

# Gauguin And The Idea Of An Asian Paradise

*Paul Gauguin not only offered the world a fresh view of itself but he also suggested that there may well be places where paradises existed. That place was the South Seas. Much inspired by Gauguin's example, many artists sought out Southeast Asia for their paradise. Bali was at the center of this experience of paradise.*

By Alison Carroll

A major exhibition of the work of Paul Gauguin in London recently focused on him as “the maker of myth.”<sup>1</sup> It is an apt phrase for the effect Gauguin—the man and his art—had not only on his primary audience in Europe, but also in Asia. His powerful images, made through the very well-known life he had in Tahiti, emphasized the idea of the artist who, in spurning modern city life, becomes the heroic seeker of a different sort of paradise, and through this he showed that this different sort of paradise was indeed something wonderful. Though artists, particularly in Southeast Asia, responded with interest, this response has not been adequately discussed. Is it because of squeamishness about his life as a European exploiter of the South Seas maiden, or because the ‘discovery’ of the idea of an Asia/Pacific paradise was done not by them but by a Frenchman, or because, as the curator of the London show says, it is just too obvious—he is over-exposed—or, again, because the story is too variously told in different centers for the threads to have been brought together?

The story in Asia, of course, is complicated. Gauguin promoted himself as not all-European, living as a child in Peru and implying

he had ‘Inca’ blood, which his dark skin and chiseled face helped affirm. And the culture he made known in Tahiti was, for the most part for Asian artists, transposed to the more knowable and accessible site of Bali. One of the qualities often noted in Bali is its success in maintaining traditional

culture and its resistance to modernity, unlike Tahiti where Gauguin overtly ignored depicting the ‘progress’ around him.

The catalogue to the London Gauguin exhibition notes how, toward the end of his life when he wanted to go home to France, people recognized the importance to his legacy of his remaining far away in Tahiti, as an exotic ‘other.’ His friend in France, Daniel de Monfreid, wrote to dissuade his return: “You are at the moment that extraordinary, legendary artist who sends from the depths of Oceania his disconcerting, inimitable works, the definitive works of a great man who has disappeared, as it were, off the face of the earth .... You enjoy the immunity of the great dead, you belong now to the *history of art*.”<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, the seminal publication, Julius Meier-Graefe’s *Modern Art*, was published in 1904 (and in English in 1908), a year after Gauguin’s death in Tahiti and included more of his paintings than of any other artist. His fame was sealed. With it came the idea of the South Seas—of Oceania—appealing to both his compatriots in France and also particularly young artists following on in Germany. The most famous French artist to head to their colony of Tahiti was Henri Matisse, who made memorable images more of water and air than the foliage



Paul Gauguin, *Femmes sur le bord de la mer, ou Maternité I*, 1899, oil on canvas, 94 x 72 cm. Collection of Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.



Victorio Edades, Galo B Ocampo, and Carlos Francisco, *Interaction*, 1935, oil on canvas, 255 x 271 cm. Collection of Dr Teyet Pascual. Photograph by Dorothea Garing, Ateneo Art Gallery, Manila.

and people of these islands. More affected by the human side of the tropical experience were young German artists around *Die Brücke* group, Emil Nolde and Max Pechstein in particular, the first of whom spent six months in 1913–1914 in New Guinea, and the second in nearby Palau.

New Guinea was at that time under German colonial control and Nolde made some 30 oil paintings, as well as drawings, mostly of the people of Neu-Mecklenburg (New Ireland) off the coast of the mainland. He did this in two months, even in this strange, hot, so different environment, showing the energy of an artist recently engaged in the vivid experiments in Germany. Nolde was beholden to Gauguin’s example in his interest in

the ‘savage’ and he wrote of the “primeval savage races” he encountered and that the tropics “are a magic world such as is known nowhere else.”<sup>3</sup> A telling comment by as great a colorist as Nolde reflects his real experience as different from his Gauguin-inspired visual expectations: that the South Seas were “not so colorful as is generally supposed”<sup>4</sup> and indeed the greatest color of his own works made there are in the landscape drawings rather than paintings of the people of New Guinea.

The response in Asia to Gauguin has been varied, following a number of cultural trails to other parts of the world. The actual islands of the Pacific have not

attracted Asian cultures. As readers of *Asian Art News* well know, the Chinese word for the South Seas is “Nanyang,” but in reality this refers to Southeast Asia, particularly the area around current-day Singapore [and Malaya], rather than the real ‘South Seas.’ However, while Tahiti (or New Guinea or Palau) didn’t attract artists from Asia, the idea of it as a paradise of difference from Europe, in their own region, did. And the power of Gauguin’s art fused both his stylistic influence and subject matter in their responses.

