“Primitivism” and Theosophy in Paul Gauguin’s la Orana Maria

Katherine C. Scalia
Montclair State University

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“Primitivism” and Theosophy in Paul Gauguin’s *Ia Orana Maria*

by

Katherine C. Scalia

A Master’s Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of

Montclair State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

Master of Arts in Fine Arts

January 2008

College/School: **College of the Arts**

Department: **Art and Design**

Thesis Committee:

- Dr. Anne Betty Weinshenker
  - Thesis Sponsor

- Dr. Susi Colin
  - Committee Member

- Mimi Weinberg
  - Committee Member

- John C. Luttropp
  - Department Chair

Date: 12/12/07

Dr. Geoffrey W. Newman

Dean, College of the Arts
The purpose of this thesis is to reveal Paul Gauguin’s expression of his theosophical beliefs in his 1891 painting *La Orana Maria.* Through extensive research into Gauguin’s system of beliefs on art and religion I intend to demonstrate the likelihood that the tenets of Theosophy would have appealed to his spiritual and aesthetic sensibilities. Gauguin’s involvement in the Symbolist movement, his mystical inclinations, the desire to understand and attain enlightenment, his knowledge of, and respect for religions of the East, and his fascination with the “primitive” are all addressed as pathways that led him to express his theosophical beliefs in painting. Initially, I approach this study by reviewing Gauguin’s life as it led him to Symbolism, and by analyzing certain characteristics of *La Orana Maria,* such as his abstraction and purification of forms, indicative of Gauguin’s eastern influences and theosophical beliefs. Additionally, I explore Gauguin’s feelings towards Christianity and how Theosophy would have been an attractive alternative. Gauguin was an intensely spiritual man, constantly aspiring to create meaningful art, while continually struggling with perceived personal shortcomings, persistent illness, and an internal conflict between the Christian tradition in which he was raised, and the modern philosophical thought of the late nineteenth century. All of these factors are addressed regarding their roles in Gauguin’s adoption of Theosophy. The writings of many Gauguin scholars are referenced as a means by which I am able to substantiate my claim that Gauguin was involved in avant-garde thinking of his time; that this enabled him to discover a religion that suited his personal values, lifestyle, beliefs about humanity, faith and redemption, and that he articulated this the best way he knew how – in painting.
"PRIMITIVISM" AND THEOSOPHY IN PAUL GAUGUIN'S *LA ORAÑA MARIA*

A THESIS

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Art in Fine Arts, Art History

By

KATHERINE SCALIA

Montclair State University

Montclair, NJ

2007
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Introduction

In this thesis, I examine Paul Gauguin’s Symbolist background, his appreciation for esoteric religions, and his use of images from “primitive” arts to depict a Christian theme as motivations and methods by which he expressed his personal religious beliefs. This technique will be applied specifically to his 1891 painting *Ia Orana Maria (I Hail Thee Mary)* (Fig.1), and how this painting is a representation of Gauguin’s belief in Theosophy. Gauguin’s use of religious imagery has been previously discussed and studied by many scholars, such as Bernard Dorival, Henri Dorra, and Ziva Amishai-Maisels. The Reverend Thomas Buser, whose article for *Art Journal*, “Gauguin’s Religion,” will be referenced, was the first art historian to propose that Gauguin was a follower of Theosophy. Buser’s article served as a cornerstone for other scholars who wrote about the connection between Gauguin’s belief in Theosophy and other works in his oeuvre. However, a thorough study of *Ia Orana Maria* in the context of Gauguin’s theosophical beliefs has not until now been addressed.

I will approach this study by looking at Gauguin’s life as it led to his adoption of the Symbolist style, by reviewing statements he made regarding spirituality, by assessing his use of “primitive” imagery, and by analyzing certain characteristics of *Ia Orana Maria*, such as the abstraction and purification of forms that may be indicative of the influence of theosophical ideas on the artist. Additionally, I will explore Gauguin’s feelings towards Christianity and how Theosophy would have been an attractive alternative.
Completed during his first trip to Tahiti in 1891, *La Orana Maria* is a strikingly bright and colorful painting, as lush in tones as in its scenery. Gauguin depicts a Tahitian woman standing in the foreground with a young boy, presumably her son, straddling her left shoulder. They are both adorned with delicate golden halos. Displayed before them are fruits, such as bananas, mangoes, and plantains, laid out as if on an altar. A tree with white blossoms occupies the left side of the painting. To the left of the mother and son, and further away from the viewer, are two women standing on a violet colored dirt path. They are looking at the mother and child, and based on the vertically clasped position of their hands, they appear to be worshipping them. Further to the left, and partially obscured by the flowering tree, is the ephemeral, yellow-winged figure of an angel. The figures are standing near a road with a tropical forest, dark volcanic mountains, a bright blue sky with wispy clouds, and a small hut in the background.

Achille Delaroche described *La Orana Maria* as “...a stained-glass window full of richly colored flowers, human flowers and flowers of plants... Supernatural vegetation that prays, flesh that blooms on the shadowy border between the conscious and unconscious.”

Although this scene is generally believed to be a depiction of the Adoration of the Virgin and Child, *La Orana Maria* appears to be the representation of an oneiric vision or hallucination. It immediately recalls images of the Garden of Eden; of an unspoiled paradise. The scene is of another world; possibly Gauguin’s impression of a terrestrial heaven. In *La Orana Maria* Gauguin was painting a representation of the blending of earthly and spiritual realms.

The union of different cultures and ideas fascinated Gauguin, especially those from exotic lands. He was part Peruvian and part French, and having called himself a
“Peruvian Indian,” he evidently chose to embrace his ancestry and its exoticism. Gauguin’s biography and lineage highlight his ingrained propensity to the mixing of cultures. His time as a merchant marine and his failure in a business career are directly related to his abandonment of Western civilization for a more “primitive” land. Gauguin’s interest in “primitive” people and cultures, such as Buddhist and Hindu Indians, led him to learn about their religions, which were rooted in esotericism and highly influential on the tenets of Theosophy.

Theosophy is the study of God and God’s relationship with man and the earth, however Theosophy achieves this through teachings about God and the world based on mystical insight, an understanding based on personal feelings. Theosophy is the synthesis of all religions, and therefore ranks above all other religions in the views of its followers. According to Theosophy, man’s relationship with God is inspired and more mystical and intuitively based, rather than being influenced by strict dogma, such as the dogma enforced by the Catholic Church. Theosophy differs from Christian theology in that it is pantheistic and supports the idea of reincarnation. Its only moral requirement is faithfulness to the brotherhood of man. The objectives as outlined by The Golden Book of The Theosophical Society are the following:

1. To form a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste or color. (2) To encourage the study of Comparative Religion, Philosophy and Science. (3) To investigate unexplained laws of Nature and the powers latent in man.

