

## **PRIMITIVISM AND THE OTHER**

### **History of Art and Cultural Geography**

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#### **Abstract**

The article pleads for an articulation of cultural geography to the history of art, and in this optic, applies itself to analysing the primitivist movement and particularly to the path of Gauguin. Primitivism introduced artefacts of "primitive" people into the history of western art; it signifies a mutation in the relationship between the West with the other and the elsewhere. The change of values that it illustrates possesses a major geographical dimension. Primitivism manifests the colonial ideology with its contradictions, but may as well call colonization into question. Tourism, which is, in the case of Tahiti, directly linked to Gauguin and to his myth, is inscribed in the filiation of primitivism, which he shares or inherits certain hopes and several ambiguities. In return, primitivism enables the understanding of features of the geography of these places, set up by the West into "Elsewheres", and visited, even transformed by the painters, the colonizers and the tourists.

#### **Key Words**

Cultural geography, representation, art, painting, primitivism, alterity, Gauguin, Tahiti, tourism, colonization

#### **Introduction**

So long as one will not have made serious progress in telepathy, cultural geographers are reduced, through lack of direct access to mental representations, to analyse object representations: texts, drawings, maps, photographs, words, etc., which one hopes will constitute a good translation of mental representations of a group or of the individual on whom one is working, and that they inform us about the world in which the subjects live. However, it is rare that the subjects spontaneously produce object representations to give accounts of the world in which they live. Researchers are often obliged to invoke them, introducing notable biases. Even more, the object representations respect common codes, which ensure their transmissible character: it is not necessarily true that all individuals master them sufficiently to share their vision of the world; it is not certain that the codes are sufficient to take account of the sometimes idiosyncratic components of the interior world.

So as to avoid traps, it would be necessary to use non solicited representations of subjects talented enough to express them, master well the codes or are even capable of inventing sufficiently adapted languages to give accounts of the specificity of their vision.

Works of art satisfy this need. On the contrary to history, the social sciences, and particularly geography, have nevertheless had relatively little reference to this type of source, in spite of several appeals in this sense<sup>1</sup>. In the pictorial arts, and above all in the painting of landscapes which drew the attention of geographers, for obvious reasons, numerous works have shown the interest of the conclusions that one could draw from their analyses<sup>2</sup>. If the artistic sources and particularly the pictorial ones<sup>3</sup> have not been systematically exploited by geographers, it is no doubt linked to their reserve in adventuring into the field of the history of art, but it is probably for fundamental reasons.

One can fear that the exceptional status of works of art, and particularly those produced by an *avant garde* of artists in rupture with the representations of their times, limits the conclusions that the social sciences, particularly the geographers, can draw from their analyses: a work of art would only enable understanding of the universe of its author. However the capacity of certain artists to be ahead of their times, the diffusion and the reception of the work of those who are recognised and appreciated as being great masters can transform their artistic production into a matrix of social representations. One knows that the representations of Provence and to begin with, tourism, owe to Cézanne and Van Gogh. More so, the artist does not work in isolation, and their works are inserted often into currents that manifest a research for a shared expression.

Is it useful to add that works of art, in the same way but more so than all representations, as realistic as they pretend, do not inform us about the world as it is but as it is represented? Numerous paintings of paradise that we dispose of do not inform us about the landscapes of the place but on the expectations of a society and on the vision of Eden; Gauguin does not paint Tahiti, but his Tahitian dream.

This article aims to examine, in this perspective, a current of western art: the primitivism. It developed essentially between the years 1890 and 1940. Gauguin, Picasso, Matisse and the *fauves*, the surrealists, the German expressionists, Brancusi, Modigliani, Klee, Leger, Giacometti, the American abstract expressionists take their place in different roles and, among others, within primitivism.

Beyond the diversity and the evolutions of this current, the primitivism is characterised by its will to reject the canons of western art, perceived as being inauthentic, and by its hope to find a regenerative inspiration in alternative expressions, perceived as being more true because more simple and more free. The artist, by its new references, is searching to detach from conventions and the ambitions of western art, notably those of the naturalists, the impressionists and of the neo-impressionists, in order to succeed in understanding a profound truth, which is not that, falsely, of appearances.

The models of substitution which artists borrow correspond to figures erected by the West in archetypes of alterity: the child, the insane, the dreamer, the woman, and the animal. But it's the Savage, the Primitive which constitutes the principal alternative and source of inspiration. Its alterity is inscribed in time (it belongs to the dawn of Humanity), but also in space (it 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 stakes that are directly spatial. It enters into resonance with political geography, notably that of colonialism and of decolonization, but also with that of tourism. It enables tackling head on the question of relationship of the West and the Other, which is central for the post-modern geographer, and particularly the post-colonial.

One will not exploit here the whole of the primitivist current, but above all the work and the path of Gauguin. Because of his major influence in the history of western art and, more broadly, of the popular and universal success of his work, his work constitutes a matrix of social representation. As Gauguin is the first figure, even the inventor of primitivism, it is firstly to him that one owes the mutations of western culture linked to primitivism, particularly in its geographical dimensions<sup>4</sup>.

## 1 Primitivism and "discovery" of "Negro art"

It is in the years 1905-1906 that western painters, firstly Matisse, Picasso, Vlaminck, and Derain, "discover" "Negro" art. One can agree to see in this revelation the heritage of Gauguin, of whom these precursors were great admirers. The work of Gauguin and the "discovery of "Negro" art which follows, marks the birth of primitivism. The interpretation of this current, and especially the primitivism of Gauguin, is controversial<sup>5</sup>.

Primitivism is not defined by an inspiration that is directly drawn from the primitive arts. *Manao Tupapau* (fig 1) owes more to the phantoms of Manet and of Ingres than to the Tahitian mythology<sup>6</sup>. *Where do we come from, what are we, where are we going* (fig. 2) recalls more the frescos of Puvis de Chavanne than Polynesian art. One can by the way, underline the parallel between the taste for exotic and undressed scenes that are characteristic of orientalist painters and the search for a picturesque eroticism that is not foreign to Gauguin: *Manao Tupapau* is to compare with the harems of Jérôme or of Fromentin.

