressed are not out of date: many of them have left traces in our geographical imagination, that they helped to structure. A cultural geography of the West, articulated to the artistic currents that influenced, or even determined it, remains to be written. This articulation may vary. For example naturalist painting, because of its realist ambition, tells us about the world as the painter believes it to be: impressionism translates the world as the painters think they perceive it.

Giving up on the 'fatality of the real'³⁵ specific to modern art and of which Gauguin was the initiator, leads the artists to paint not what they see, 'around the eye', but the 'mysterious centre of thought'³⁶, in Gauguin's terms. This doesn't imply their work is no longer interesting for geography, so long as one accepts that the discipline is a social science, and that therefore, its object is not the world as it is but the world as it is lived, perceived, practiced and finally produced by human beings and by societies. Art is relevant to (cultural) geography all the more if it depicts interior worlds. Gauguin desired, in his own words, 'a corner of himself still unknown'³⁷; he went to seek it in the South Seas. His primitive canvases tell us little about Polynesia in 1891–1903, a lot about Gauguin's worldview and about that of Westerners from the late 19th century to the present day. It

is precisely because in Tahiti, Gauguin did not paint Tahiti, that his work and his itinerary constitute a precious source for the (cultural) geography of the West.

Should Tahitians therefore not be interested in Gauguin? He cannot teach them anything about their pre-colonial past, but his work and life cast light on the changes undergone by Polynesia in the past two centuries, from colonization to the development of tourism. Primitivism has its place in the genealogy of relationships between the West and the Other: it allows one to grasp the geography by which the West has constructed itself in reference and opposition to 'Elsewheres'. Conversely, primitivism accounts for the geography of these 'Elsewheres', in that they were transformed, and even produced, by the West.

Notes

¹In the English and French speaking worlds: Wallach, 1997; Piveteau, 1989.

²Among French geographers who have recently shown an interest in painting: Frémont, 1999; Fumey, 2003; Grison, 2002; Knafou, 2000; Knafou and Staszak, 2004; Staszak, 2003. In English, the reference is of course D. Cosgrove.

³French literature has been explored by French speaking geographers. Their works deal with specific authors: Chamoiseau, Giono, Gracq, Hesse, Pagnol, Proust, Ramuz, Rousseau, Vallès, Verne, etc. are the topic of many papers (often in the journal *Géographie et cultures*). A few

geographers have tried to analyze the links between literature and geography more systematically (Brosseau, 1996; Chevalier, 2001). The reason why geographers feel more comfortable with literature than with other arts has to do with their familiarity with the written text... and with the important place of literature in French education. Painting, sculpture, cartoons, cinema have been paid less attention – not to mention music (Lévy, 1999).

⁴Some of the arguments of this paper are taken from my recent works on Gauguin, especially the last chapter of *Géographies de Gauguin* (Staszak, 2003a).

⁵Goldwater, 1988; Rubin, 1991; Rhodes, 1997; Dagen, 1998.

⁶Varnedoe, 1991: p. 179.

⁷Dor de La Souchère, 1960.

⁸Letter to Daniel de Monfreid, October 1902 (Gauguin, 1943, p. 83) (Gauguin's emphasis).

⁹Goldwater, 1988, pp. 26, 277.

¹⁰H. Huehn, *Die Kunst der Primitiven*, Munich, Delphin Verlag, 1924 (Goldwater, 1988, p. 49).

¹¹Bénin, 1932; Dakar-Djibouti, Marquises, 1934; Eskimo, 1935 (Goldwater, 1988, p. 27).

¹²Letter to Daniel de Monfreid, April-May 1893 (Gauguin, 1943, p. 13).

¹³Source: www.elysee.fr.

¹⁴Jacques Chirac, foreword to a booklet presenting the Musée du quai Branly, April 2000.

¹⁵CGTU: Confédération Générale du Travail Unitaire (communist trade union).

¹⁶Hodeir and Pierre, 1991, pp. 125–134; Ageron, 1997, pp. 499–501.

¹⁷Aragon, in Hodeir and Pierre, 1991, p. 126.

¹⁸Staszak, 2003b.

¹⁹Staszak, 2003a.

²⁰Hodeir and Pierre, 1991, p. 120.

²¹J.-C. Paulme, Loti, Gauguin, Ségalen et l'art ancien des Iles Marquises à l'Exposition Coloniale, *Le Figaro*, 26 septembre 1931.

²²J.-C. Paulme, Loti, Gauguin, Ségalen et l'art ancien des Iles Marquises à l'Exposition Coloniale, *Le Figaro*, 26 septembre 1931.

²³Girardet, 1995, p. 143.

²⁴Said, 1997, p. 263 (Said underlining).

²⁵Bachimon, 1990, pp. 303–304; Margueron, 1989.

²⁶P. Benoît (*Océanie française*, 1933), M. Chadourne (*Vasco*, 1927), J. Dorsenne (*C'était le soir des Dieux*, 1926, *Les Filles de la Volupté*, 1929, *La Vie sentimentale de Paul Gauguin*, 1927), Z. Grey (*Tales of Tahitian Waters*, 1931), J.N. Hall (*Mutiny of the Bounty*, 1934), R. Keable (*Tahiti Isle of Dreams*, 1925), A.V. Novak (*Tahiti les îles du paradis*, 1923), F. O'Brien (*White Shadows in the South Seas*, 1919), G. Simenon (*Le Passager clandestin et Touriste banane*, 1936), E. Triolet (*À Tahiti*, 1920).

²⁷G. Méliès (three movies in 1913), F.W. Murnau (*Tabou*, 1928), Lloyd (*Mutiny of the Bounty*, 1935).

²⁸De Poyen Bellisle, Letter to the Governor, November 16th 1921, in Bailleul, 2001, p. 151.

²⁹Dubucs, 2002.

³⁰Spitz, 2003.

³¹Gauguin, *Avant et après*, 1903 (Gauguin, 1989, p. 73.)

³²In Bailleul, 2001, p. 200.

³³Letter to André Fontainas, février 1903 (Merlhès, 1984, p. 177).

³⁴Devatine, 2003.

³⁵Huygue, 1965, p. 238.

³⁶Gauguin, *Diverses choses*, 1896–1897 (Gauguin, 1997, p. 172).

³⁷Letter to Émile Bernard, August 1889 (Merlhès, 1984, p. 84).

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