The ideas of modern Theosophy were inspired by the religions and philosophies of the East, specifically of Hinduism and Buddhism of India. Hindu pantheism most directly influenced Theosophy’s notions on the existence and nature of God, suggesting
that God is “the one Uncreate [sic], Universal, Infinite and Everlasting Cause.” The objectives of the Theosophical Society were “to collect and diffuse a knowledge of the laws which govern the universe.” Believers in Theosophy tried to achieve a high level of spiritual awareness. This enlightenment was to be achieved through the ability to synthesize the essence of all religions, and in doing so, one was considered as wise as Christ or Buddha.

Helena P. Blavatsky (H.P.B.), one of the founders of the Theosophical Society, stated, “We reject the idea of a personal, extra-cosmic and anthropomorphic God.” Inspired by Hinduism, H.P.B. explained that God was considered “Absolute” or the “Absolute Principal” and went on to say, “The Absolute does not think or exist, but is rather thought and existence.” Theosophical beliefs were dispersed and made popular through her book *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), and the founding of the Theosophical Society in 1875 in America. In *The Secret Doctrine*, H.P.B. described the existence and function of the “Masters,” fully enlightened souls that serve as “Adept Teachers.” The notion of the Masters is eastern in origin. A former president of the Theosophical Society, an Indian named Jinarajadasa, suggested that the existence of the Masters is not new, that they, in fact, evolved. He explained:

For if evolution is a fact, and if also the soul of a man is immortal then the necessary result of evolution must be the slow transformation of all souls into the grade of Masters of the Wisdom. Furthermore, as evolution has been a principle in the universe since the beginning of time, it is obvious that somewhere in past ages, Masters of the Wisdom must have existed. So, then, also, what the Masters are today, each one of us, whatever his failings now, will be some day.
The idea that a soul eventually evolves into an enlightened being, despite the failings and sufferings of each individual incarnation, would have certainly appealed to Gauguin, considering his numerous emotional, spiritual, physical crises throughout his life.

The Symbolist movement, of which Gauguin was no doubt a part, is the pathway through which Gauguin was immersed in a culture that would have embraced the ideals supported by Theosophy. Regarding the rich cultural environment of late nineteenth century France, Henri Peyre stated, “Rarely in France have the ties between painters, music lovers, and men of letters been closer than at the period we call symbolist.”17 Starting in France in about 1885, Symbolism was a reaction to realism, decadence, and Impressionism. Symbolist art is commonly associated with the Symbolist movement in literature which was spawned by Romantic author Charles Baudelaire. Symbolism developed into a formalized movement through the writings of Stéphane Mallarmé, Jean Moréas, Paul Verlaine, Arthur Rimbaud, and the art critic Albert Aurier. The tenets of Symbolism were further promoted by art critic and writer J. K. Huysmans. Gauguin’s artistic techniques and Huysmans’ writing style have some noteworthy parallels. Both Gauguin and Huysmans believed that through the process of purification, the subject of a work, be it art or literature, can come close to achieving infinite beauty that can be identified as divine.18 Gauguin’s friendship with Symbolist authors and artists was likely a source of his knowledge of Theosophy.

Symbolist authors used symbols and suggestion in the place of direct statements, and ultimately these techniques influenced painting. Gauguin incorporated elements of Symbolism in art, and in literature, in his work by using symbols to represent his thoughts, emotions and beliefs, and by painting with Symbolist aesthetics in mind.
Additionally, Symbolists believed that the reductive process in painting would bring their art closer to that of the “primitives,” an art that they felt was fresh, simple, and pure. Artists who worked in a Symbolist mode, such as Gustave Moreau, Maurice Denis, Odilon Redon, and Gauguin’s friend Emile Bernard, produced works of dream-like fantasy with enigmatic symbolic content, often depicting mythological scenes. Works by these artists tend to be ambiguous by depicting a subject that is not readily apparent to the viewer, a technique that Gauguin used often in his artwork. The mysterious nature of Symbolist painting is frequently infused with mysticism.

The method employed by some Symbolist artists required a reduction to the fundamentals of painting through the elimination of details, specifically through the simplification of forms, the flat application of color, and bold shapes enclosed within strong contour lines. Maurice Denis was one of the artists with whom Gauguin painted while living in Pont-Aven, and on whom Gauguin would have much influence. One of the founding members of the Nabis, Denis had a similar aesthetic vision to that of Gauguin. Accordingly, Denis stated, “Remember that a picture, before being a war horse, a female nude, or some anecdote, is essentially a flat surface covered with colors assembled in a certain order.”

On the other hand, Gauguin intended his artwork, and the process of its creation, to be imbued with spirituality, not merely the formulaic application of paint on a canvas. Describing this objective, Gauguin stated, “Art is an abstraction, draw it from nature while dreaming in front of it, and think more of the creation which will result, it is the only means to go up towards God while acting like our Divine Master, to create.”
Similar beliefs were published in Edouard Schuré’s book *Les Grands Initiés (The Great Initiates)* (1889), which explores man’s search for the spirit. Here, Schuré writes of his studies of occult religious figures, such as Krishna, Buddha, Zoroaster, Hermes of Egypt, Moses, Pythagoras and Jesus. *The Great Initiates* was published in 1889, two years prior to the painting of *La Orana Maria*. Although there is no direct proof that Gauguin read it, it is likely that if he encountered it, it would have been at approximately the same time that he became immersed in the Symbolist movement. In fact, Wayne Anderson, author of *Gauguin’s Paradise Lost*, has argued that Gauguin’s painting *The Loss of Virginity* (1890-91) was inspired by this book. Moreover, Vojtěch Jirat-Wasiutyński proposed in an article for *Art Journal* that Gauguin’s artwork, specifically *Self-Portrait with Halo and Snake* and *Portrait of Jacob Meyer de Haan*, was influenced by the mystical writings of Shure’s book, both being from 1889. Additionally, Gauguin’s grandmother, Flora Tristan, was a close friend of Eliphas Lévi (a pseudonym for the Abbé Alphonse Louis Constant), a noteworthy figure of nineteenth century occultism. Lévi oversaw the publishing of one of Tristan’s writings after her death. Jirat-Wasiutyński suggests that Gauguin knew of their friendship, and this could have caused Gauguin to have an interest in Lévi’s writings.