The journals of the leading French colonies of Asia in Indo-China, particularly in Hanoi, regularly wrote of and reproduced work by these new Post Impressionists, often in fairly fuzzy

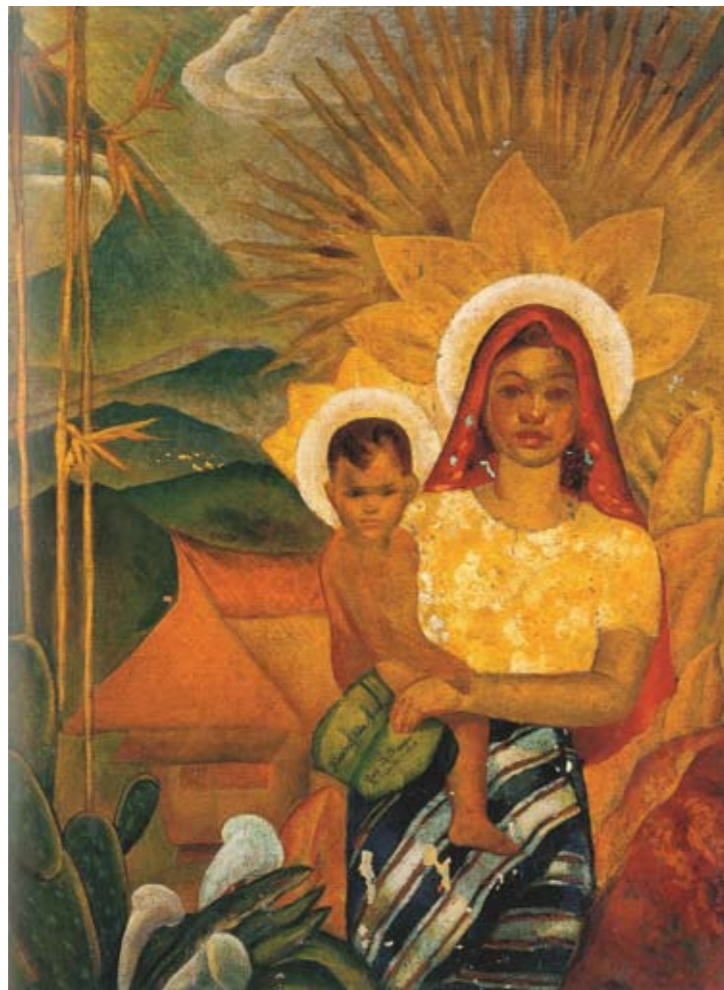
black and white reproduction. However, while the Vietnamese therefore knew of Gauguin, they were both too far away from the South Seas, and too close to their Confucian neighbor China, to be tempted themselves to follow.

**T**he key responses were in the Philippines and then in Bali, Java, and Singapore, the latter affected by a key artist from Shanghai. Apart from Shanghai, all of course are tropical island cultures themselves.<sup>5</sup>

Filipinos in the 1930s recognized Gauguin as 'other' as they recognized the Mexican muralists.<sup>6</sup> The revolutionary triumvirate of Filipino art, Victorio Edades, Galo B Ocampo, and Carlos Francisco, had been influenced by the idea that Rivera and his colleagues were artists of significance who were not European. Gauguin was a man also associated with Latin America via his 'Inca/Peruvian' past, who saw the interest of a tropical island society which shared so much cultural and visual

associations with themselves. Edades had had a scholarship to study in the USA and while there had seen a traveling exhibition of Gauguin's work. He brought books back to Manila of the art he had seen in America. Edades wrote how impressed they were by Gauguin, by "the way he created his masterpieces of Polynesians in Tahiti, by his color and composition."<sup>7</sup> Ocampo went on to create a key Filipino work that would not have happened without this lead: *Brown Madonna* (1938). It shows a local village girl, with her halo the anahaw palm leaf and includes text across the leaf she holds in direct acknowledgement of Gauguin. Obvious, too, is the rich color applied in contrasting blocks across the strong simple forms of the figures and landscape. Edades's literal tribute to Gauguin is seen in *Bulul at Babae* of the 1930s Philippines, as it is in work by less well-known artists such as Arsenio Capili (see his *Tinguian Woman* of 1941). This mix of influence, made relevant to Filipino life, was also seen in murals the triumvirate did in Manila that eventually has led to works such as those by the group Sanggawa in the 1990s.