The aspiration to the savage of Gauguin owes more to the good savage of Rousseau than to the Maori people. The imprints of Gauguin on the primitive arts remains transitory 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). So, the blue idol that appears in *Where do we come from* is much more Asian than Polynesian.

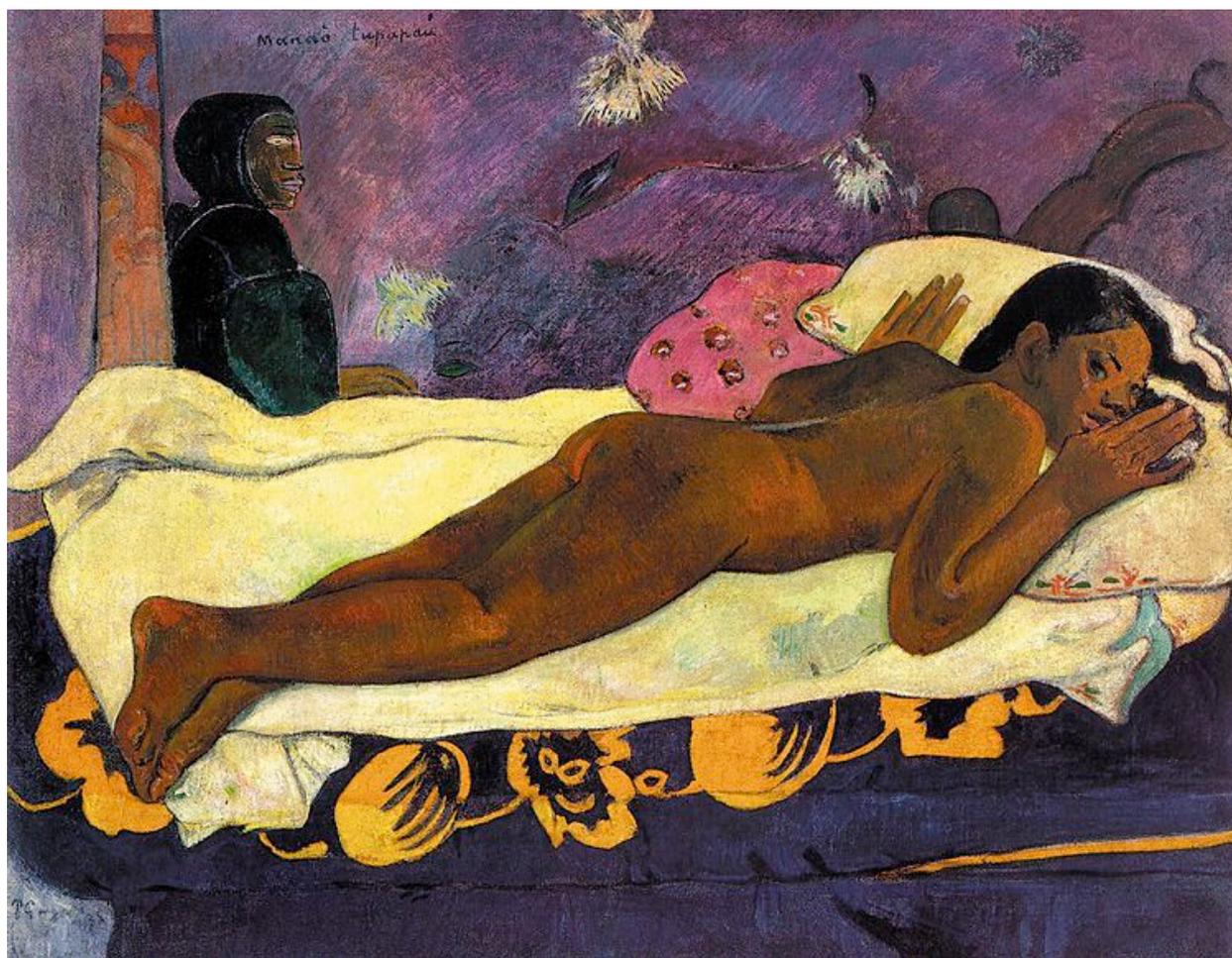


Fig. 1: Paul Gauguin, *Manao tupapau* (*L'esprit des morts veille*) (*The Spirit of the deaths is watching*), 1892, W457, Museum of Modern Art, New York

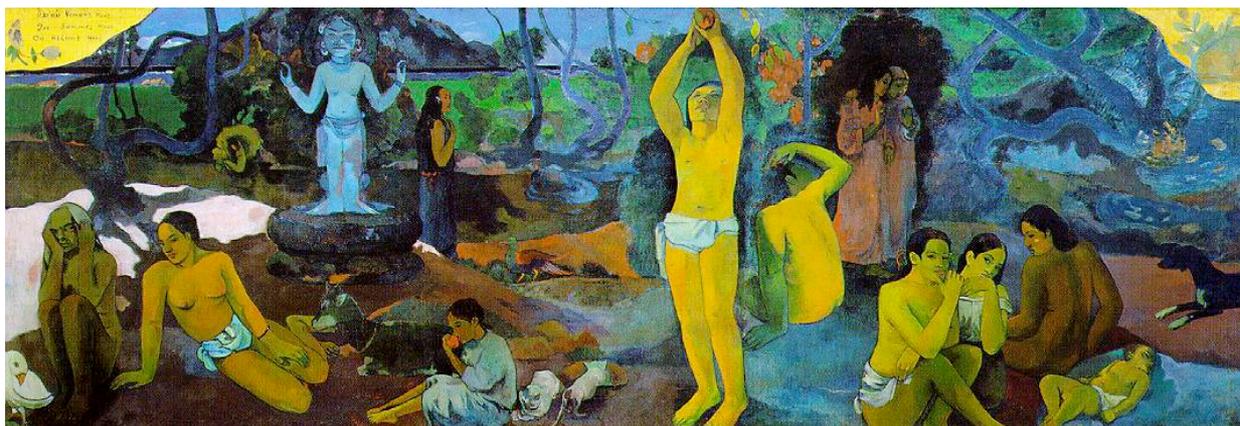


Fig. 2: Paul Gauguin, *D'où venons-nous, que sommes nous, où allons-nous ?*, 1897, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, 1,7m x 4,5m