The pervasiveness of mysticism and the occult in late nineteenth and early-twentieth century art and culture, especially in France, has been identified as a crucial factor in the development of modernism. There is no doubt that the esoteric thought on which Theosophy is based was prevalent in late nineteenth century France and certainly in Gauguin’s circle of artists. According to the Reverend Thomas Buser, “the air Gauguin breathed contained occultism; in many ways occultism formed the basis for all
Symbolism.25 In his article for Critical Inquiry, “The Ordinary Business of Occultism,” Gauri Viswanathan discussed why Theosophy appealed to intellectuals of the time such as doctors, teachers and artists. He wrote:

…it [Theosophy] offered a philosophy that approached consciousness as a substantive rather than transcendental phenomenon…Positing one substance and no separate God, Theosophy’s pantheistic orientation helped approach the vexing problem that a supposedly merciful God can also be the source of suffering. While the unresolved contradictions in the Christian conception of God invariably led many intellectuals to atheism, Theosophy’s decentered divinity encouraged an alternative route for those still wary of an unreconstructed nihilism.26

The presence of occult religious theories in the late nineteenth century is further discussed in an article for Art Journal by Linda Dalrymple Henderson summarizing recent literature on mysticism and occultism in modern art. Regarding the theory of correspondence (links which unite seemingly unrelated realms; windows on the configuration of the universe; a lens between macrocosm and microcosm) originally proposed by the Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg in the eighteenth century, Henderson states:

…the notion of correspondences, so often presented as a purely aesthetic, formal issue, is deeply rooted in the mysticism of Swedenborg and Eliphas Lévi, mediated by Baudelaire. In utilizing the theory of correspondences, an artist like Gauguin was making an epistemological statement about the relationship of self to the world, about the analogy between inner and outer realities. To the Symbolist artist, art was a revelation, and Symbolist doctrine, imbued as it was with mysticism and occultism, paved the way for much that would follow in the twentieth century…27

In America, Swedenborg’s beliefs were highly influential on the young Theosophical Society. In Gauguin’s manuscript for his daughter, Cahier pour Aline, when speaking
about the laws of harmony and beauty he made a direct reference to Swedenborg, proof that he was aware of the mystic’s theories.28 Gauguin’s close friend Paul Sérusier could have discussed Theosophy with Gauguin. We know that Sérusier was a reader of Balzac, and was familiar with his two novels Louis Lambert and Seraphita, both of which were influenced by Swedenborg’s theories. Evert van Uitert discussed Gauguin’s Self-Portrait Dedicated to Vincent van Gogh (1888) as being influenced by Louis Lambert.29 According to Mark Cheetham, these novels provided a connection between Gauguin and Swedenborg’s theory of correspondences.30

Several scholars including the Reverend Buser, Jehanne Teilhet-Fisk, and Daniel Guérin reference a document in which Gauguin mentions his beliefs on religion and his dissatisfaction with the Catholic Church.31 This document, located at the St. Louis Art Museum, is the currently unpublished manuscript L’Esprit moderne et le catholicisme (1902). In this manuscript Gauguin stated his belief that Christ was not an actual figure in history, but a type of ideal being whose behavior and beliefs humanity ought to adopt. Gauguin believed that the human soul resided in the brain and the Reverend Buser argues that this is a theosophical outlook.32 His disillusionment with Catholicism, the religion in which he was raised and which missionaries were teaching in Tahiti, helps to explain why Theosophy would hold particular appeal for Gauguin.

According to Jehanne Teilhet-Fisk, “Gauguin’s works are unique and distinctive, in that they synthesized theosophical doctrines from the Tahitian cosmology, the Hindu and Buddhist doctrines, and Christianity.”33 In La Orana Maria, abstractions such as the bright, unnatural areas of color, the simplification of forms, the heightened intensity of
nature, and the hieratic composition are Gauguin's devices to depict his private theosophical beliefs.
Chapter 1
Path to Symbolism

Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) was born in Paris to a journalist father and a mother of Peruvian descent. He spent most of his childhood in Lima, Peru where the family emigrated after Louis-Napoléon’s coup d’Etat in 1851. In 1855, the Gauguins returned to France and settled in Orléans. At the age of seventeen Gauguin joined the merchant marine as a navigating cadet and remained a sailor until 1871. It is during this time in his life that he first traveled extensively in the tropics which likely gave him a taste for primitive lands.

While on leave in Paris in 1871 Gauguin decided to give up seafaring permanently. He became a stockbroker on the Rue Laffitte where he met Emile Schuffenecker for the first time. Schuffenecker became a close friend with whom he would exchange many letters. Gauguin did relatively well in business for several years. In 1873 he married Mette Sophia Gad, a middle-class Danish girl. At this point in his life he started to study and practice drawing. Shortly after, Gauguin began to paint as an amateur. He immersed himself in the Impressionist movement and began to collect works by artists like Manet, Cézanne, Renoir, Pissarro and Monet.

After the stock market crashed in 1883 he moved his wife and five children to Copenhagen where he unsuccessfully tried to revive his career in business. When this attempt failed, Gauguin decided to pursue painting full time. Following a poorly received exhibition in Copenhagen, he moved back to Paris in 1885. Gauguin’s situation did not improve in Paris where he suffered from extreme poverty. In an attempt to escape
his hardship, he moved to Brittany to paint in Pont-Aven, a rural region of France. He hoped that he would find an inexpensive place to live and work in this provincial town, and that it would also provide him inspiration from the somewhat primitive surroundings. It is here that he met Émile Bernard who would become a friend and influence on his art. In 1886 Gauguin returned to Paris where he met Van Gogh in Montmartre. The following year, Gauguin must have longed for the tropics so he shipped out for Panama and Martinique where he spent roughly seven months before being forced to return due to exhaustion from dysentery. Clearly, even before Gauguin sailed to Tahiti, primitive people and exotic colors appealed to him and he searched them out to make them a part of his life.

Having recovered from his illness, Gauguin returned to Pont-Aven where he painted productively, and had a fruitful meeting with Bernard. During this stay in Brittany in 1888, the two men created their first Cloisonnist and Synthetist paintings, including Gauguin’s *Vision After the Sermon* (Fig. 2). Cloisonnism, a technique Gauguin and others used while working in Brittany, required the severe partitioning of forms composed of planes of color with thick, dark outlines. Many of the paintings made by Gauguin and Bernard during this period exhibit this technique. Among them is Bernard’s *Buckwheat Harvesters at Pont-Aven* of 1888 (Fig. 3). Synthetism involved a similar painting technique, but incorporated the synthesis of natural forms with an artist’s impressions and memories. Gauguin’s *Vision After the Sermon* exemplifies the formal elements of Synthetist painting in that its components are simplified through the flat application of color, and the heavy bordering of forms. Gauguin had now completely broken away from the Impressionist style of painting, and from objective representation.
He abandoned minute changes in color in favor of bolder ones and preferred pronounced outlines rather than subtle blending.

Gauguin disapproved of the lack of thoughtful expression in Impressionist art. He believed that art should be spiritually and intellectually inspired, not merely representation of natural phenomena without meaning. Gauguin was a spiritual man who frequently painted scenes full of mystery. The strictly visual interpretations of nature in Impressionist painting that contained little meaning for the most part offended Gauguin. In an unpublished manuscript he wrote late in life he stated:

They [the Impressionists] focused their efforts around the eye, not in the mysterious centers of thought, and from there they slipped into scientific reasons. There are physics and metaphysics....Intellect and sweet mystery were neither the pretext nor the conclusions; what they painted was the nightingale's song.43

Based on these statements is seems quite appropriate that Symbolism would appeal to Gauguin as a means of subjective expression, as it would allow him to represent "intellect" and "mystery" through symbols.