We look next to Bali, where the Asian response to Gauguin really flowered,



**Galo B Ocampo, *Brown Madonna*, 1938, oil on canvas, 89 x 73.4 cm (including frame). Collection of University of Santo Tomas, Manila.**

and created the image of a place, like Tahiti itself, in many ways misleading of its reality. Life is not the paradise for many Balinese that outsiders expect. Indeed one of the more poignant responses to the Bali bombs was outsiders' sudden realization



**Victorio Edades, *Bulul at Babae*, 1930s, oil on canvas, 55 x 69.5 cm. Collection of the Jorge B Vargas Museum and Filipiniana Research Center, University of the Philippines - Dilman.**

that tourism and its income are so important to so many on the margins of wealth in what seems on the surface such a 'rich' society.

Walter Spies, of German background like Nolde and Pechstein, went to Bali in 1927 and was followed by society leaders from Europe and the USA, from Charlie Chaplin to Noel Coward. Spies was not only very important in his contribution to the establishment of a recognized Bali School of painting, but in his transformation of the idea of living in a tropical landscape such as Bali's. He, unlike the Balinese, was not so fearful of spirits that might invade the house complex at night, so he didn't need their systems of walls, enclosure and deflection. Instead of turning his back on the vegetation, he opened his environment outwards. He extended the traditional Balinese pavilion into a European-style garden, with grass and flowers and water, and not-so-evident walls, a model that hotels around the world have followed.

We know a lot about the stay of Walter Spies in Bali, alone among the foreigners for really changing his work in line with the reality—the mystic magic—of Balinese culture. Dutchmen Rudolf Bonnet, Arie Smit, and Willem Hofker, Australian Donald Friend, Belgian Jean La Mayeur, and others, all went there to paint the objects of their desire. Other non-Asian visitors are less well-known. Mexican Miguel Covarrubias is a sympathetic character, seen in his book on Balinese culture published in 1937 and his paintings and drawings, which maintain the sinuous elegance and energy he had developed elsewhere.

It can be argued that Spies became an Asian artist, but it is a moot point. However, the Balinese themselves, who learnt much from him and realized there was a market for their artwork from the rich tourists who visited from the 1930s, are the ones central to this article. They followed in Gauguin's shoes in painting their land and people for a Western gaze, with works that, as such images often do, rise to heights of great creative success. Ida Bagus Gelgel and Ida Bagus Kambang won silver medals at the 1937 Paris International Exhibition. I Gusti Nyoman Lempad created works that stayed close to tradition but understandable

and powerful to all. *Funeral Ceremony*<sup>8</sup> by an unknown artist in the 1930s is typical of these early works.

The idea of the landscape as paradise and the portrayal especially of young women living at one with nature comes directly from Gauguin. Ironically the impact of his work derived from the demonic threat from old gods and demons of Tahiti—giving it its sense of foreboding or menace—could easily have remained in the Balinese images. The Balinese traditionally painted stories of gods and goddesses, witches and demons, stories with scenes from the old Hindu master narratives: not the village life and certainly not the alluring young maidens we see so often. However, the tourist audience of Bali did not understand the stories and wanted a pleasant memory of their holiday there, so the balance gradually adapted to this.

**T**he sexualization of Bali and its people is a vexed issue. The human body was not the key to Spies' Bali, rather the landscape and its cultural whole, but it was important to Covarrubias as his paintings of young naked girls (and photographs by his wife) show. And it was very important to others like Hofker. This is where current-day squeamishness takes over. The beautiful-girl images made by many in Bali remain slightly unsettling now. The 'orientalism' that Edward Said so clearly articulated, with 19th century European gaze at half-naked dancing girls of the Middle East, is, indeed, extended to Bali in this century, with the gaze of not only European men but also those from other parts of Asia.

It certainly extended to the next group: the artists of Chinese background who went to Bali: first Liu Haisu in 1940



**Left: Chen Chong Swee, *Balinese Women*, 1952, oil on canvas, 74 x 59 cm. Collection of National Heritage Board, Singapore. Far left: Willem Hofker, *Ni Kenyung*, 1942, Neka Art Museum, Ubud.**



**Anonymous, *Funeral Ceremony (Upacara Penguburan Jenazah)*, pre-1940, watercolor and ink on paper.**

and then the group from Singapore (the Nanyang, or Chinese 'South Seas' as noted before) in the 1950s. It is of note that the myth of the artist in paradise, as Bali offered, was so strong that these artists from Singapore did not find what they wanted in the life around them, even in the kampungs of rural Malaya. In part this was still the idea of the heroic explorer, having to 'be there.' Like Gauguin "it was, by his own admission, only in the tropics that he had discovered 'himself.'"<sup>9</sup> So these artists set off for an adventure to an exotic place and the nearest was Bali. They did talk of going to Tahiti but it was deemed too difficult to access.

