

Introduction

Authenticity is a word that always accompanies the art market, as it guarantees the monetary value of a work of art. Originality and creativity are also firmly anchored ideals. In order to expose forgeries, art experts are trained, most of whom specialise in one artist. These are often the editors of the *Catalogue raisonné*, a comprehensive directory of an artist's works compiled according to scientific standards. The *Catalogue raisonné* can be used to control the art market and protect the artistic oeuvre. Despite the seemingly objective categories and the rather dry listing of the works, including their provenance, exhibition history and publication history, such a project is characterised by a vital concept of the whole, which is shaped by purpose and development. It is complex to remove or add works from the catalogue. It therefore requires openness to new investigations and insights. In this sense, it is essential to constantly research and scrutinize an artist's oeuvre and also to review the *Catalogue raisonnés* of artists (incorporating current research findings) and revise them if necessary. After all, this is a document that is intended to provide posterity as well as the contemporary world with information about the work of artists. Authenticity and genuineness are therefore essential, as they provide information about the artists' work, their influences and reception. However, despite authentication, works of art may still not be included in the *Catalogue raisonnés*. This may be due to gaps in documentation, insufficient awareness or acceptance of new research by the editorial committee, or institutional hesitancy to challenge previously established conclusions. As a result, even authentic works can remain outside the canon, highlighting the complex and often subjective nature of *Catalogue raisonnés* and the ongoing need for transparency and collaboration within the art world.

Paul Gauguin was a French painter who was passionate about his art. In addition to paintings, Gauguin produced numerous ceramics, woodcuts and writings. It seems as if the artist's life's work has been handed down in a comprehensive and detailed manner. However, just as Gauguin cannot be assigned to an artistic epoch, his works do not allow any clear conclusions to be drawn about his oeuvre.

The visual language of his paintings, based on an extensive collection of source motifs, is heterogeneous and adaptable. Richard Field argues in his 1977 dissertation *'Paul Gauguin: The Paintings of the First Voyage to Tahiti'* that Gauguin thought primarily in colours and that he carefully composed his paintings to „*crystallise his ideas*”, often repeating or borrowing ready-made motifs. Gauguin's paintings therefore pose particular challenges of authenticity for viewers, collectors and scholars. For example, the still life *'Nature morte à la tête de cheval'* (W 216, fig. 1) hardly matches Gauguin's handwriting, as it hardly corresponds to the artist's “style” in the mid-1880s. The work was not exhibited for the first time until 1926, when it was in the possession of Hjalmar Gabrielson in Gothenburg. How it came into the collection is unknown. The signature also appears to have been added later. A technological examination of the work would at least clarify questions about the colours, paint thickness and painting technique, but this was never carried out. It is nevertheless listed in the *Catalogue raisonné*.



fig. 1: Paul Gauguin *Nature morte à la tête de cheval*, 1886, oil on canvas, 49 x 38 cm, Artizon Museum Tokyo.

The work '*Nue tahitienne assise avec fleur rouge*', which is examined in this work in art-historical and technological detail, was created in 1892 (fig. 2). It shows a seated Tahitian woman bending forwards and forming her hands into a protective structure. At the bottom right is a glowing red hibiscus flower that stands out against the blue background. The woman is presumably sitting on a bed, as the ground gives way slightly to her weight. She is wearing three white flowers in her hair and her gaze is turned away from both her hands and the hibiscus flower. Gauguin has signed and dated the work at the bottom left.



fig. 2: Paul Gauguin *Nue tahitienne assise avec fleur rouge* (recto), 1892, *Chambre avec vue d'une fenêtre ouverte* (verso), undated, oil on canvas, 64.5 x 90.5 cm, private collection Zurich.

This work will demonstrate that the work '*Nue tahitienne assise avec fleur rouge*' is an original painting by Paul Gauguin from 1892 and that the painting '*Chambre avec vue d'une fenêtre ouverte*' on the reverse is also attributed to Paul Gauguin.

The first chapter describes Gauguin's life and working methods in general, later focussing on Tahiti and Tehamana and the interior scene on the reverse.