What then defines the primitivism of Gauguin? One can discern three components 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, the *tupapau* (spirit of the dead) represented is drawn from Tahitian mythology and beliefs: the subject of the painting refers to the 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 saw and reproduced what is seen by the young girl (which caused Gauguin to be described as a symbolist). So 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 question of Tahitian oil painting, nor of sculptures idols. The primitivism of the work reflects the thought of Gauguin. Marked by the *fin-de-siècle* anti-modernism and disgusted with materialist and hypocritical western civilization, he aspires to a lost authenticity, to an elsewhere that is both geographical and spiritual, that the imaginary of the period makes him search in the Tahitian Eden, in the vahine representing the primitivist figures of Eve, of the good savage, of the child and the animal. The primitive arts have not influenced the work of Gauguin. It is the autonomous evolution of such that brought the painter to grasp at the same time primitive motives and themes, in a logic that is specific to the dynamism of western art and quite independent of the primitive arts. Primitive art, for Gauguin as also for Picasso, and to take up the terms of the latter, was a "*point d'appui*", a "justification"<sup>7</sup>, so as to assume as Gauguin wrote, "the right to dare all"<sup>8</sup>: to simplify the lines, deform the figures, saturate the colours and the contrasts, forget the shadows, neglect the perspective, represent the purely imaginary... Gauguin owes no more to Polynesian art than Picasso to "Negro" art, but not less. Primitivist art is not primitive art: the first has certainly borrowed from the second (although the declared quotations are more rare than one had believed), but one has mainly drawn from what he had placed there.

It remains that in 1919 in Paris, the Devambez gallery opens the First exhibition of Negro art and of Oceanic art<sup>9</sup>. It is the first time that one shows objects of tribal art other than as curiosities or as pieces of ethnological interest (Fig. 3). In 1924 the first book devoted to primitive art is published<sup>10</sup>. The exhibitions of the Trocadero Museum of the 1930s<sup>11</sup> shows objects of tribal art. This entry of primitive art into the History of art owes much to the cubists, to the *fauves* and to those who have followed the footprints of Gauguin since 1906. In spite of the limited and ambiguous character of the borrowing of the primitivist from "Negro" or Oceanic art, it is nevertheless them who, in the eyes of the public, have transformed the savage into an artist. The sculptures wood of Gauguin (fig. 4), that he had qualified as "ultra

savage"<sup>12</sup>, owed little to Polynesia, but they have led to considering the artefacts of the Polynesians and the Africans as works of art.

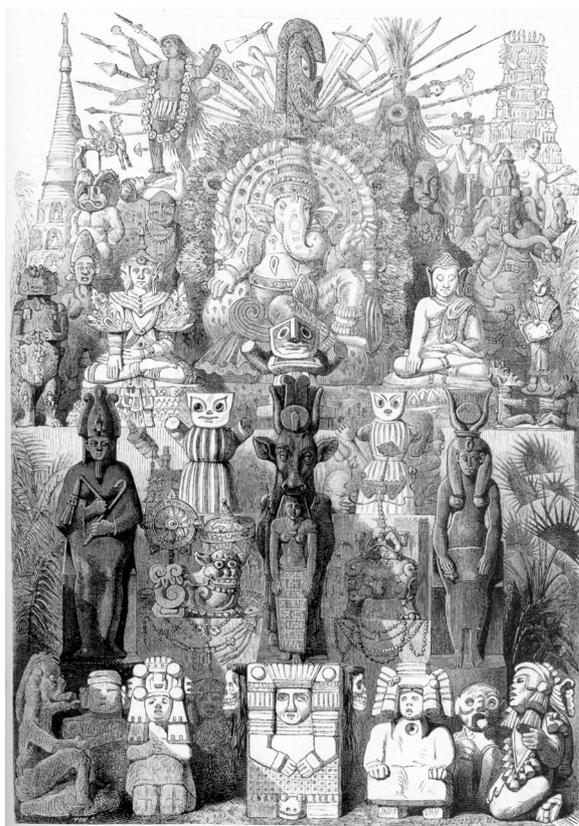


Fig. 3: « Les idoles au champ de mars. Dessin de M. Kreuzberger », *Exposition Universelle*, Paris, Dentu, 3 octobre 1867.

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

The stakes are high: the capacity to create works of art count among the criteria mobilised for differentiating Man from the animal (fig. 5). The view of the West on "primitive" people changes because they recognise them as being capable of producing masterpieces on the same level (even, according to some primitivists, more so) than western people. To introduce "primitive" arts into the Louvre (2000 exhibition), to consider them from a purely aesthetic point of view and devoid of all ethnological considerations (for example all reference to their ritual use) continues to give rise to debate. Not that one denies them aesthetic quality, but rather one fears, in integrating them into the History of western art and to evaluate them according to the criteria forged for these, to (re)fall into Eurocentrism. One no longer speaks of "Negro" art, but the polemics around the expressions "primitive art" and "first arts", which became heated when one wanted to name the *Quai Branly* museum in Paris, show that the artistic and museological stakes imply a lively political dimension. This new institution receives objects from the *Musée des Arts Africains et Océaniens* and from the *Musée de l'Homme*. The political component of the entry of first arts to the Louvre and the creation of the museum of the *Quai Branly* is assumed by its initiator: Président Jacques Chirac, himself an amateur of first arts and who is the French head of state to have gone furthest in the direction of a colonial *mea culpa*.



Fig. 5: « Les précurseurs de Raphaël et Michel-Ange, ou la naissance des arts du dessin et de la sculpture à l'époque du renne », gravure d'Émile Bayard, in L. Figuier, *L'Homme primitif*, Paris, Hachette, 1870, p. 131 (detail). (Raphael and Michel-Ange precursors, or the birth of the art of drawing and sculpting during the Reindeer Period).