As is known in the story of the Chinese in Southeast Asia, the Balinese-inspired work was very important to their oeuvre. They saw Bali as a paradigm of

'Asia' and *their* place, where they should look for their subject matter. For some it was a release and a freeing of other constraints that led to some of their most remarkable pieces. The first and most important in many ways was Liu Haisu, who, after study in France, had been the founding director of the Shanghai Art Academy and led the Shanghai revolution of embracing the new art from outside, throwing off the conservatism of the old China, often in the face of great resistance and difficulty. Liu traveled to Southeast Asia in 1939, with his collection of paintings to sell to raise money for the war effort from diasporic Chinese. He then went on to Java and Bali in 1940 and he didn't return to China until 1942. Michael Sullivan, in his seminal *Art & Artists of Twentieth Century China*, judges his paintings made in Java

and Bali at this time as “among his best works” and he took them back to Shanghai with him.<sup>10</sup> Liu was very aware of his place in the region, saying, “I paint with Western painting material and tools, but my style and substance are Chinese, and the realm of my paintings is typically Oriental,” and particularly about the ‘South Seas’ or Nanyang style of which, in China, he is considered the founder.<sup>11</sup>

Did Liu Haisu sow the idea of Bali in the Singaporean mind? Among his students was Liu Kang, later doyen of Singaporean art and a key figure in Singaporean interest in Bali as a site for exotic tropical ease. Liu Kang had spent early years in Malaya then studied in Paris, before, in 1933, returning to Shanghai and a teaching post, under Liu Haisu, at the Academy. Singaporean art critic Chia Wai Hon noted later how Liu Kang had continued his French practice of painting *en plein air*, making excursions to “Suzhou, Hangzhou, Wuxi, Nanjing, and other scenic locations.”<sup>12</sup> Caught on holiday in Malaya in 1937 by war in China, he remained there until at the end of the war when he was free again to travel to paint the tropical landscape around him. He like other fellow ex-students of Chinese academies also living in Singapore, such as Cheong Soo Pieng, Chen Chong Swee, and Chen Wen Hsi, was influenced by the Gauguin-inspired idea of tropical paradise.

It took until 1952 for Liu Kang to have the time, money, and probably energy to follow Liu Haisu to Bali. Liu Kang and his friends only stayed for one month yet it is always singled out as a momentous occasion. They stayed with La Mayeur, who had made his name painting images of his (beautiful) Balinese wife Ni Polok. The four Singaporeans, too, got into the mood and painted beautiful Balinese girls. Liu Kang remarked, “Anyone who has been to Bali will never forget the half-naked women. Those who have experienced it will always savor the memories, sometimes in their sweetest dreams. From the aesthetic point of view the Balinese should maintain their traditional way of life.”<sup>13</sup> In his famous work *Artist and Model*, he also included himself so his ‘objectification’ of the local people is much assuaged. The Singaporeans showed their work on return at the British Council, and this exhibition, says critic and historian Marco Hsu, “directed the focus of the art community toward local



Liu Kang, *Artist & Model*, 1954, oil on canvas, 84 x 124 cm. Collection of National Heritage Board, Singapore.

themes, and one which has brought the four artists to new realm in their art. As such, it was truly a momentous event in the Malayan [including Singapore] art scene.<sup>14</sup>

Their Balinese work is often reproduced, often quoted as key pieces, and their sojourn very frequently included in exhibition information. They laid the path for other artists from the peninsula to travel there, which they did until new nationalism



Liu Haisu, *Balinese Girls*, 1951, oil. Published in Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of Twentieth-Century China*, Berkeley, 1996, pl.18.

from 1960 on meant artists “changed their destinations to Kelantan and Trengganu,”<sup>15</sup> tropical ‘paradises’ in what became the new state of Malaysia.

The last group of Asian artists looking for an island paradise discussed here are the leaders of Indonesian new art in the 1940s and 1950s in Java, who ‘escaped’ to the new world of Bali. It is interesting that in a similar physical (though indeed different cultural) space, as Java is to Bali, they, too, left their own surroundings for this alternative place. The artists—Sudjojono, Hendra Gunawan, and Affandi—all came to Bali, but they came at the end of their long artistic lives, to live out dreams.