The second chapter summarises the data and analyses of the technical studies. It discusses the canvas, the colour palette and other analyses and places these in relation to technical studies by the Art Institute of Chicago and other works in other museums. The history of the restorations and retouches carried out is also examined. Together, the first and second chapters provide evidence of both an art-historical classification and a technical-scientific examination of the work, allowing a clear attribution to Paul Gauguin.

The third chapter reconstructs the provenance of the work. A distinction is made here between confirmed and unconfirmed provenance. The possibilities and limitations of provenance research are then outlined.

The fourth chapter was written by Dr. Elpida Vouitsis and presents further in-depth research into the early provenance. Both expertise prove that both paintings are of art-historical value and close a gap in Gauguin's oeuvre.

1 The life and work of Gauguin

This chapter first examines Gauguin's living conditions in general and then focuses on the years in Tahiti from 1891-1893 in order to subsequently place the work '*Nue tahitienne assise avec fleur rouge*' in historical context. As the woman depicted is presumably Tehamana, Gauguin's wife during his first stay in Tahiti, other works by Gauguin depicting Tehamana are discussed in terms of stylistic criticism. As the canvas was painted on both sides, the last part of the first chapter also examines the painting on the reverse, '*Chambre avec vue d'une fenêtre ouverte*' (fig. 2).

1.1 Gauguin's work and first artworks

Paul Gauguin initially earned good money in banking in Paris. However, he grew tired of this profession and decided to quit his job in 1884 to devote himself entirely to his art. 1873 was not only the year in which Gauguin married his wife Mette Gad, but also the year in which he painted his first documented painting entitled '*Sous-bois, Saint-Cloud I*' (W 2, fig. 3; Wildenstein, 2001: 7).³



fig. 3: Paul Gauguin *Sous-bois, Saint-Cloud I*, 1873, oil on canvas, 26 x 35.4 cm, private collection.

³ In the *Catologue raisonné* published in 2001, a portrait by Marie Heegaard, which is lost, is listed as the first painting. The work '*Sous-bois, Saint-Cloud I*' is mentioned here as the first painting, as it has been physically preserved and is in a private collection. In Georges Wildenstein's *Catologue raisonné*, published in 1964, Gauguin's artistic career is dated as early as 1871 with the painting '*Paysage d'Automne*'. This first publication later proved to be flawed and erroneous (e.g. incorrectly dated works), so that a revision was worked on for decades. The first part with numerous additions, but also deletions of problematic works, was published in 2001. The present work refers to the updated catalogue from 2001 (published and online).

<https://digitalprojects.wpi.art/gauguin/artworks>. 17/07/2024.

Gauguin's early artistic work was characterised by Impressionism, landscapes, still lifes and people depicted during an activity. The colour palette was rather muted, restrained and dedicated to realism. After completing his apprenticeship as an amateur painter, he continued to learn techniques from the Impressionists, particularly Cézanne. Especially in the years between 1886 and 1888, his painting changed as a result of his close dialogue with Bernard, Laval and van Gogh. From the 1880s onwards, his colours became brighter, friendlier and purer. His style changed during his time in Brittany. The forms became more two-dimensional and Gauguin enjoyed the contrasting play of complementary colours.

When the artist went out to paint in Pont-Aven, for example, his approach and teaching seemed to be the following: Observe and think about the subject, select and simplify to arrive at the picture and finally complete the painting in one go. To do this, he often made notes in a sketchbook in order to later paint the outline of the motif in the studio with diluted blue paint and then return outdoors to produce the final painting from the motif without interruption.⁴

Several thinly painted works, such as '*Conversation dans les prés, Pont-Aven*' (W 280, fig. 4), painted in 1888, and several unfinished canvases, such as '*Vue sur Pont-Aven prise de Lézavan*' (W 281, fig. 5), also painted in 1888, clearly show Gauguin's approach.⁵



fig. 4: Paul Gauguin *Conversation dans les prés, Pont-Aven*, 1888, oil on canvas, 92.5 x 73 cm, Royal Museums of Fine Arts of Belgium, Brussels.

