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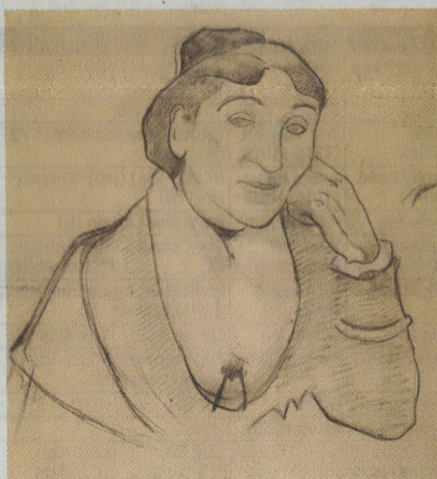
Gauguin's self-conscious art

De Young's first show of Impressionist's works ranges from significant to banal

By Charles Desmarais

Near the end of the new Paul Gauguin exhibition at the de Young Museum is a curious printed panel. Titled "Gauguin Family Album," it charts the artist's relationships with a wife and five children, but also with five "young women," 13 to 15 years old, who were his lovers between 1890 and 1902. Some of the girls bore children; two he claimed to have married, though he never divorced his first wife; all were left to fend for themselves financially when he was done with them.

One can only applaud the museum's transparency in sharing that information. It is but one example of far too many great artists behaving horribly, yet viewers have a right to know what kind of louse they are dealing with. The question is not whether the information



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Above: "L'Arlésienne, Mme. Ginoux (The Woman from Arles, Madame Ginoux)" (1888). Top: "Reclining Tahitian Women" (1894).

should have been provided, but why it shows up where it does in the show. When one finally encounters it, it's too late to act by, say, choosing not to attend. It is, by that time, extraneous — not to say salacious — information.

"Gauguin: A Spiritual Journey," on view Nov. 17 through April 7, seems to be the first Gauguin exhibition to be held in San Francisco. The best of the show is reason enough to place it high among your holiday cultural outing priorities. As a whole, however, it feels fluffed-up, marred by its inflation with the barely relevant.

There are great examples of the works that brought the self-trained former stockbroker to the pinnacle of late 19th century French art. There are worthwhile surprises, too, among

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the works he made as he struggled to be recognized by the Impressionists who were his teachers and his heroes, before he went his own, brilliantly idiosyncratic way.

A selection of prints from the museum's Achenbach Foundation collection might be missed in galleries busy with color, but it includes the most radical images in the show. Figures, logically readable on their own, overlap and dissolve into landscape. The pictures become marvelous puzzles that barely but surely hang together, flickering between flattened abstract form and illusionistic depth.

A significant grouping of the artist's rare ceramic works, almost never seen together in numbers that allow comparison, is a small show on its own. He called them his "monstrosities" and saw them partly as a way to recover aspects of an "Inca" heritage he claimed from his French-Peruvian mother. Some of them are truly grotesque, blistering and melting into, let's call them, abnatural forms. Among them, though, one also finds his admiring "Portrait Head (Tête de Martiniquaise)" (1887-88) of a sturdy, dignified woman in a kerchief.

Several key paintings are, in

"Gauguin: A Spiritual Journey": 9:30 a.m.-5:15 p.m. Tuesdays-Sundays. Through April 7. \$13-\$28. De Young Museum, Golden Gate Park, 50 Hagiwara Tea Garden Drive, S.F. 415-750-3600. <http://deyoung.famsf.org>

► Go to <http://dyinsights.org/gauguin> to see an excellent interactive publication, designed to be used in preparation for a visit to the exhibition. Included is an installment of the Yuki Kihara film "First Impressions: Paul Gauguin."

themselves, worth the visit to the exhibition. "Landscape From Brittany With Breton Women" (1888) is a visual delight, with its doubling of the women's headdresses, that extends the narrative pleasure we take in a simple vignette of rural life. It documents an artistic departure and, at 40, a step toward maturity. Made just two years after his participation in the final Impressionist exhibition, it was also a step away from the interpretation of nature and toward art as symbol.

Just a year later, with "Breton Girl," he had moved even further from illusionistic detail, relying on broad forms to describe the peasants and a landscape he found exotic.

Brittany, of course, would hardly satisfy for long the Parisian's dreams of engaging a



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Paul Gauguin's "Breton Girl" is an 1889 painting.

part of the world — of life — he called "savage." He was ready to make his famous move to Polynesia, to live in a native hut like he saw at the world's fair, to embrace a fantasy world of tropical landscapes and bare-breasted native girls.

By the time he arrived in Tahiti in 1891, the French colony was well past the stage of Christianization and on its way to becoming part of the modern world. What he had imagined but did not find, he chose to create, both in his life — he lived in the South Pacific, with only brief return trips to Europe, until his death in 1903 — and in his art. Several works from the period are shown, including two extraordinary examples — "Tahitian Woman With a Flower" (1891), a mash-up of Renaissance tropes and fiery post-Impressionist color,

and "Reclining Tahitian Women" (1894), a nod to Manet's "Luncheon on the Grass" as observed by a Polynesian god.

The flaws of the exhibition derive not from curatorial weakness, but from the museum's insecurity about borrowing a selection of works from a single museum. Copenhagen's Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek is endowed with a fine Gauguin collection, presumably due to the artist's connection to the city through his Danish wife, Mette, to whom he sent art to sell as a form of child support. With 56 works including the artist's first amateur successes, however, it is not a collection that can sustain a substantial survey, even with the addition of excellent drawings and prints from the Achenbach.

To compensate, the museum has developed a few threads of

discussion that are, like that "Family Album" panel, engaging on their own merits but largely peripheral to the artist's work. The de Young has a fine collection of Oceanic art, and a number of works are on display. Their association with Gauguin lies in the artist's love of Pacific island culture, but its inclusion is more atmospheric than art historical — none of the objects figure directly in his work.

Most eccentric of all is the inclusion of a specially commissioned series of new videos by Yuki Kihara, an artist who works in Samoa. "First Impressions: Paul Gauguin" consists of discussions with a small group of "third gender" Samoans, "turning the colonial gaze ... back upon Western culture."

It's an intriguing idea, and it might have made a worthwhile adjunct show. Gauguin is said to have included Ma hu — Tahitian "third gender" individuals — in some paintings. Judging from the first episode, the videos are mildly entertaining. The discussions, however, are based on reproductions, not on works of art, and the topics are superficial. That may well be the point — Gauguin's knowledge of Tahitian culture was likely just as shallow when he first encountered it — but its inclusion within the exhibition proper does no honor either to Kihara's art or to Gauguin's.

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