For part of 1889 and 1890, Gauguin lived in a town called Le Pouldu, another provincial Breton town about fifteen miles from Pont-Aven. It is likely that Le Pouldu appealed to Gauguin because of its strange and exotic landscape of rolling sand dunes. According to painters who lived there prior to Gauguin, the people living there had an unusually rough and savage appearance as well. While painting at Le Pouldu, Gauguin lived in an inn with his friends Paul Sérusier and Jacob Meyer de Haan, who financially supported him.44 These two men were extremely influential on Gauguin, who absorbed
much of their avant-garde thinking. In his book on Post-Impressionism, John Rewald stated:

Among the members of Gauguin’s group Sérisier and de Haan seem to have been the most articulate thinkers, the most ardent theorists. While Bernard had formerly provided Gauguin with the harvest of his diversified reading, Sérisier was now able to supply the others with his extended knowledge of philosophy.45

Sérisier was very interested in Schuré’s theosophical text, *The Great Initiates*, and may well have brought this to Gauguin’s attention. It is likely that the theories discussed between Gauguin, de Haan, and Sérisier provided Gauguin a connection to cutting-edge developments in science, literature, philosophy and religion, and may have, in fact, given Gauguin his first encounter with Theosophy.46

Although Gauguin never announced that his work was the epitome of Symbolist Art, it was viewed by his contemporaries as exactly the kind of painting that embodied Symbolism. The prominent art critic, Albert Aurier, served to coin certain descriptions of Symbolism. According to his Symbolist manifesto of 1890:

An artwork must be:
1. Ideistic – its sole ideal is to express an idea.
2. Symbolist – as it expresses this through form.
3. Synthetic – because it captures these forms and symbols in a broadly comprehensive manner.
4. Subjective – because what is portrayed is never seen as an object in itself but as a symbol chosen by the artist to represent an idea.
5. Decorative – because the real decorative painting of the Egyptians, and most probably of the Greeks and of primitive artists too, is simply the manifestation of subjective, synthetic, symbolist, ideistic art....47
In fact, Gauguin’s work so actualized the tenets of the Symbolist movement that Aurier labeled Gauguin as the leader of the group. While discussing the break from Impressionism and the crucial role that Gauguin’s *Vision After the Sermon* played in this schism, Aurier proposed:

Let us invent a new kind of ‘ist’...for the newcomers, at the head of whom comes Gauguin: Synthetists, Ideists, Symbolists, as you like....Paul Gauguin appears to me as the initiator of a new art, not in history, but at least in our times....It is evident that there exist in the history of art two great contradictory tendencies, one of which depends on the blindness and the other upon the clairvoyance of this ‘inner eye of man’ of which Swedenborg speaks – the realistic and ideistic tendencies.

Following his successful stay in Pont-Aven, Gauguin traveled to Arles in 1888, where he and Van Gogh aspired to found the “studio of the south.” The Reverend Buser suggests that Gauguin may have assimilated the idea of the theosophical portrait from Van Gogh, although it has not been proven that Van Gogh was a believer in Theosophy. In 1888, Gauguin and Van Gogh exchanged self-portraits, and when writing about his self-portrait in a letter to Gauguin, Van Gogh stated that he had painted an admirer of the eternal Buddha. Van Gogh and Gauguin had lived together for two months, when on Christmas Eve, Van Gogh cut off his own ear during a bout of madness. This incident caused Gauguin to immediately return to Paris. In a letter from 1890 to Émile Bernard, referencing his knowledge of Buddhism, Gauguin made the following comments regarding Van Gogh’s death:

“Sad though his death may be, I am not very grieved, for I knew it was coming and I knew how the poor fellow suffered in his struggles with madness. To die at this time is a great happiness for him, for it puts an end to his suffering, and if he returns in another life he will harvest the fruit of his fine conduct in this world (according to the law of Buddha)...”
In 1889 Gauguin exhibited with the “Impressionist and Synthetist Group” at the Café Volpini. The School of Pont-Aven and the Nabis, groups of young artists who would ultimately be highly influenced by Gauguin’s approach, saw the show and were greatly impressed. There never was an actual school at Pont-Aven. The name simply refers to the profound influence that Gauguin’s production of art in Pont-Aven had on these artists, some of whom such as Émile Bernard, spent time painting with him in Brittany. The Nabis, who included artists such as Paul Sérusier, Maurice Denis, Pierre Bonnard and Edouard Vuillard, focused on the surface qualities of their paintings. Their subject matter sometimes favored the fantastic, especially while under the influence of the Symbolist movement. It was Sérusier who mediated Gauguin’s ideas to this group of artists. Having met Gauguin in Pont-Aven, and lived with him in Le Pouldu, Sérusier absorbed Gauguin’s painting style. This time spent learning Gauguin’s techniques was of profound influence on Sérusier, and he spread his discovery among his friends in Paris. Eventually Gauguin’s style would be a source of inspiration for Expressionist and Abstract artists of the twentieth century, some of whom were also believers in Theosophy, such as Piet Mondrian and Wassily Kandinsky.

After another stay in Brittany Gauguin returned to Paris in 1890, and being without a home, he stayed with his friend Schuffenecker. Gauguin hoped that his time in Paris would give him the opportunity to share his artistic beliefs and hear those of others. He was also interested in making contacts in the art world that could potentially lead to a better financial position through the sale or showing of his paintings. By 1891, Gauguin was frequently gathering at the Café Voltaire with the Symbolist writers who met there.
weekly. Here he had many discussions with literary figures such as Paul Verlaine, Charles Morice, Jean Moréas and Albert Aurier. Much thought on art, politics, spirituality and religion was exchanged at these meetings, and Gauguin was no doubt influenced by the notions of these writers and creative thinkers. In a letter to Mette dated March 24th, 1891, Gauguin spoke of one such gathering, a dinner held in his honor:

Yesterday a dinner was given for me with forty-five people present, painters and writers, and Mallarmé was chairman. Poems, toasts, and the warmest kind of tribute to me. I assure you that in three years I’ll have won a battle that will enable us – you and me – to live securely. You will rest and I’ll work. Maybe one day you’ll understand what kind of man fathered your children. I am proud of my name. 

Before Gauguin’s departure for Tahiti, Mallarmé sent him a note saying, “I often thought this winter about the sagacity of your resolution. Your hand! All this not to have you answer me, but that you may know I’m yours, near or far.”

Armed with the desire to find artistic inspiration in a “primitive” land and the drive to be a successful painter and provider for his family, Gauguin resolved to travel to Tahiti. Prior to his departure he sold thirty of his pictures at the Drouot auction in order to generate funds for his trip. On April 4th 1891, he set sail for the South Seas.
Chapter 2

Gauguin’s Religion

There is no doubt that Paul Gauguin was an intensely spiritual man. His emotions and spirituality are infused in nearly everything he created. He believed that art should not be passively objective, but actively subjective. Gauguin was raised a Catholic, but over time, he became disillusioned with the Church. The late nineteenth century was rich with new evidence about humanity and the evolution of our species as discoveries published by Darwin in the *Origin of Species* in 1859 became common knowledge among educated society in Europe. This groundbreaking science made it difficult for many to continue taking the Bible as a literal description of the origin of the earth and man. Darwin’s theories on evolution represented a culmination of the conflicts between Christianity and science. Advancements in sciences ranging from astronomy to paleontology challenged the views of nature established by Christians. Theosophy would be a vehicle for some to remain spiritual, while also breaking away from traditional Christian beliefs.

