



ne of Gauguin's most important (and expensive) sculptures may not be quite what it seems. *Head with Horns*, which was acquired by the Getty Museum in 2002, is a

mysterious work, which reappeared after it had been missing for a century (Figs. 2 and 4). However, a photograph from the French colonial archives reveals that this wooden sculpture was once regarded as having been made by a Polynesian craftsman.

Head with Horns was first exhibited in 1997, when it was unveiled at the Fondation Maeght in Saint-Paul, on loan from a private collection.¹ The sculpture had long been known about, since two photographs of it were glued into the illustrated version of Gauguin's Tahitian album *Noa Noa*, which was completed in the late 1890s (Fig. 1).² However, until its recent re-emergence the actual sculpture had never been seen, and was assumed to have been lost during Gauguin's lifetime.

In 1998 *Head with Horns* was lent to the Gauguin exhibition at the Fondation Pierre Gianadda in Martigny.³ Its third presentation was at the Metropolitan Museum, in a show of Gauguin works from New York collections that opened on 18 June 2002.⁴ Just nine days later it was formally announced that the Getty Museum had privately purchased *Head with Horns*. Although the price was not disclosed, it was reported to have been over \$3m, a record for a Gauguin sculpture.⁵ The Getty has not named the previous owner, but we understand that it was Wildenstein, the gallery whose family foundation publishes the *catalogue raisonné* of Gauguin's paintings. Wildenstein is believed to have acquired the sculpture in Switzerland after World War II.

The Getty dates *Head with Horns* to 1895-97, during the early years of Gauguin's second stay in Polynesia. In announcing the acquisition, the museum suggested that that it 'may be a symbolic self-portrait, as the sculpture suggests Gauguin's own features, possibly mixed with the attributes of Tahitian natives.'⁶

The attribution of *Head with Horns* has not been seriously discussed in print, but since its rediscovery two illustrations have emerged that raise questions. The first, dating from 1899, is in a booklet by Jules Agostini, *L'Océanie française: Les Iles sous le Vent*. On the last page, there is an engraving of *Head with Horns*, with the caption 'Idole des Iles sous le Vent' (Les Iles sous le Vent, or Leeward Islands, comprise the part of French Polynesia lying to the west of Tahiti).⁷ The engraving (Fig. 7) is clearly based on the left-hand



The works illustrating this article are by Paul Gauguin (1848-1903), unless stated otherwise.

¹ *Noa Noa*, fol. 30v. Late 1890s. 31 x 24 cm. The two photographs of *Head with Horns* that Gauguin pasted into this album made in Tahiti were the only widely known record of the sculpture before its reappearance in 1997. Musée du Louvre, Paris

² *Head with Horns*: a detail of Figure 4

photograph in *Noa Noa*, which depicts the sculpture straight on.⁸

Gauguin first stayed in Tahiti from 1891 to 1893, before returning to France for two years. He arrived back in Tahiti's capital, Papeete, on 9 September 1895, and met Agostini, who was head of public works, very shortly afterwards. They both sailed on *L'Aube* on 26 September, for a voyage to Huahine, Bora Bora and Raiatea-Tahaa (Iles sous le Vent), on a French government mission to reestablish colonial control. Gauguin was invited and presumably curious to see the outlying islands. The voyage took only a few days and *L'Aube* returned to Papeete in early October.

Gauguin and Agostini remained friends. In November 1895 Gauguin moved to the village of Punaauia, eight miles south of Papeete. Agostini later took a photograph of the exterior of Gauguin's wooden house, built in June 1897.⁹ Agostini finally left Tahiti in January 1898.

It is difficult to see how Agostini could have miscaptioned the image of *Head with Horns* in his 1899 booklet. He was a friend of Gauguin, and would

IDOL OF THE ISLANDS

In 2002 the J. Paul Getty Museum bought an extraordinary sculpture by Gauguin that had been lost for over a century. **Martin Bailey** investigates the many mysteries surrounding this wooden horned head. The greatest puzzle of all is whether it really is by Gauguin.



3 Paul Gauguin, photographed in about 1894. Photo: Musée d'Orsay, Paris

4 *Head with Horns*, c. 1895-97. Wood with traces of polychromy, ht 58 cm. J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles

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1 Jean-Louis Prat, *La Sculpture des Peintres*, exh. cat., Fondation Maeght, Saint-Paul, 1997, (no. 30).

2 This version of *Noa Noa* is in the Louvre, and the two photographs (straight-on and three-quarters views of the sculpture) are on fol. 30v. It would be interesting to know if there are any captions on the reverse of the photographs, but they are pasted down. *Head with Horns* was recorded in the 1963 *catalogue raisonné* of Gauguin's sculptures as a missing piece, known only from the photographs in *Noa Noa*. Christopher Gray, *Sculpture and Ceramics of Paul Gauguin*, Baltimore, 1963, cat. A-13, pp. 310-11.