The spokesperson of the group in their youth was Sudjojono, who in 1946 had railed against the ‘beautiful Indies’ paintings of the colonial Dutch, where calm landscapes belied the reality of East Indies’ life for the local people. It is interesting to speculate how much Gauguin’s work had affirmed the ‘beautiful Indies’ in the local arts firmament. Sudjojono did paint the reality of his time, in an exceptional way, but at the end of his life traveled to Bali and while not painting either ‘beautiful Indies’ landscapes or village girls, he did paint what he saw before him. One impressive piece is of the garden of the Neka Museum in Ubud.

Hendra Gunawan, born

in Bandung, but doing his most significant work in Yogyakarta, established a studio in Bali in 1978 and died there. Historian Astri Wright has suggested Hendra’s relatively fast relocation to Bali, two years after his release from his Javanese prison for his communist sympathies, was both a personal, artistic, and physical release from past troubles, and offering multiple rewards. His work, she notes, is “all brighter, lighter, and more celebratory than any he had painted previously,” but it does not have the tension and drama of his earlier work and is the lesser for it.<sup>16</sup>

With the exception of Affandi, none of their work in Bali was as important as their earlier imagery. Affandi’s work was more consistent through his life and indeed in Bali he found subjects that reflected his interest in depicting the lives of the simple people and their environment. He had traveled there often, from 1939, then in 1957, where Caroline Turner quotes his daughter Kartika describing a Bali beach subject painted in his old age: “that particular beach ... gave him lots of inspiration ... [It was] where simple and honest people lived their daily life ... Their struggle for life, ... nature [and] the cruelty of reality ... became his concern and poured into his canvasses.”<sup>17</sup> This, of course, begs the question of where was this struggle, if not in front of Affandi in his home districts of central Java. Of course it was, but in Bali, it was given freer license for expression.

Artists from many parts of the world still go to Bali to live and work, often recreating the local scene, often just using the environment to explore their own personal worlds. The local artists have created a major industry painting the life around them. A significant debt for this is owed to Paul Gauguin. Δ

#### Notes:

1. Gauguin, *maker of myth*, Tate Modern, London, September 20, 2010 – January 16, 2011.
2. In Belinda Thomson, “Paul Gauguin: Navigating the Myth,” *Gauguin, maker of myth*, Tate, London, 2010, p.23.
3. Martin Urban, *Emil Nolde – Landscapes*, London, 1970, p.24.
4. Ibid.
5. Individuals in Asia also followed Gauguin, for example, woodcut artists in Japan in the 1930s; Korean Lee In-Sung painted Gauguinesque works, like *A day in autumn* (1934), and is known to



Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), *Femmes de Tahiti, ou Sur la plage* (Tahitian Women on the Beach), 1891, oil on canvas, 69 x 91 cm. Collection of Musée d’Orsay, Paris.

- have owned at least one postcard image by Gauguin; and in India Amrita Sher-Gil, who had seen an exhibition of Gauguin’s work in London, painted *Self portrait as a Tahitian* in 1934.
6. Alison Carroll, “East and West? A different story: the impact of Mexico on 20th century Asian Art,” *Art Monthly Australia*, #213, September 2008, pp 11-16.
  7. Purita Kalaw-Ledesma & Amadis Ma Guerrero, *Edades; National Artist*, Manila, 1979, p. 70.
  8. From Joseph Fischer, “Problems and Realities” in *Modern Indonesian Art*, 1990, pl.72.
  9. Tamar Garb, “Gauguin and the opacity of the other: the case of Martinique” in *Gauguin, maker of myth*, op.cit. p.24.
  10. Michael Sullivan, *Art and Artists of*



Affandi, *Perahu Bali*, 1961, oil on canvas, 101 x 135 cm. Courtesy: Affandi Museum, Yogyakarta.

11. *Twentieth-Century China*, Berkeley, 1996, pp.74-5.
12. See Chia Wai Hon, “Liu Kang at 87,” National Arts Council & National Heritage Board, Singapore, 1997, reprinted in “Essays” *Bits and Pieces; Writings on Art*, Contemporary Asian Arts Center, Singapore, 2002, p.191.
13. Quoted by Yvonne Low, “Remembering Nanyan Feng’ge,” in *Modern Art Asia*, November 5, 2010.
14. Marco Hsu, *A Brief History of Malayan Art*, Millennium Books, Singapore, (1963) 1999, p.73.
15. Ibid. p.71. Hsu does note that, later, others from the Malay peninsula did continue to travel to Bali to paint, including Yeh Chi Wei and Lai Foong Moi.
16. Astri Wright, “Hendra Gunawan in Bali,” *Crossing Boundaries; Bali, a window to twentieth century Indonesian Art*, Melbourne, 2002, pp.45-6.
17. Caroline Turner, “Affandi in Bali,” *Crossing Boundaries*, ibid, p.41.

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