The Reverend Buser claimed that in the late nineteenth century few artists were making religious paintings. Some Symbolist painters such as Moreau, Denis, and Redon, as well as Gauguin were an exception to this trend. He also noted that Gauguin’s close friend, Vincent van Gogh, and many of the Nabis were staunchly religious and that during the last decade of the century religion was a popular subject for discussion amongst Gauguin’s contemporaries. Perhaps there were fewer religious paintings because at that time, people were still trying to reconcile their beliefs given the new
developments in science and the revival of mysticism in Europe. As a deeply spiritual man, Gauguin constantly searched for a system of beliefs that satisfied his more mystical inclinations and artistic sensibilities. He was seeking out meaning and a more direct route to spirituality as evidenced in his ceaseless pursuit of “primitive” life, which he believed would provide him with a straightforward path to enlightenment. In this search, and through the thick atmosphere of religious discussion in the late nineteenth century, I believe Gauguin discovered Theosophy.

Recently, a handful of scholars have pointed out Gauguin’s inclination towards the esoteric and mystical. Buser was the first to argue that “when it came time for Gauguin to think about a subject, he thought theosophically...Theosophy was his worldview.” Buser used *Self-Portrait with Halo and Snake* (Fig. 4) and *Portrait of Jacob Meyer de Haan* (Fig. 5), both from 1889, as proof of Gauguin’s theosophical beliefs. In the *Self Portrait*, Gauguin painted himself as both sinner and saint. This dual nature is depicted in the halo above his head, and the snake held in his hand. Buser argued that Gauguin is associating himself with Christ, and regards himself as a creator through painting. Buser claimed that, “He [Gauguin] is a theosophical Christ, a seer, an initiate with special vision and special ‘Science’.” In the *Portrait of Jacob Meyer de Haan* Gauguin painted de Haan, his close friend, as a seer, someone who understands the basis of reality. This is achieved by the parallel images of de Haan’s head on the left, and the lamp on the right, which represents de Haan’s ability to illuminate the mysteries of humanity.

Vojtěch Jirat-Wasiutyński claimed that in the *Self-Portrait* Gauguin was depicting himself as initiate and magus, a theme which has its roots in Theosophy and in *The Great
Initiates, the book by Shure concerning the tradition of esotericism. In a discussion of Gauguin’s relationship with de Haan, John Rewald stated that de Haan’s knowledge of metaphysical philosophy and religion had a profound effect on Gauguin. De Haan’s influence is evident in Gauguin’s unusual portrait of him where he also included images of Milton’s Paradise Lost and Carlyle’s Sartor Resartus, symbols of the myths of religion and philosophy. Additionally, Ziva Amishai-Maisels affirmed that Theosophy was a core source of religious inspiration for Gauguin. Wayne Andersen claimed that Gauguin’s Loss of Virginity (1890-91) was another painting inspired by The Great Initiates. And most significantly, Gauguin scholar Evert van Uitert acknowledged the link between Gauguin’s Self-Portrait (Les Misérables) (1888) (Fig. 6) and Swedenborg’s mystic ideals as presented by Balzac in Louis Lambert. Through this book and Balzac’s Seraphita Gauguin became familiar with esoteric and mystical beliefs that Balzac was attempting to explore. With all of this scholarship in mind, it can be confidently proposed that Gauguin had significant knowledge of mysticism in literature, and was comfortable mediating his Theosophy through his painting. It is therefore not unlikely that he would have chosen to do so in la Orana Maria.

While in Tahiti, a place he hoped would embody primitive life, and simple faith, he realized that it had already been polluted by western culture. The Catholic Church had established missions and the Maohi culture was already infused with Western sensibilities. He had experienced this while in the Marquesas as well. Gauguin was angered by this situation and bruised by personal conflicts he had experienced with ecclesiastical authorities on Tahiti who thought his art and writing were obscene. He expressed his exasperation in his unpublished manuscript L’esprit moderne et le
catholicisme (1902), essentially a tirade against the Catholic Church.\textsuperscript{73} Regarding this document, Gauguin stated:

Remembering certain theological studies of my youth, and certain later reflections on these subjects, certain discussions also, I took it into my head to establish a sort of parallel between the Gospel and the modern scientific spirit, and upon this the confusion between the Gospel and the interpretation of it in the Catholic Church, an interpretation that has made it the victim of hatred and skepticism.\textsuperscript{74}

Gauguin's writings indicate that he was on a seemingly endless journey for understanding; an exploration of the origins of morality and faith. In a discussion of morality in the unpublished manuscript, Gauguin passionately stated this concern:

\ldots it is necessary to look for the origins of morality. Today it exists only in the West, or, to put it more accurately, only in the Christian world, which might lead us to believe that this imposed morality, these imposed mores, have their beginnings in an ancient philosophy, one older than Jesus Christ, but affirmed and consecrated by Jesus' doctrine, in view of the extent to which the Catholic Church and especially the Protestant Church impose it on other people: \textit{Works of the flesh thou do in marriage only}. By now, who has not encountered the confessor's handbook, with its frightening sadism? From scanning the sacred Buddhist writings or the Christian Scriptures, one can ascertain that it is never mentioned — not being an element of wisdom, and contributing neither to man's happiness nor to his improvement. This Morality, the source of all hypocrisy and of many physical evils, engenders the great traffic in flesh, the prostitution of the soul; and it would even seem to be a virus born of civilization, for among the savage races of Oceania and the black peoples of Africa there is no such thing. Moreover, as soon as Christianity makes an appearance among them, vice, which had hitherto been unknown, also appears, along with the fig leaf below the navel.\textsuperscript{75}

This statement exemplifies Gauguin's belief that with the introduction of Christianity into a "primitive" culture comes vice, and the corruption of the free spirit of the native people. Living in Tahiti and witnessing the spoiling of the native culture no doubt fueled
Gauguin's need to express his beliefs on how Western religious practices, when taken as all-encompassing law and with no regard for the true basis of morality, can be destructive.

Gauguin decorated the back cover of *L'esprit moderne et le catholicisme* with his print of the Virgin and Child, a winged angel and other figures similar to those seen in *La Orana Maria*. Jehanne Teilhet-Fisk argued that when Gauguin painted *La Orana Maria* he had not been in Tahiti long enough to infuse the painting with much understanding of Maohi culture or religion, but that his use of Christian symbolism hinted at "the destructive encroachment of civilization on Nirvana." It is possible that by including a print of a similar image of the same theme on the back cover of *L'esprit moderne et le catholicisme*, written after he had spent many years in Polynesia, Gauguin was confirming that his ominous prediction had come true.