3 Ronald Pickvance, *Gauguin*, exh. cat., Fondation Pierre Gianadda, Martigny, 1998, (no. 118).

4 Colta Ives and Susan Alyson Stein, *The Lure of the Exotic: Gauguin in New York Collections*, exh. cat., Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2002, pp. 135 and 224 (no. 108).

5 The \$3m price was given in the *New York Times*, 21 June 2002. The auction record for a Gauguin sculpture is \$1.485m, for *Hina* at Sotheby's, New York, 17 May, 1990.

6 J. Paul Getty Museum press release, 27 June 2002.

7 Jules Agostini, *L'Océanie française: Les Iles sous le Vent*, Paris, 1899, p. 32 (image engraved by 'FH'). The book also includes a brief reference to Gauguin (p. 22), which does not appear to have been published in the Gauguin literature: '*La belle Vaitramati, du village de Vaitupé, dont les traits symbolisés ont été fixés sur la toile par un peintre d'un incontestable talent,*

presumably have known whether the sculpture had been made by him or a Polynesian. Agostini, who was well-informed about anthropology, was methodical in the recording of his photographs. It is possible that the image was miscaptioned by the publisher, but this seems unlikely since nearly all the images in the booklet are engravings based on photographs by Agostini, who was then back in France, and would have been closely involved in the publication.¹⁰ Had a mistake been made, it is perhaps surprising that there is no record of any complaint from Gauguin, since the modestly-priced (15 centimes) booklet presumably circulated among the French community in Polynesia.

We have also discovered that a photograph of *Head with Horns* (straight-on version) was published in 1931, under the caption 'Iles Marquises: Idole', with a credit to 'Office colonial' (Fig. 8).¹¹ This appeared in Emile Bayard's book *les styles coloniaux de la France* and appears to have been unknown to Gauguin scholars, who have understandably concentrated on the literature of Oceania.¹² The Marquesas Islands



lie to the north of Tahiti, and it is surprising that the 'idole' is said to come from there, rather than Les Iles sous le Vent, but it is possible that Bayard linked the photograph with *Noa Noa* (Gauguin later moved to the Marquesas) or with the traditional horn-like hairstyle of young men from the Marquesas Islands.¹³ The original photograph remains untraced.¹⁴

The fact that *Head with Horns* was published as a Polynesian sculpture in 1899 and again in 1931 raises questions about the attribution. Its provenance also remains a mystery. Gauguin probably no longer had the sculpture by the late 1890s, since although he reproduced it in three graphic works, these all appear to have been drawn from the two photographs in *Noa Noa*.¹⁵ The *Woodcut with a Horned Head* (Fig. 6) and the drawing *Polynesian Beauty and Evil Spirit* (Fig. 9; together with a monotype print on the verso) show the three-quarters view, with the images of the horned head in reverse in both prints. The monotype *Tabitian Woman and Devil* (Fig. 5) depicts the straight-on view. All three date from around 1898-1900, about the time that *Noa Noa* was completed.¹⁶

The sculpture is unsigned, and Gauguin tended to sign (or monogram PGO) his major works, particularly those he gave away to friends or sold.¹⁷ *Head with Horns* is not referred to in his surviving correspondence. Nor is it among items recorded in Gauguin's possession at his death. There is no trace of it being acquired by one of the collectors or dealers who came to Tahiti in the early 20th century in search of his works. Although Gauguin collected photographs of artworks by



5 *Tabitian Woman and Devil*, c. 1898-1900. Monotype, 65 x 46 cm. Private collection. Reproduced from John Rewald, *Gauguin Drawings*, New York, 1958 (no. 120)

M. Gauguin [sic], *ent le don de plaire au Mars polynésien qui en oubli sa première et céleste demeure.* [trans] 'Beautiful Vaïraimati, from the village of Vaïtupé – whose symbolic features were set on canvas by a painter of undeniable talent, M. Gauguin [sic]; she had the gift of attracting the Polynesian Mars to the point that he [Mars] forgot his first, celestial abode.' The folk tale of Vaïraimati comes from the island of Bora Bora, in Les Îles sous le Vent (Gauguin's painting *Vaïraimati/Vaïramati*, 1897-98, is in the Musée d'Orsay, Paris).

8 This booklet is now rare. The engraving has been reproduced only once, in Jean-Yves Tréhin, *Tahiti: L'Eden à l'épreuve de la Photographie*, Tahiti, 2003, p. 144. It is also referred to in Ronald Pickvance, *Gauguin*, op. cit. (cat. 118), and Stephen F. Eisenman, *Paul Gauguin: Artist of Myth and Dream*, exh. cat., Compleso del Vittoriano, Rome, 2007 pp. 342-3 (cat. 104).