“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 into our collections, alas in painful circumstances, on a background of colonialism. This was for Europe a time of conquest and of economic expansion, but it was also, for the colonized countries a time of humiliation and of suffering, that Jean-Paul Sartre was able to describe as an "enormous nightmare".

Progressively, during the second half of the 20th century, we have constructed step by step with these countries new relationships, founded on understanding, mutual respect, dialogue and exchange. Gradually the west was able to measure the cultural dimension of these civilisations, in all their diversity complexity and richness, a dimension long hidden by arrogance and ethnocentrism.

The time had come to give greater visibility to these new relations, placed under the sign of recognition, sharing and fraternity. That is why I have wished that the first arts find in the year 2000 their place in the museum institutions of France”

President J. Chirac, inaugurating the “Pavillon des sessions” and its first art collection (Louvre museum, April 13<sup>th</sup> 2000)<sup>13</sup>.

In his presentation of the *Quai Branly* museum, Jacques Chirac has not neglected to quote the primitivist painter (in this case Derain and Picasso) among "*les passeurs de rêves*, men of heart and of spirit who (...) have called from their wishes a true recognition, in the museum institutions of France, of forgotten civilisations of Africa, Asia, the Arctic, Oceania and the Americas"<sup>14</sup>. The integration of the collections of the earlier *Musée des Colonies* and of the museum of ethnology of the Trocadero into 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 the consequence and late equivalent of the departure of Gauguin for Polynesia and of the African tropism for the cubists. Primitivism has thus participated in the movement by which the West, which had begun an open debate in the 16th century, finished by accepting (supposedly), in the 20th century, 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* is a counter-exhibition organised that same year by

the CGTU<sup>15</sup> and the surrealists; it received 5000 visitors<sup>16</sup>. As well as the rooms dedicated to Russia and those presenting the atrocities of the colonial conquests and the first movements of liberation, three divisions are consecrated to "Negro", Oceanic and American art ("redskin"). One finds there collections of primitive art of Breton, Eluard, Tzara, Aragon and some big Parisian merchants. The mobilisation of the surrealists and the resort to "art of colonised countries"<sup>17</sup> in one of the first anti-colonialist demonstrations show that primitivism is closely mixed into the political history of France and of her colonies.

## 2 Primitivism and colonization

The work of Gauguin was not presented in the "counter-expo". It is, however at the Colonial Exhibition itself. It seems that there would be two ways of assuming the heritage of Gauguin, and two faces to primitivism. The relationship between this trend, the colonization and colonial culture are marked by ambivalence. This is manifest since the birth of primitivism, in the itinerary of Gauguin and in the reception, even in the production of his work. The geographic imagination of Gauguin, which motivates his departure for Tahiti in 1891 and is expressed in the Polynesian pictures, is representative of his time. His Tahiti is typically and ordinarily western: it refers to the golden age of the Greeks, to the biblical Paradise. It owes much to Rousseau, Bougainville, Diderot and Loti<sup>18</sup>. The lifestyle of Gauguin in Polynesia is clearly that of a colonial and, in Tahiti, he assumes a firm defender of the French community<sup>19</sup>.

To place the artist in the forward positions of colonisation, instead of more awaited military, missionary and planter figures would be exaggerating. Nevertheless the systematic presence of draftsmen with explorers, the official missions for which painters were engaged in the colonies (notably Gauguin, on the occasion of his first stay in Tahiti) prove that one expected them to play a role. More so, the strictly aesthetic considerations cannot be disconnected from the colonial and racist discourse. The hierarchy of races is also founded on that of the beauty of the various people. It is significant that the measure of the angle of the face, the use of which by the anthropometry and exploitation by racist theories is of sinister memory, should be firstly the matter of painting and aesthetics. Its inventor, Petrus Camper (1722-1789), famous medical practitioner and artist, has as objective to aid western artists to well paint the African, instead of simply painting European forms with a dark skin, and to define the beauty. Gauguin did not display the Polynesian savagery; it only celebrated the beauty of the people and the cultural richness. Concerning the Tahitians, and more particularly the Tahitian women, there was there nothing original. Thanks to his stature of "Nouvelle-Cythère" and of the Garden of Eden, thanks to western canons of beauty (particularly feminine), the vahine, as soon as her "discovery" had been placed very high in the hierarchy of the peoples, on the contrary to the "Negress" situated on the bottom of the aesthetic and anthropological scale of the races. In painting the magnificent Tahitian women, Gauguin only strengthened the flattering stereotypes that were already in place.

Gauguin had strengthened the western representations of Tahiti in giving them a magnificent expression, largely distributed thanks to the rapid success of his painting. Tahiti and the Tahitian men and women drawn by Gauguin do not enter into contradiction with the colonial imagination. There is not a clearer manifestation than the pictures of Gauguin at the Paris Colonial Exhibition in 1931 (8 million visitors)<sup>20</sup>, in the Oceania Pavilion (fig. 6).



Fig. 6: the EFO (Etablissements Français d'Océanie) pavilion in the Colonial Exhibition l'Exposition in 1931, photographie (*L'Illustration*, album hors-série « L'Exposition coloniale », 1931)

Other than the souvenirs and the works of Loti and Segalen, the pavilion contains the works of Gauguin: 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 is represented by divers objects of "the prehistoric period", that is to say before the annexation of 1842: also some small *tikis* "in human bone" show the "innumerable and pitiless gods" who claim "human victims that were never refused to them"<sup>21</sup>. So as to understand the logic of this exhibition, let us see the explanation that the person responsible for it makes in the *Figaro*.

"The sign of Loti as for that of Gauguin marks, in the form of an homage to each of them, this Polynesian exhibition. Who then in reality has revealed to the West, too evolved and complicated that 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 souvenir of this silence that the traveller should take with him today of these islands where lived a race of which, in 1774 Cook, estimating them to be 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 counts hardly two thousand. A races 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 conserve for us the imperishable souvenir of its perfect and calm beauty".