Some scholars, such as Mark Cheetham, believe that Gauguin's beliefs embodied neo-platonic ideals, and that they went hand in hand with Theosophy. We know that Gauguin was familiar with Emanuel Swedenborg by the inclusion of a reference to his writing in *Cahier pour Aline*. Gauguin stated,

> There is in the firmament a book in which the eternal law of harmony and beauty is written. The men who know how to read this book, says Swedenborg, are the favoured of God. And he adds that the artist is the true elect, since he alone has the power to write this book, and he must be looked upon as God's messenger.

This is highly suggestive of the neo-platonic ideal that there are absolute laws of harmony and beauty, and that they are represented on earth in metaphor. Gauguin would embrace such a belief as it justified his Symbolist inclinations, and he would have appreciated
even more the suggestion that artists have the ability to write this “book” or “law.” Cheetham argued that through Sérusier, Gauguin would have become familiar with the recently formed Theosophical Society, whose beliefs were to some degree influenced by Swedenborg.
Chapter 3

“Primitive” Influences

Because we know that Gauguin was the primary innovator of modernist primitivism, it is fitting that Gauguin would use non-western images in his artwork. In Primitivism in 20th Century Art Kirk Varnedoe discusses Gauguin’s relationship to the trend:

Gauguin identified primitivism with self-realization, not just because he thought Primitive peoples created or coupled in ways he envied, but on still more basic levels: because he believed that a move beyond or behind Western traditions of art-making and ways of living would lead him reflexively back into his own psyche, and that the proper outer simplification of his art and life would resolve inner confusions, literally to give form to his most basic identity. 

Within the arts that were considered “primitive,” Eastern arts held a particular appeal for Gauguin. The earliest “primitive” influences on Gauguin were derived from Japanese artwork, including, but not limited to, prints, screens, and ceramics. The art of Japan was very popular among artists in Paris in the late nineteenth century. It is no surprise that Gauguin’s work would have been influenced by the trend known as “Japonisme.”

In the 1850’s trading rights were established with Japan which resulted in a huge influx of artwork to Western markets. This was a significant influence on Art Nouveau, a style of art taking place in the late nineteenth century that shared aesthetic ideals similar to some of the Post-Impressionists, such as its use of more decorative, graphic forms, and flowing lines to achieve an art that was spiritually uplifting. Artists involved in Art Nouveau were synthesizing art and craft, and concurrently, Symbolist artists were
synthesize subject and idea with form and color. In a discussion of Art Nouveau for The Metropolitan Museum of Art Cybele Gontar stated, “The unfolding of Art Nouveau’s flowing line may be understood as a metaphor for the freedom and release sought by its practitioners and admirers from the weight of artistic tradition and critical expectations.” Art Nouveau and Symbolism are frequently linked in their aesthetic origins and traditions and Gauguin was no doubt influenced by Art Nouveau works of the time. Furthermore, Gauguin’s art was an influence on the production of Art Nouveau works into the early twentieth century.

Gauguin paid high prices for Japanese prints, and had several by Japanese printmaker Kitagawa Utamaro (1753–1806) in his room at the inn at Pont-Aven. While we do not definitively know which prints Gauguin owned, it is likely that they resembled typical ukiyo-e style prints, such as those in Figures 7 and 8. So strong was the influence of these prints that Gauguin said one of his paintings at the time was, “completely Japanese, painted by a Peruvian Indian.” On several occasions, Gauguin included a depiction of a Japanese print in the background of his paintings, such as in the 1889 works Still Life with Onions, Beetroot, and a Japanese Print (Fig. 9), and Still Life with Head-Shaped Vase (Fig. 10) in which the vase is Gauguin’s self-portrait.

The influence of these prints is evident in the bright, flat areas of color and decorative quality of the composition of Vision After the Sermon (Fig. 2). Additionally, the form of the wrestlers was taken from a Hokusai drawing. Vision After the Sermon has all the characteristics of the height of Gauguin’s Symbolist period. He shows a more decorative tendency, as opposed to literal depiction. It recalls not only Japanese prints, but stained glass, murals, and medieval panel painting. In nineteenth-century Europe,
these were all considered decorative and primitive arts. It is composed of large areas of pure, bright, unnatural colors applied to underscore the flatness of the pictorial surface. This flatness is enhanced by the dark outlines of the forms, and the absence of shadows. It was a work that was meant to be “primitive” in that it was decorative, while possessing a symbolic meaning, that of mystical faith.85

In addition to being influenced by the art of Japan, Gauguin also became fascinated with Buddhist art from Java. In 1889, when Gauguin was in Paris, he visited the World’s Fair, where he was also exhibiting his artwork. While at the fair, he spent some time at the Javanese pavilion, and the dances that were performed thoroughly fascinated him. In fact, he said that in the dances he witnessed at the World’s Fair he could see his photographs of Cambodian reliefs “come to life.”86 After seeing the Egyptian and Cambodian sculpture, as well as Pre-Columbian art from Central and South America, Gauguin found inspiration in this art which he believed was not created to depict fact, but was instead based on intuitive expression. This supported his belief that art should stem from the human unconscious, that painting should revert to the motivations of the “primitives,” and that art should be “an examination of the interior life of human beings.”87

Gauguin possessed two photographs of fragments of the friezes that decorate the Javanese temple of Barabudur (completed c. 780 CE), which were found in his hut after his death. The theory that Gauguin often referenced these photographs was originally presented by Bernard Dorival in his 1957 article for The Burlington Magazine and is now widely accepted.88 One photograph consisted of two levels of the frieze: the upper represents The Meeting of Buddha and the Three Monks on the Benares Road and the
lower *The Arrival of Maitrakanyaka at Nandara* (Fig. 11). The other photograph also shows two levels: the *Assault on Māra* (a story from the life of Buddha) on the upper level and an episode from the life of King Benares, most likely the reconciliation with his wife, on the lower (Fig. 12).  

Images taken from these photographs appear in Gauguin’s *La Orana Maria*. This painting marks a change in Gauguin’s style, demonstrating that he was now using Eastern imagery of the kind seen in his photographs of the Javanese temple. Figures taken from the photographs appear in many of his other paintings, such as *Te Nave Nave Fenua (The Delightful Land)* (Fig. 13), and *D’où venons nous? Que sommes-nous? Où allons-nous? (Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?)* (Fig. 14). There are several sculptures by Gauguin that were influenced by the Barabudur photographs, such as *Idol with a Shell* and *Idol with a Pearl* (Fig. 15), both from 1892. The figure in each small wooden relief sculpture is seated in the lotus position, as does Buddha in the Barabudur photograph the *Assault on Māra*.

