Art

Review

Gauguin: The Breakthrough into Modernity

Women on the verge: *'Parau Api (What's New)', 1892 (left); 'Young Christian Girl', 1894 (right)*

★★★★½

Van Gogh Museum until 6 June

In 2004 the Van Gogh Museum acquired a series of 11 prints by the leading post-impressionist French painter, Paul Gauguin (1848-1903). Known as the 'Volpini Suite' after the manager of the Café des Arts in Paris where the series could be viewed on demand, the portfolio features Gauguin's favourite subject matter: mostly women and exotic landscapes.

The café was situated on the grounds of the 1889 World's Fair, and the prints were specially conceived on the occasion as an inexpensive way for fairgoers to take home a piece of Gauguin's oeuvre, one of the most groundbreaking of the day.

By putting the portfolio into historical context and exploring its main themes, the museum's new exhibition, 'Gauguin: The Breakthrough into Modernity', uses the 'Volpini Suite' as a key to unlock the work of one of modern art's founding fathers. Along the way, the exhibition also reveals that artistic modernity as we know it wouldn't have existed if it hadn't been for the decisive influence of non-Western cultures and so-called 'primitive' art, the exotic appeal of which Gauguin captured repeatedly in the female form.

In his diary, Gauguin claimed to be a 'pure savage' – primitive and disgusted with the corruptions of modern life. When he was 38, he gave up his middle-class ambitions as a textile sales representative, and left his wife to care for their five children alone so he could dedicate himself entirely to painting and to finding a haven away from the hustle of civilised culture.

Soul-searching and fed up with the social and artistic conventions of his time, he travelled the rest of his life throughout France and its colonies in search of what he thought were expressions closer to the true – or 'primitive' – nature of man.

Following in the footsteps of the so-called 'orientalists', who had been travelling to far-flung locations to bring back imagery and ideas since the 1830s, Gauguin did not merely use these places and its people as inspiration; he transformed the exotic from subject matter into lifestyle.

The first gallery of the Van Gogh exhibit presents all 11 works from the 'Volpini Suite' and attempts to put them into historical context. Fresh from the easel, the paintings by Gauguin and his pals at the exhibition of the Groupe Impressionniste et Synthétiste (later called the School of Pont-Aven) reflect a shift towards simplified forms and expressive (rather than descriptive) use of colour.

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The new style of painting was dubbed 'cloisonnism' by some and 'synthetism' by others. It heralded a return to a subjective form of art that made use of symbols and rejected the slavish representation of reality as a futile exercise. In contrast to the naturalistic art embraced by the French academy, Gauguin was painting from memory and synthesised a wealth of different forms to compose his own work. He sought to express an 'inner' vision.

The second, more revelatory part of the exhibition gathers some additional 30 paintings, woodcarvings and ceramics made by Gauguin throughout his life. They are arranged into four thematic sections that correspond to the subject matter represented in the 'Volpini Suite': peasant women; bathers; the women of Arles; and the exotic landscapes of Martinique.

It clearly shows that what was so new about Gauguin's art was his artistic vision: not his subject matter, but rather his use of simple forms and colours endowed with symbolic meaning.

Gauguin's exoticism – this dubious marriage between modern artist and so-called primitive cultures embodied in the feminine form – has been a thorny topic for quite some time now. 'Gauguin: The Breakthrough into Modernity' doesn't deconstruct the myth of Gauguin's genius or give us particularly new insight into his fundamental conservatism.

The Van Gogh exhibit is all too busy foregrounding the costly acquisition of the 'Volpini Suite' to produce a truly groundbreaking exhibit. By doing so, it misses an opportunity and instead simply reaffirms the obvious: that we should look with sceptical eyes at Gauguin's fascination with women and primitive cultures as an expression of his own colonialist desire.

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