J.-C. Paulme, assistant curator in charge of Oceania at the Colonial Exhibition in 1931<sup>22</sup>.

Polynesian art, even if it is firstly "astonishing" and referring to a barbaric cult, see itself recognised as having certain value, as also the Polynesian "race", which above all has merit for its beauty. But this art and this "race" are in the process of disappearing and even condemned to disappear. The European artists that have put them on stage, other than the intrinsic merit of their works, have also the merit of saving from oblivion the Polynesian civilisation and people. One finds there one of the justifications of the colonial enterprise: to save people in full degeneration, help them to find their lost glory. In this optic, it is logic to call to artists who pay tribute to their glorious past and do, in reality, a work of archaeologists, of historians (since the colonisation marks the entry of these people into "History"). That the colonisation celebrated by the exhibition might be directly or indirectly responsible for the disappearance of the culture and of the Polynesian people is obviously not mentioned.

The work of Gauguin was easily given impact by the colonial propaganda and it was also the case on other occasions. In 1935, in the framework of the Exhibition for the bicentennial of the attachment of the Antilles and Guyana to France, which was held at the *Musée National de la France d'Outre-mer*, ten of his works of Martinique were presented. It is possible, but here indifferent, that there is a problem of recuperation and that the integration of the work of Gauguin a colonial point of view is based on a misunderstanding even on a betrayal of this.

The heritage of Gauguin seems to be paradoxical. On one hand, across the history of art and the primitivist movement, it is at the origin of a (re)habilitation of the “primitive” arts and so of the “primitive”: it can that way nourish anti-colonialism. On the other, his work reproduces and affirms the colonial stereotypes and it is utilised without difficulty by the colonial propaganda.

The very concept of primitive explains this ambivalence. In placing the peoples and societies on the way of progress towards the most elaborate (western) civilisation one legitimises the colonization, presented as the right or the duty of the strong over the weak. Colonization is only possible or justified to the extent that the home country is “in advance” over the colonies, over which it is capable of imposing “progress”. Racial doctrines (*L'Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines* of Gobineau is published in 1853) and the burgeoning anthropology (the fundamental book of Taylor, *The Primitive Civilisation* is translated into French in 1877) provide a “scientific” basis to the legitimisation of superiority *de facto* and *de jure* of the West. The literature of exploration, then colonial, which stages the primitive and savage character of the peoples that have been or destined to be colonised, ensure the distribution. The primitive, presented negatively, calls the colonial who will come to civilize him. However, one feels already dawn in the such insistent descriptions, although horrified but fascinated, by the barbarity of the indigenous peoples, an “obscure temptation”<sup>23</sup>. This is linked to the *fin-de-siècle* anti-modernism, which questions the idea of progress, contests the superiority of “civilization”, rehabilitates societies left behind by History and erects the primitive character in virtue (and gage) of authenticity. The primitive, although pretending to overthrow the hierarchy between the primitive and the civilized, to proclaim that it's the first that has much to teach the second, maintains and even reinforces the dichotomy between the West and the Others. Colonization is no longer justified as an enterprise of civilization of barbaric peoples, but it remains as an attempt at regeneration for a West astrayed and on its last legs.

This renewal cannot take place in contact with a primitive society in full glory. Other than the balance of power established by the colonization supposes that the “primitive” could be dominated, the utopian character of the project of regeneration always leaves to believe – and it is a *topos* of orientalism - that one arrives too late, that the Golden Age has already passed, the primitive societies already fallen. Their decline, obvious for the colonialists who observe without thinking (or wanting to think) that they are the cause, justify the colonial project, liberated of its responsibility and offers 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 in him a savage to eradicate, but also for the orientalist and the primitive who places his hopes in him.

It might seem surprising to place primitivism and orientalism on the same level, while the history of art has given each a different fate and that one has insisted on the links between orientalism and European imperialism. The Orient, as a western construction of a spatial alterity, assembles all of the “elsewheres”, all of the exoticisms. The dictionaries of the period include Oceania in their definition of the Orient, and Gauguin inscribes explicitly his Tahitian project in an oriental quest. As oriental alterity is conceived in opposition to civilization, “the primitivity is inherent to the Orient, is the Orient”<sup>24</sup>.

The pejorative vision of the primitive leads the missionaries, the teachers and the engineers into the colonies, the meliorative brings the orientalists... and Gauguin. The two aspects are in fact mingled. On one hand, the seduction exercised by the Orient reposes on a hope of renewal, and that of the Oriental on his (or rather her) exotic and savage sensuality. On the other, the conquest of the Orient and the Oriental is possible and legitimate only in relation to western superiority. This ambivalence is blatant with Gauguin. He assumes the western superiority in enjoying the status of the colonialist, and whatever he might say, of western art, while integrating borrowed elements from the "primitive" arts. At the same time, his departure from Europe and his artistic project carry the mark of a profound and revolted dissatisfaction with the society (urban, capitalist, Christian) and modern art (realism, impressionism).

From the nineteen twenties, the work of Gauguin has been widely reproduced, exposed and celebrated. How is it integrated into the colonial discourse, what could have been its effect on the colonialization of Polynesia? It is hardly possible that it might have determined the departures towards these far away islands, which did not ever receive many colonialists: for the whole colonial period (1842-1960), one has traced only 401 settlers, 295 of which were French from the metropole<sup>25</sup>.

### 3 Primitivism and tourism

Gauguin did not send any settlers to Tahiti, but numerous western visitors, yesterday or today, come there following his path. His work constitutes more an invitation to 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, because his work is easily recognized as an exceptional success, that one grants, for right or wrong, and in line with what Gauguin had himself said, of his Tahitian experience, painters in search of inspiration or especially sensitive to the work of Gauguin are tempted to relive his adventure. Linked to the *Die Brücke* expressionist movement, Emil Nolde and Max Pechstein leave in 1914 for the Palau Islands. Henri Matisse, following his voyages in Algeria and Morocco, stays three months in Tahiti in 1930.

