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.” 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 spanning modern city life, became 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, as the curator of the London show says, it is just too obvious—he is over familiar? It is an apt phrase for the myth.”1 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 spanning modern city life, became 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, as the curator of the London show says, it is just too obvious—he is over familiar?

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 erotic ‘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 immortality of the great dead, you belong now to the history of art.”

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 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 50 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.” 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!” 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’s work has varied, both in its 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

Paul Gauguin, Femmes sur le bord de la mer, ou Maternité I, 1899, oil on canvas, 84 x 72 cm. Collection of Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg.

The 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 ‘orientalism’ that Edward Said so clearly set off for an adventure to an exotic place and difficulty. Liu traveled to Southeast Asia in 1939, with his collection of paintings to sell to raise money for the war effort from diaporic 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 powerful to all. Funerary Ceremony by an unknown artist in the 1950s 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 narrative. 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 Bali paintings gradually adapted to this.

The Balinese inspired work was very important to their own society. 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 diaporic 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 powerful to all. Funerary Ceremony by an unknown artist in the 1950s is typical of these early works.

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and Bali at this time as “among his best works” and he took them back to Shanghai with him.14 Liu was 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.15

Did Liu Haisu savor 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 art and a key figure in the Singaporean art community toward local themes, and one which has brought the four artists to new realms in their art. As such, it was truly a momentous event in the Malayan [including Singapore] art scene.16

Their Balinese work is often reproduced, often quoted as key pieces, and their sombre 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 in Bandung, but doing his most significant work in Yogjakarta, established a studio in Bali in 1979 and died there. Asian artist Astrid Wright has suggested Hendra’s relatively fast relocation to Bali, two years after his release from his Japanese prison for his communist sympathies, was both a personal, artistic, and physical release from past troubles, and offering multiple re-wards. His work, she notes, is “all brighter, lighter, and more celebratory than any he has created previously, but it does not have the tension and drama of his earlier work and is the lesser for it.” 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 travelled 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 simple and honest people’s lifestyle. ... nature land the cruelty of reality … became his concern and poured into his canvasses.”17This, of course, begs the question of where was it. His work, she notes, is “all brighter, lighter, and more celebratory than any he has created previously, but it does not have the tension and drama of his earlier work and is the lesser for it.” 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.

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1. Paul Gauguin (1848–1903), Femmes de Tahiti, ou Sur la plage (Tahitian Women on the Beach), 1881, oil on canvas, 88 × 91 cm. Collection of Musée d’Orsay, Paris.