⁴ See Sketchbook Tahiti 1891-1893, Cahier pour Aline 1893, Noa Noa 1893.

⁵ The work '*Conversation dans les prés, Pont-Aven*' was painted with diluted paint, which makes the colours appear paler and the canvas shows through in places. In places there are entire colour omissions on the canvas, which is typical of Gauguin. In contrast, the work '*Vue sur Pont-Aven prise de Lézavan*' was painted with undiluted colours, making them appear more luminous. Overall, the work is painted much more flatly and the blue contour lines are clearly recognisable, which are also characteristic of Gauguin.



fig. 5: Paul Gauguin *Vue sur Pont-Aven prise de Lézavan*, 1888, oil on canvas, 70 x 54 cm, private collection.

Paul Gauguin's art and his writings suggest that originality and authenticity for him resulted primarily from the conception of the artwork and only secondarily from its style and technique.

Both art historians and employees at the Wildenstein-Plattner Institute encounter problems when it comes to the immediate and unambiguous attribution of paintings to Gauguin's oeuvre. For example, some works, especially still lifes or landscapes, were copied as a learning experience. While the painting '*Entre les lys*' from 1889 was still represented in the 1964 *Catologue raisonné* (W 366-1964, fig. 6), it can no longer be found in the 2001 *Catologue raisonné*.⁶ One possible reason may be that two versions of the work exist. They differ only in terms of colour, signature and dating. The original shows faded shades of pink, while more stable pigments were used in the copy, so that the copy has retained important information about the original.

⁶ Meanwhile, the signed and dated work was sold at Sotheby's New York on 15 November 1989 for just under 8.7 million euros. Today, the painting is in a private collection.

https://de.artprice.com/artist/10904/paul-gauguin/gemalde/686100/entre-les-lys?lots_search_uniq_id=1725370810817098169&keyword=Entre+les+lys&p=1. 24/01/2024.

The WPI has since updated the *Digital Catalogue raisonné* and the work '*Entre les lys*' is now listed online (PGUBFT).

<https://digitalprojects.wpi.art/gauguin/artworks/detail?a=76171-entre-les-lys>. 18/07/2024.



fig. 6: Paul Gauguin *Entre les lys*, 1889, oil on canvas, 92 x 73,5 cm, private collection.

With the publication of the current version of the Digital Catalogue raisonné, the work is listed there with the note '*Approved without formal examination by the Gauguin Committee of the WPP.*'

A similar problem with a volatile pigment in a gouache by Gauguin meant that the work '*Jeune Bretonne au bord de la mer*' (fig. 7) was initially rejected by Daniel Wildenstein because it did not look strong enough to be painted by Gauguin.⁷ It was only after the publication of a technical study that the work was accepted and will be included in the forthcoming volume of works on paper.⁸

The signature and dating were not sufficient for an entry. Only scientific research and technical photographs confirmed that the paper support of the young Breton girl by the sea had darkened and that the figure was much more strongly modelled and the landscape more brightly coloured before the fleeting red pigment faded (Burns & Jirat-Wasiutyński, 1997).

This example shows how important technical investigations are for work entries and that the focus should not only be on style, technique and artistic handwriting. In their early years, and even later, artists played with colours, styles and elements in order to find or change themselves and their art.

It was only in Tahiti that Gauguin found his final form of expression, which cannot be categorised as Symbolism, Primitivism, Synthetism or Expressionism. On the oceanic island, Gauguin found his very own formal language and colour palette, which shaped his painting until his death.

⁷ It should be noted that the works '*Bretonnes près de la mer*' (W 340-1964) and '*Petites Bretonnes devant la mer (II)*' (W 341-1964), both painted in 1889, depict a similar girl figure.