Numerous novelists are also drawn towards the South Seas, particularly by the work of Gauguin. There is a real procession from the 1920s onward, which provokes an editorial storm<sup>26</sup>. S. Maugham stays for one month in Tahiti in 1917 and in 1919 publishes *The Moon and Six Pence*, of which Hollywood made a film in 1942, a romanticized life of Gauguin which was to greatly help to establish the "myth" Gauguin, particularly in the English speaking world, in the same way as the texts of V. Segalen in the French speaking world. The film producers have not been outdone<sup>27</sup>.

This media explosion is due not only to Gauguin. Bougainville and Loti still make their impact. This explosion is also the result of the opening of the Panama Canal (1914) and of the first regular steamship connection with Tahiti (1924). The island gains in accessibility, but also increased its capacity to fire the imagination due to this artistic production. Tourism begins to develop there, which the Papeete Chamber of Commerce recognizes in creating an Office of Tourism in 1930. At the beginning of the nineteen thirties, about 700 tourists visit the island each year. It was not until the opening of Faaa airport in 1961 that the tourism took off, and 2000 in order to surpass the figure of 250 000 visitors per year. At the same time, Hawaii was receiving more than 5 million.

It is in 1921 that, for the first time, an administrator mentions (with embarrassment by the way) the tourist resource that Gauguin represents: his tomb "has become a sort of place of pilgrimage for foreign tourists"<sup>28</sup>. The painter, as against Jack London<sup>29</sup>, had never been personally implicated in tourist promotion for Polynesia. Even if all of the tourist guides give space to Gauguin concerning Tahiti and the Marquesas Islands, Polynesia has in fact little to

offer to the amateurs of painting. Of course, one programmes the visit to the Gauguin museum in Papeari and the places where the painter had lived in Tahiti. The rare tourists who make the effort to go right to the Marquesas do not miss contemplating on his tomb at Atuoana, and they see the *Espace Culturel Paul Gauguin* of Atuona, inaugurated on the 8th May 2003 for the centenary of the painter, in the form of a replica of the house of the painter but without any original work. In the Tahiti Museum, inaugurated in 1965, only a few etchings and three sculpted spoons were 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 and they have taken part in the fabrication of the such attractive image of the island. The imagination of present tourists owes little to Loti, whom one hardly now reads, but still owes to Bougainville and to Rousseau who, if one does not read it, still gives form to the Tahiti of our dreams. Gauguin holds a central place in the communications of the tour operators in order to sell Tahiti: he is ever present in the tourist brochures. One reproduces his paintings or adaptations of them (fig. 7). But beyond direct references, it is all of the images, even the words, which owe something to Gauguin.

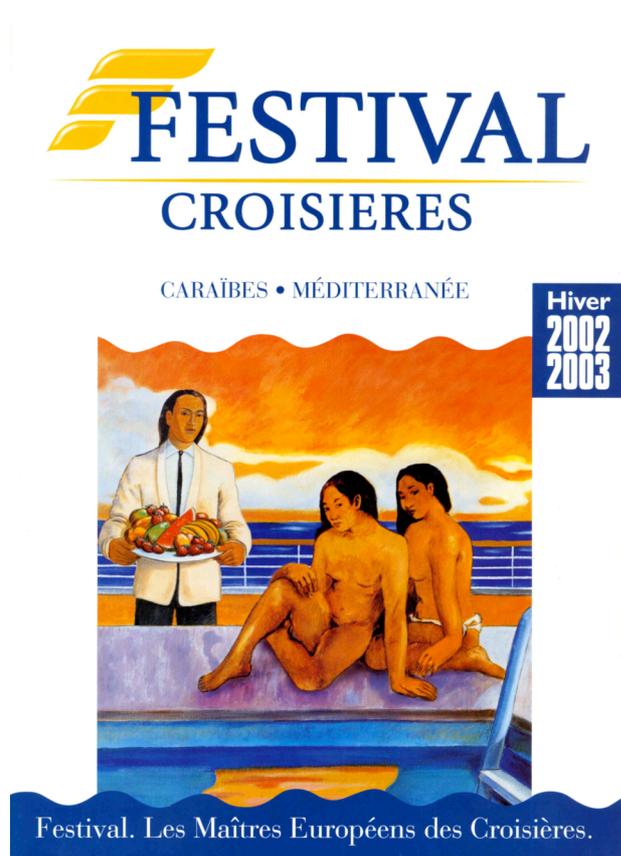


Fig.7: catalogue *Festival Croisières* 2002/2203 (front page)

Even if it is difficult on the spot to base a whole stay on the person of the painter, an active marketing offers substitutes. Tourist shops in Papeete are full of objects in the image of the Tahitian paintings of Gauguin. An historian or an amateur of art can, no doubt, be shocked by the consumerist way-laying of the work of the painter. But from the point of view of cultural geography, there is logic in the matter. Gauguin who had also come to Tahiti in the search of the exotic and the picturesque, who often represented in his work the scenes of the photographs and post cards on sale in the curio shops of Papeete, was not far from the tourist and he is of significance in the flow of tourists coming to Tahiti. His works were not (and are

still not) aimed at the Tahitians: was it not expected that one should offer them on the spot to this western public to whom they were intended and who have come to Tahiti indirectly because of them?

It is certainly not the primitivism of Gauguin that makes tourists come to Tahiti; they are attracted by the blue lagoon, the white sand... and the naked beauty of the Tahitian girls. This aspiration is nevertheless strengthened by the Eden like images produced by the painter, for whom it seems in that matter to be of little importance that they should refer to Tahitian motives and myths. However this enchanting vision of the tropical island is also tributary to the idea of a protected nature where the indigenous people live an easy, harmonious and authentic life. This nostalgia for a lost paradise is not foreign to primitivism, which confronts the failure of civilisation and of western art with the model of first arts and societies. There is a continuity between the Greek golden age, the biblical paradise, the good savage of Rousseau, the primitivist Tahiti of Gauguin and the tourist dream of the tropical beach.