9 Reproduced in Jules Agostini, *Tahiti*, Paris, 1905, p. 71 (see also text on p. 115). Neither Gauguin nor the sculpture are mentioned in Agostini's other publication on Polynesia: 'Folk-lore de Tahiti et des Îles Voisines', *Revue des Traditions Populaires*, February 1900, pp. 65-96 and March 1900, pp. 157-165. Agostini died in Nice in 1930. It has recently been suggested that the photograph of Gauguin's house may have been taken by Henri Lemasson, the French postmaster in Tahiti, who was an amateur photographer and a friend of both Gauguin and Agostini: George T. M. Shackelford and Claire Frèches-Thory, *Gauguin Tahiti*, exh. cat. (English language) Grand Palais, Paris, and Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Paris, 2003-04; p. 47. It should also be pointed out that Gauguin is known to have had his own camera, although no surviving photographs are convincingly attributed to him.

10 It is possible that the photograph of *Head with Horns* was taken by Lemasson (see previous footnote), rather than Agostini, but Agostini would have been much more likely to have used his own images in his booklet.

11 The photograph appears undamaged (unlike that in *Noua Noa*, which has unsightly blotches, presumably at least since the Louvre's acquisition of the manuscript in 1927), showing that it was another copy.

12 My thanks to Philippe Peltier, head of Oceania at the Musée du quai Branly, for recently bringing this publication to my attention. The book is now relatively scarce, which again



others, only a single image survives of one of his own pieces photographed in Polynesia during his lifetime.¹⁸

Turning to its physical condition, the narrow, circular base of the sculpture (between the head and the darker plinth) is the same wood as the head, but appears to have been turned on a lathe. No other examples are known of Gauguin sculptures which have been worked in this way. *Head with Horns* had developed unsightly cracks by the mid 1890s, particularly its left horn and the side of its right eye. Although usual in an ethnographic piece of some age this would be surprising in a finely finished modern European sculpture. What is particularly unusual, is the plinth – probably a 'found object'. No one has suggested that this was made by Gauguin, although he may have added it. No other Gauguin sculptures are

known with an original plinth of any substantial size.

An examination of the wood does not help the question of authenticity. The head is of sandalwood, which is hard and slow to work. It was common in Polynesia in the early 19th century, but had become comparatively rare by Gauguin's time (and expensive for a piece of this size).¹⁹ The plinth is lacewood, which is not found in Polynesia, although it grows in Australia and elsewhere in the Pacific.²⁰

It is particularly difficult to reach a judgement on whether the sculpture is by Gauguin because it is unclear what the head actually represents. The face shares the characteristics of both a European (the thin lips) and a Polynesian (the flat nose). As the Getty points out, it could either be a self-portrait of Gauguin (compare, for example, the photograph reproduced as



6 *Woodcut with a Horned Head, 1898-99.* Woodcut on transparent laid tissue paper; 14.5 x 28.6 cm (block). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1936 (36.7.3)

7 *Idole des Iles sous le Vent, woodcut after a photograph by Jules Agostini (1859-1930).* From Jules Agostini, *L'Océanie française: Les Iles sous le Vent*, Paris, 1899

8 *Iles Marquises: Idole, photograph by Jules Agostini (1859-1930).* From Emile Bayard, *Les styles coloniaux de la France*, Paris, 1931

helps to explain why it has been missed by Gauguin scholars.

13 Gauguin was in the Marquesas Islands (Hiva Oa) from 1901 to 1903, and *Noua Noua* was completed earlier, in the late 1890s (the Louvre acquired *Noua Noua* in 1927, while or just before Bayard was working on his 1931 book). The traditional Marquesas hairstyle of two tufted topknots (known as *taitike*) from the island of Nuka Hiva is illustrated in images in Eric Kjellgren, *Adorning the World: Art of the Marquesas Islands*, exh. cat., Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2006, cat. 20-27.

14 Inquiries at the Centre des archives d'outre-mer at Aix-en-Provence and the Musée du quai Branly (which has an important group of Agostini photographs, boxes 144-46) have not

Figure 3) or a Marquesan man with two bunches of hair (worn as an expression of power). Arguably, this very ambiguity is evidence that it is indeed a Gauguin. In terms of technique, it is more 'polished' than Gauguin's more expressionist carvings, although he did also work in this style. Gauguin's sculptures, whether wood or clay, are very diverse and imaginative, which again makes attribution difficult.

But if *Head with Horns* is not by Gauguin, who made it? The 1899 Agostini woodcut and the



photograph in the 1931 Bayard book suggest that it could be an authentic Polynesian work. However, there was no great tradition of wood sculpture there, and relatively few pieces survive from before European settlement in the early 19th century. There are certainly no known examples of sculptures similar to *Head with Horns* by indigenous craftsmen. Another suggestion is that it was made by a European in Polynesia, but not Gauguin. It could possibly have been a sailor who had incorporated elements of what he perceived to be traditional Polynesian art (sailors often had time on long sea voyages and would carve wood or bone).