In *La Orana Maria*, we see what is generally believed to be the biblical scene of the Adoration of the Virgin and Child. Notably, Gauguin painted characters from the Bible as Tahitians. However, its forms and parts of its composition are taken from Javanese art. As Dorival first detected, Gauguin “lifted” figures for many of his characters and elements in *La Orana Maria* from the photographs of the frieze from the temple of Barabudur. Specifically, the two worshippers at the center of the painting are almost exactly copied from the top level of the frieze *The Meeting of Buddha and the Three Monks on the Benares Road* (Fig. 11). Reading from left to right, they are based on the first and third monks who greet Buddha. Gauguin made life-sized sketches from this
photograph using Tahitian women as models, posed in the same manner as the monks. He used these sketches to illustrate his worshippers. The flowering tree behind the two worshippers is also derived from the bottom register of this frieze.90

Other photographs in Gauguin’s possession included one of a Theban tomb fresco from the eighteenth dynasty, now in the British Museum (Fig. 16). Its images clearly influenced paintings such as Ta Matete (The Marketplace) (Fig. 17) and the decorative background of Nevermore of 1897.91

According to Swedenborgian thought, reality is hierarchical, and this is quite possibly reflected in the hierarchical composition of la Orana Maria.92 In Theosophy there are three separate levels of increasing faith, seer, initiate, and magus, and followers classify themselves accordingly. The seer is informally engaged in philosophy, studying it casually. The initiate has accepted Theosophy as his religion, seeks to understand the divine, and has “control of the passions.”93 The magus, the highest level of the hierarchy is a “realized initiate,” and through his force of imagination and intellect can control nature.94 According to Buser, “What did interest Gauguin in Theosophy right from the start was its doctrine of the initiate or visionary who can penetrate the beyond.” The succession through this hierarchy held particular interest for Gauguin. It is possible that Gauguin expressed this hierarchy compositionally in the striated appearance of la Orana Maria.95

Furthermore, the Symbolists claimed the hieroglyph as one of their prototypes.96 The influence and use of ancient Egyptian art in Gauguin’s work could be linked to his knowledge of their role in the esoteric tradition. Jirat-Wasiutyński explains this relationship:
Schuré's *Great Initiates*, for example, gave a pivotal role to Egypt in the maintenance and spread of esoteric doctrine. Most of Schuré's great initiates pass through an initiation in the Temple of Isis in Memphis. Hermes, Moses, Orpheus, Pythagoras, and Plato all acquired at least part of their esoteric knowledge there.\(^7\)

The art of Egypt appealed to Gauguin aesthetically, and therefore it is no surprise that if he had knowledge of Egypt's place in esotericism, he would be increasingly inclined to use Egyptian imagery as a vehicle for expressing his own mystical beliefs in his painting.

In *Ia Orana Maria* there is a series of parallel planes on which the figures stand, and throughout the painting. At the bottom where Mary stands with her son on her shoulder and the table with the various fruits is located, is a large green area of grass. Above that is the horizontal, rectilinear plane of the dirt road on which the two worshippers stand; it is violet in color. It appears that the white flowering tree grows on the border of these two planes. The angel seems to float above the violet road, but its feet also seem to intersect with the brown of the bushes that form the next horizontal plane. The next layer is a yellow field in which trees and bushes grow. Beyond and above are several more layers of colors, including pink, green, and deep purple until they reach the mountains in the background. Even above the mountains the blue sky is horizontally striated with white clouds. This stratified element in Gauguin's painting, especially the staggering of figures, was likely inspired by the Barabudur photographs (Figs. 11 and 12), and his photograph of the Theban tomb fresco (Fig. 16). Since we have already seen how Gauguin was inclined to combine aesthetic elements from different cultures, it is possible that the striation of the composition was influenced by both the hieratic structure of
Theosophy, and by formal elements from Javanese and Egyptian art. Arguably, Gauguin used these references to inject his theosophical belief into his art.
There are aspects of *Ia Orana Maria*, other than Gauguin’s use of non-western imagery to depict a Christian theme, that suggest his belief in Theosophy. One such indicator is our inability to clearly see the angel. The tree that partially obscures it contributes to the difficulty in deciphering whether the angel is meant to be the figure of a real person or a vision. Also, the angel does not seem to be standing on the road. It seems, in fact, to be floating in space. The road on which the worshippers stand (and above which the angel floats) separates them from the space where Mary and Jesus stand. Could it be that by separating their location on the picture plane, the road is meant to identify the worldly versus divine beings? Gauguin had used this technique before by painting the tree trunk to separate Jacob and the angel from the Breton people in *Vision After the Sermon*.

It is also unclear whether the angel is meant to be male or female. It has flowing brown hair, but since one cannot clearly see a face or anatomical features, the angel’s suggested gender remains a mystery. In Christianity, angels are without gender, however, they are often given male names such as the archangel Michael, and the angel of the annunciation, Gabriel. The notion of androgyny has spanned most religions and cultures, and is evidenced by the writings of Plato, classical statuary, and has been used more recently as a theme in art, specifically in a mystical capacity. Androgyny usually represents perfection achieved by the blending of opposing forces. This notion would have appealed to Gauguin’s desire to achieve enlightenment.
At the 1889 World’s Fair in Paris, Gauguin would have seen art from Africa and Asia that depicted divine androgynous beings. In Tahiti, he encountered a culture that was far more androgynous than any he had experienced in Europe or elsewhere in his travels. Both Tahitian men and women had long hair (although it was sometimes considered effeminate for a man to have long hair), wore clothing that bared their chests, and often wore a white flower (a type of gardenia) behind one ear. Gauguin spoke of the blending of male and female characteristics in his journal Noa Noa:

Together they engage in the same tasks with the same activity or the same indolence. There is something virile in the women and something feminine in the men. This similarity of sexes makes their relations the easier. Their continual state of nakedness has kept their minds free from the dangerous pre-occupation with the ‘mystery’ and from the excessive stress which among civilized people is laid up the ‘happy accident’ and the clandestine and sadistic colors of love. It has given their manners a natural innocence, a perfect purity. Man and women [sic] are comrades, friends rather than lovers, dwelling together almost without cease, in pain as in pleasure, and even the very idea of vice is unknown to them.

Gauguin wrote this passage in Noa Noa while describing a trip he made into the forest with a Tahitian man to chop down a tree. Barbara Landy believes that the felling of this tree is a metaphor for the destruction of Gauguin’s “civilized self.” In an article for The Burlington Magazine, she proposes that Gauguin deemed this necessary to free him from the morals imposed upon civilization, and that if he was no longer civilized, then he could not commit any of the evils associated with not conforming to civilized morals. This destruction would allow him to be harmonious with nature. The androgyny of his Tahitian guide is significant for the larger argument that destruction and rebirth are necessary to achieve harmony.
The androgyny of the angel in *la Orana Maria* might also specifically be a result of Gauguin’s knowledge and appreciation of the androgynous Buddha. Gauguin depicted an androgynous Buddha in his sculpture *Idol with a Pearl* (Fig. 15), which was discussed previously as having been modeled on the Barabudur Buddha. The model for Gauguin’s Buddha in *Idol with a Pearl* came from the section of the Barabudur frieze, *The Assault on Māra*. In *Idol with a Pearl*, a figure is seated cross-legged in a niche. On the outside of this niche, and rising from it, is a partial head with long hair and a closed right eye. The figure within the relief is a Buddha seated in a half-lotus position. Gauguin intentionally blurred the line between male and female in the *Idol with a Pearl* Buddha. He carved his Buddha to appear to have long hair, and being carved from wood, the hair has the appearance of being brown, just like that of the angel in *la Orana Maria*. The three figures on the rear of the sculpture are derived from the Marquesan *tiki*, small, sculpted figures of creator gods, but Gauguin has given them long brown hair as well. It is likely that Gauguin was so fascinated with the idea of perfection achieved through the unity of opposites that he chose to use the concept of androgyny in *la Orana Maria*.