"Ethnic tourism", which promises disgusted or tired Westerners to find roots of wisdom and original happiness, in the pristine environment of conserved nature, among first peoples who have everything to teach us, inscribes itself more directly in the filiation of primitivism, with which he shares the vision of the world, deceptions 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. One questions the authenticity of the procedure, to neo-colonialist stench, the folklore of indigenous cultures of which he become responsible, the misunderstandings that are nourished: so many reproaches that certain art historians make of primitivism.

#### **4 As seen from Tahiti**

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

To believe the 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 invites certain irritation. Gauguin "had no particular influence on our people. He is only one among numerous western voices who robbed us of our expression"<sup>30</sup>, she affirmed at a colloquium held in Papeete on the occasion of the centenary of the death of the painter, stirring up a commotion among certain European university personalities.

Gauguin was a colonialist and a European artist. As a settler, Gauguin is no more responsible than another. As an artist and producer of fine words it is less clear: his work plays a notable role in the maintenance of misunderstandings between the West and the Tahitians, due to the myths that they perpetuate. More so, the reduction of Tahiti to the island of Gauguin turns attention from the realities and the problems that are specific to Polynesia. However, Gauguin has represented Eve and Marie as Tahitians (fig. 8) ; he has celebrated Maori myths; he has placed Polynesian artefacts in his work and has recognized their artistic value. He deplores that "one does not seem to imagine in Europe that there had been either with the Maoris of New Zealand, or in the Marquesas a very advanced art of decoration" and that "the administration had not imagined for an instant, something that would have been easy, to create a museum in Tahiti of all Oceanic art"<sup>31</sup>.



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

The ambivalences of primitive art are they sufficient to relativize, even invalidate, 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 correspondents in the archipelago, gives us an enlightened counterpoint.

“I regret to inform you that there does not exist in the Marqueses an individual of either sex that could correspond with you. Public instruction here is not wide spread and the inhabitants of the Marqueses are, from many points of view, inferior to the Central African Negro, placed at the very bottom of the social scale; their immorality defies the imagination.

Besides, in general, I do not believe that it is of any interest that to establish a correspondence on the basis of equality between young French girls and the indigenous people of our colonies: the first have nothing to gain, quite the opposite, from such a bringing together, and the others, for whom the dominant fault is the lack of measure, lose immediately the sense of hierarchy, or even propriety.

I think that I guess correctly that you have been tricked by romantic poets, Loti perhaps, who sometimes paints the tropical countries with much talent, but mostly with little truth. My long experience of colonial matters and of life gives me authority to you advise, I insist Mademoiselle, to cultivate in your country and in your milieu, the friendships that your generous heart is seeking. You will find there serious guaranties that you would search for in vain 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 Mlle Mimi Baurens, Bordeaux<sup>32</sup>

The administrator who addresses this terrible blunt refusal to Mimi Baurens understands clearly in her request, the influence of those "*who paint the tropical countries*". The naive expectations of Mimi can make one smile, as can smile the tourists whom in ten days try to understand the Polynesian culture. 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 together"<sup>33</sup> (34). Beyond the nature and the motivations that are not always clear in this confrontation, an encounter takes place and is transmitted to others. Certainly, it is not Tahiti that one sees in his canvases, but it is nevertheless a Tahiti, his own. In return, the debates that are still incited by the painter and his work today give the occasion to tackle the history of Tahiti and also the relationships between the European and Tahitian communities. It is in this more positive perspective and in discrepancy with the ideas of Chantal Spitz that Flora Devatine, another Tahitian writer, presents Gauguin as a place of word and of dialogue<sup>34</sup>.

In Gauguin Street in Papeete, the boutique *Gauguin Tissu* (fabric) presents its wares on an ensign: *paréo, tapa, batiks, provençal*. There is a quite primitivist logic to put on the same level Tahitian cottons, beaten mulberry bark that is typical of Polynesian tradition, Indonesian tissues and prints from the South of France: one finds there the geographical horizons where Gauguin had found his travel destinations and his primitive resources. The ambiguous status of the *paréo* obliges us to stop there.

The *paréo*, contrary to the *tapa*, is not Tahitian: these cottons, printed in Manchester, are for Tahiti, an importation, linked to the British presence on the island during the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> 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 loves so much to dress his models with the *pareo*, did not realise its hybridity. One should not conclude however on the inauthenticity of the *paréo*: as much as it shows the incorporation by the British textile industry of the Tahitian motives and market, it also shows the capacity of the Tahitians to claim and spread their culture in a context shifting from pre-colonial to colonial and from colonial to post colonial. It would be to make little of the taste and the adaptability of the Polynesians to reduce their adoption of the *paréo* to a question of acculturation. It would be, once again, to refuse them a role of actor in their own history. Today, the *paréos* come from Eastern Asia, but they are also made by Tahitian firms based on motives created by local artists.

The *paréos* are very much sought after by the tourists. Logically, the shopkeepers propose magnificent examples printed in fine colours with motives of the Tahitian canvases of Gauguin. Let us even underline here the parallel between the cloth of the *paréo* and Gauguin's canvas: apart from the decorative exuberance of their colours, both belong, indissociably, to the West and to Tahiti, they are loaded with erotic and exotic connotations, are linked to the Tahitian identity and so constitute an attractive product for the tour operators as well as a souvenir for the tourists. Both can, according to all of these claims, pretend to the status of Oceanic icon of post-modernity and of primitivism.

From there to make a post-modern hero of the painter, opening the way of multicultural dialogue, there is a step that should not be taken. For the artist that work today in Tahiti, Gauguin at the same time a teaching figure and an anti-model.