⁸ On 25 June 2001, the work was sold at Christie's London for around 460,000 euros. On 4 November 2010, Christie's New York sold the work again for around 725,000 euros. The work has thus increased in value by approx. 58% (6.44% p.a.) within nine years. According to the description of the work in the auction catalogue, the work was still not registered in 2010.



fig. 7: Paul Gauguin *Jeune Bretonne au bord de la mer*, 1889, gouache on paper, 41 x 27.9 cm, private collection. The blue contour lines are also clearly recognisable here.

1.2 Gauguin in Tahiti

Paul Gauguin was always in search of the origin, or rather in search of the lost human realms. He hoped that he would find them in Tahiti. As early as 1887, Gauguin set off for Panama and Martinique with his painter friend Charles Laval. They produced the first paintings of this exotic subject, such as '*La Cueillette des Fruits, ou Aux Mangos*' (W 250, fig. 8), '*Conversation (Tropiques), ou Negresses Causant*' (W 251, private collection) or '*Porteuses de fruits à l'anse Turin, ou Bord de mer II*' (W 253, private collection).

Due to Laval's poor health, the two painters had to leave early. But in 1890, Gauguin decided to emigrate to Tahiti and prepared his departure.⁹ He organised an auction at the Hôtel Drouot for 1891, the proceeds of which he used to finance his trip. He reached Papeete, the capital of Tahiti, in June 1891. In *Noa Noa*, Gauguin describes his impressions of his arrival and the country. He reports on the death of the last king and the Europeanisation and missionary work by France, which he was very critical of, as in his opinion both represented a threat to the “primitive people”. It was only in the interior of the country that Gauguin found what he was looking for: the primitive.¹⁰ It was there that

⁹ Deep down, Gauguin still harboured the calculations of a banker, as he did not want to travel to Tahiti just for the beauty of the country. In a letter to Schuffenecker in November 1888, Gauguin wrote "*The market needs new motifs*", which he hoped to find there.

¹⁰ Gauguin's infatuation with Tahiti began in the late 1880s. In 1880, Julien Viaud published the novel '*Le mariage de Loti - Rarahu*' under his pseudonym Pierre Loti, reinforcing the flourishing Tahitian myth that had been sparked in 1771 with the publication of Louis-Antoine de Bougainville's '*Voyage autour du monde*'. Gauguin had read both novels. He even discussed his enthusiasm for the landscape and way of life described there with Vincent van Gogh when he visited him in

Gauguin developed his most mature and personal style, which would not have emerged in Europe. The new types of people and landscapes, the pure and classical forms as well as the clear and splendid colours represent a „*style of the most beautiful rhythm of lines, surfaces and colours and of the strongest formal and intellectual concentration.*” (Graber, 1946: 14).



fig. 8: Paul Gauguin *La Cueillette des Fruits, ou Aux Mangos*, 1887, oil on canvas, 86 x 116 cm, Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam.

Intimidated by the Tahitian women who surrounded him, he set off on a horse to find a wife. In *Noa Noa*, he describes how he finally met Tehamana¹¹ and how they lived together. For Gauguin, this was the fulfilment of his life:

Now the perfectly happy life began, based on the certainty of tomorrow, on mutual trust, on the mutual certainty of love. I had started work again and happiness was living in my house. It rose with the sun, radiant like it. The gold of Tehura's face flooded the interior of the hut and the surrounding landscape with joy and clarity. And we were both so completely simple! (Gauguin, 1961: 54).

The years 1891-1893 were very creative years for Gauguin and he painted many of his most important works during this time. Only the work '*Tehamana has many Parents*' or '*The Ancestors of Tehamana*' (W 497, fig. 9) from 1893 bears the name of his Tahitian wife in its title. However, there are numerous works that also allow a connection to Tehamana, as the following chapter shows.

Arles in 1888 (Költzsch exhib. cat., 1998: 60). He later adopted individual passages for his work *Noa Noa*, so that his texts are strongly reminiscent of the novels. *Noa Noa* is certainly based in part on Gauguin's personal experiences, but the writing is largely fictitious (exhib. cat. Költzsch, 1998: 62).

¹¹ In *Noa Noa*, Gauguin calls her Tehura. However, the work will use the name Tehamana.