The sculpture could also have been made by a Polynesian craftsman for sale to a visiting European.²¹ If so, Gauguin and Agostini might have believed it to be a surviving example of traditional art, since there were so few authentic examples that they could have seen. This would explain why Agostini published it as an 'idole' and why Gauguin included it in his graphic work. A final suggestion is that *Head with Horns* could possibly have been an unusual collaboration between Gauguin and a Polynesian craftsman.

Interestingly, while most American scholars accept *Head with Horns* as by Gauguin, some leading French scholars remain doubtful about the attribution, although they have been discreet about expressing it.



Photo Office colonial.

Fig. 181. — ILES MARQUISES. *Idole.*

9 Polynesian Beauty and Evil Spirit, c. 1900. Crayon and graphite on paper, 64 x 52 cm. Private collection

unearthed a copy of the photograph of *Head with Horns*.

15 If the sculpture was made by Gauguin in 1895-97, as dated by the Getty, and he no longer had it by the late 1890s, then it is most likely that it was given to a friend in Tahiti (he seems to have sold very little, if anything, in Polynesia and there is no evidence that it was shipped to one of his French dealers).

16 Although these works have sometimes been given titles with the word 'devil', this is not a Polynesian concept.

17 Of the wood sculptures done in Polynesia listed in Gray, op. cit., 41 are signed and 24 unsigned.

18 This photograph shows his important painting *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), photographed by Lemasson in 1898 at Punaauia, before it was shipped to Paris. See Jean-Yves Tréhin, *Gauguin, Tahiti et la Photographie*, Papeete, 2003, p. 133.

19 The identification of sandalwood was made by Arlen Higinbotham, at the Getty. It is possible that further research might reveal whether the wood is from Polynesia. No other Gauguin sculptures are known in sandalwood (Gray, op. cit., p. 85), but this is not necessarily significant in attributional terms. The horns of the sculpture could have been made using the wider base of the tree near the roots.

20 The plinth has a flat back, suggesting that it was originally a decorative architectural element (such as a column capital) which was placed against a wall. The front is five-sided.

21 One very early example of this is a costumed wooden figure of a mourner made in Tahiti in the early 19th century as 'tourist art' (Musée d'Histoire naturelle de Lille): see Frank Herreman, *Océanie. Signes de Rites, Symboles d'autorité*, exh. cat., Espace culturel INCG, Brussels, 2008-09, cat. 151.

22 It was, however, shown in the exhibition *Paul Gauguin: Artista di mito e segno*: op. cit., cat. 104.

23 'Deux photographies collées d'un curios, statue de production locale représentant un niho polynésien (tête de dieu cornu), acheté par Gauguin à Raietea', *Gauguin Tahiti*, op. cit., (French language catalogue), p. 153; *Gauguin Tahiti*, op. cit., (English language catalogue), p. 106.

24 Email to the author.

25 *Head with Horns* may also have influenced one of the last wood sculptures by Gauguin, *Père Paillard* (Futber Lebery) of 1902 (National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC), cat. entry 259, p. 465.



The sculpture was not requested for the major 2003-04 exhibition 'Gauguin Tahiti: The Studio of the South Seas' at the Grand Palais in Paris and Boston's Museum of Fine Arts.²² There is a revealing difference between the two exhibition catalogues for 'Gauguin Tahiti'. In the French edition, the page of *Noa Noa* with the *Head with Horns* images is reproduced, with the caption: 'Bought by Gauguin at Raietea [the island in the Les Iles sous le Vent visited by him in 1895]'.²³ However, the slightly later English-language edition reads: 'Two photographs of Gauguin's sculpture of a Polynesian *niho* (head of a horned god)'.

Head with Horns may well be an authentic Gauguin, and the Getty certainly takes this view. David Bomford, its Associate Director for Collections, stresses that the museum has from the start been

aware of the arguments surrounding the piece and knew about the Agostini booklet when it acquired the sculpture. He believes that Agostini used Gauguin's sculpture in his 1899 publication as a final image 'to conjure up the general idea of an Oceanic myth'.²⁴

Even if *Head with Horns* is not by Gauguin, it certainly deserves to be in a major museum. It was a very important and valued object for the artist, as shown by his insertion of the photographs in *Noa Noa* and use of the image in three works. It is fortunate that this rediscovered sculpture has ended up at the Getty, an institution highly committed to research.

Martin Bailey curated 'Van Gogh and Britain: Pioneer Collectors' at Compton Verney and the National Gallery of Scotland in 2006.