The work of Dettloff, a German born artist who works in Tahiti, is inscribed in a primitivism that affirms its artificial nature, in mixing the footprints and hiding the paths. He borrows from hypothetical Polynesian art, evidently approached by their western, even colonial, interpretation (etchings of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, fantasies of decorated skull). He refers them to an imaginary of junk (Disney, stereotyped touristy products, icon of the sub-culture of the

western society of consumption: Coca-Cola, Disney, MacDonald). He draws a Maori tattoo on a Barbie doll (Miss Marquises, 1993), transforms *tikis* into Mannekin Piss (Männeken Piss in Tahiti, 1992; Le Déluge, 1992) and statues of Easter Island into Mickey (Sacred Site of Easter Island, 1994), engraves Polynesian motives on tyres (Traces of Culture, 1998) and disguises the German flag in *paréo*, (Heremania, 2001). His *Planches ethnographiques* are presented as illustrations of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but the Marquisian club which appear there are concocted from ears of Mickey (fig. 9)

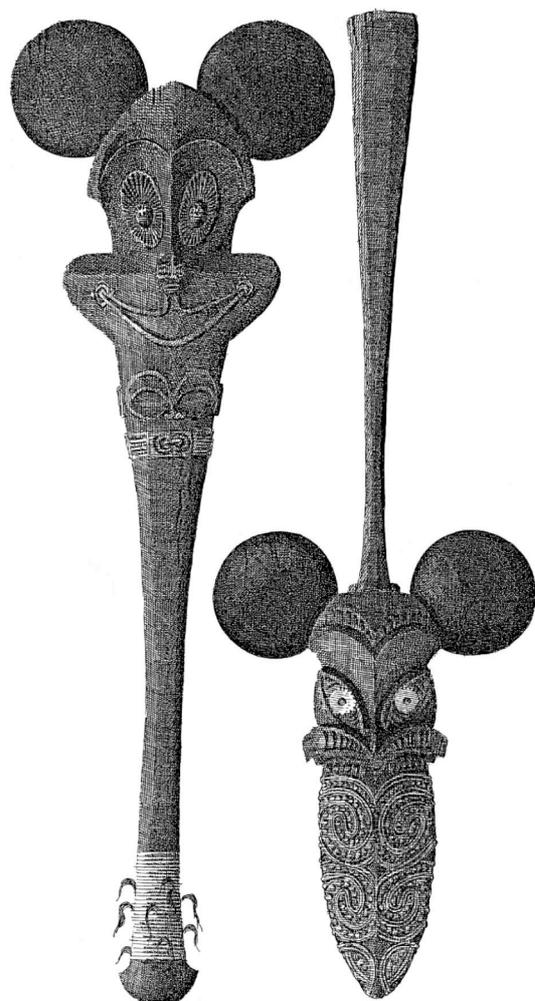


Fig. 9: Andreas Dettloff, *Planche ethnographique n°2*, 1997.

The approach of Gauguin is diverted in a subversive manner by the exhibition of the contradictions of primitivism and exoticism. The extremely post-modern hybridization and irony of these works constitute less a criticism of the primitivism of Gauguin than the finality of this, led right to the rejoicing acceptance of its contradictions. These works present a postcolonial Tahiti (and a West) that assumes its history and takes into account the geography of a world that is no longer hierarchized and fragmented, but where different cultures live together, capable by their crossed gazes to destabilize - that is to say to enrich and to put into perspective - their respective values. Is that not what Gauguin was hoping for - and also Mimi?

## Conclusion



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

Are the Tahitians then right to not be interested in Gauguin? Certainly he cannot teach them anything about their pre-colonial past, but his work and path illuminate the mutations that Polynesia has known during the past two centuries, of the colonisation and of the tourist development. Primitivism inscribes itself in the genealogy of relationships between the West and the Other: it enables the grasping the geography by which the West has constructed itself in reference and opposition to the "Elsewheres". In consequence and in return, primitivism is conscious of the geography of the "Elsewheres", into what they have been transformed - even produced - by the West.

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<sup>1</sup> In the English and French speaking world: Wallach, 1997 ; Piveteau, 1989.

<sup>2</sup> Among French geographers who have recently showed an interest in painting: Frémont, 1999 ; Fumey, 2003 ; Grison, 2002 ; Knafou, 2000 ; Knafou et Staszak, à paraître ; Staszak, 2003. In English, the reference is of course D. Cosgrove.

<sup>3</sup> French 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 analyse more systematically the links between literature and Geography (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 part dedicated to literature in French education. Painting, sculpture, cartoon, cinema has been paid less attention – not to speak about music (Lévy, 1999).

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

<sup>5</sup> Goldwater, 1988; Rubin, 1991; Rhodes, 1997; Dagen, 1998.

<sup>6</sup> Varnedoe, 1991: 179.

<sup>7</sup> Dor de La Souchère, 1960.

<sup>8</sup> Letter to Daniel de Monfreid, October 1902 (Gauguin, 1943: 83) (Gauguin underlining).

<sup>9</sup> Goldwater, 1988: 26, 277.

<sup>10</sup> H. Huehn, *Die Kunst der Primitiven*, Munich, Delphin Verlag, 1924 (Goldwater, 1988: 49).

<sup>11</sup> Bénin, 1932 ; Dakar-Djibouti, Marquises, 1934 ; Eskimo, 1935 (Goldwater, 1988: 27).

<sup>12</sup> Letter to Daniel de Monfreid, April-May 1893 (Gauguin, 1943: 13).

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- <sup>13</sup> Source: [www.elysee.fr](http://www.elysee.fr).
- <sup>14</sup> Jacques Chirac, foreword of a booklet presenting the Musée du quai Branly, April 2000.
- <sup>15</sup> CGTU: Confédération Générale du Travail Unitaire (communist trade union).
- <sup>16</sup> Hodeir and Pierre, 1991: 125-134; Ageron, 1997: 499-501.
- <sup>17</sup> Aragon, *in* Hodeir and Pierre, 1991: 126.
- <sup>18</sup> Staszak, 2003 b.
- <sup>19</sup> Staszak, 2003 a.
- <sup>20</sup> Hodeir and Pierre, 1991: 120
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- <sup>23</sup> Girardet, 1995: 143.
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- <sup>35</sup> Huygue, 1965: 238.
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