Gauguin embraced the concept of androgynous perfection and harmony of spirit as a personal goal, and in a letter to Émile Bernard’s sister, Madeline, he explained how to achieve it, “You must regard yourself as Androgyne, without sex. By that I mean that heart and soul, in short all that is divine, must not be the slave of matter, that is, of the body.” Gauguin was most likely familiar with these concepts not only through non-western art, but also from the revival of mysticism in France, and its connection with interest in the theosophical movement. One of Gauguin’s favorite books was *Seraphita*, written by Balzac in 1835, which incorporated theosophical notions. George Frederic
Parsons, who wrote an introduction to an 1889 translation of *Seraphita* aptly states, “Seraphita was conceived by Balzac in a moment of supreme insight and inspiration, to embody Swedenborg’s noblest ideas.”

In fact, the character of Seraphita was written as being related to Swedenborg himself, of whom her parents were loyal followers. The character of Seraphita is androgynous, possessing the best of both female and male qualities. This duality is meant to allow her to achieve a status as close to human perfection as possible, both physically and psychologically, to become Divine. Parsons stated:

In the androgynous symbolism under which Seraphita is presented, the author has embodied an archaic and profound doctrine. The male and female qualities and characteristics are so manifestly complementary that human thought at a comparatively early stage arrived at the idea of the original union of sexes in one relatively perfect and self-sufficient being. In the Divine World, according to Swedenborg, such consummates the attachment of those souls which during their corporeal life have been in complete sympathy. The Angel of Love, and the Angel of Wisdom combine to form a single being which possesses both their qualities.

Balzac was trying to study this progress and how it ultimately makes it impossible for the Divine to live on earth, forcing the spirit to leave the body and be born again to a new body; to be reincarnated.

Gauguin made a reference to “Seraphitus Seraphita” in an inscription on one of his drawings at the Louvre, which states: “And the monster, clasping his creation, impregnates her fertile womb with his seed to engender Seraphitus Seraphita.”

Describing the creation of a seraphic being by a monster, this inscription is indicative of Gauguin’s fascination with the combination of opposing forces. Landy links this inscription to one of Gauguin’s ceramics, *Oviri* of 1894–95 (Fig. 18). This small statue
has the head of a Marquesan mummified skull. This was supposed to represent a Marquesan chief who overcame death to achieve divinity. The body is derived from what Gauguin believed was a Javanese fertility goddess. Gauguin was therefore juxtaposing references to life and death in this ceramic. Landy states, “The borrowed pose of a fertility goddess with the Marquesan death’s head would reinforce the meaning of the ceramic as a rejuvenation from destruction.”

Regarding the Louvre drawing inscription and the *Oviri* ceramic, she goes on to say:

The inscription states that the androgynous creature or quality is begot (*engendrer*) by this monster who fertilizes (*féconde*). This idea of birth and fertility is visually expressed in the body contrast to the destructive connotation of the death’s head; the figure represents simultaneous Death and Birth.

Writing for *The Burlington Magazine*, Denys Sutton suggests that Gauguin may have gotten these ideas about rejuvenation through death from Carlyle’s *Sartor Resartus*, in which Carlyle suggests that like the Phoenix, society resurrected itself through destruction. As a possible representative of redemption, it is fitting that Gauguin requested that *Oviri* mark his grave.

Gauguin would appreciate the notion of reincarnation as he had much physical suffering throughout his life, and struggled to feel successful as an artist. Reincarnation would allow him a second chance to achieve his goals. Perhaps Gauguin was painting theosophically in the effort to achieve the enlightenment necessary for reincarnation to be possible. Additionally, it is not unlikely that the angel in *La Orana Maria* is represented as an Androgyne. In Christianity, a seraph is the highest ranking of the angels, and is one
of the heavenly beings surrounding the throne of God. Gauguin could have painted the
angel with Seraphita in mind; a representation of androgynous perfection.

In *La Orana Maria* the angel’s androgyny is also an abstraction; a simplification
of form, just as an androgyne is the purest of all forms. Gauguin spoke about his tendency
to abstract elements of his paintings in a letter to Schuffenecker. In it, he described a self-portrait (Fig. 6) that he made for Vincent van Gogh in 1888 as follows:

I believe it is one of my best things: absolutely incomprehensible (for
example) it is so abstract. Head of a bandit in the foreground, a Jean
Valjean (*Les Misérables*) personifying also a disreputable Impressionist
painter, shackled always to this world. The design is absolutely special, a
complete abstraction. The eyes, mouth and nose are like the flowers of a
Persian carpet, thus personifying the symbolic aspect. The color is far
from nature...112

Notably, in this painting Gauguin included a portrait of Émile Bernard in the background.
Gauguin commented about this portrait in a letter to Van Gogh: “I am observing young
Bernard. I do not yet get him. Maybe I shall do him from memory, but in any case it will
be an abstraction.”113

The unnatural colors and forms in *La Orana Maria*, such as the violet dirt path,
the yellow and pink colors of the ground and the unusually prominent fruits in the
foreground are indicative of Gauguin’s Symbolist belief in the synthesis of subject and
idea with form and color. Regarding the display of fruit Dorra states, “...it [the fruit] is
laid on a ‘fata,’ an altar of a type once used by the Polynesians to make offerings to their
idols...”114 Alternatively, the fruit could be seen as a reference to the forbidden fruit
eaten by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, resulting in their fall from grace and
subsequent salvation in the birth, and later, death of Christ. This duality of subject is
suggestive that Gauguin intended to blend Christian and Eastern imagery and faiths, in this case, Christian and Polynesian.

Gauguin created this synthesis to enhance the ambiguity and dream-like qualities of the painting. It also functions to highlight the hieratic layout of progressing planes of color. Describing Gauguin’s enigmatic painting technique, Robert Goldwater states:

...discovering the meaning of his own picture as he went along; finding it, to be sure, in the abstract pattern of the lines and shapes and colors which he had already set down, but not satisfied with that. He searched for a meaning in terms of subject matter, or, to use his own word ‘parable,’ and having interpreted the sense of what he had, more or less unconsciously, already put down on canvas, he then allowed the picture to finish itself. Thus both form, and subject, vague at first and only half understood, became clear to the painter himself in the process of creation.115

I believe, in using this technique, Gauguin deemed that he was painting with the same mystical inspiration that one would use to achieve wisdom in Theosophy. Since a relationship with God is personally inspired in Theosophy, it is conceivable that Gauguin believed he could attain this spirituality by painting “mystically.”

Perhaps, in *La Orana Maria*, Gauguin was trying to tell a story other than simply the Adoration of the Virgin and Child. It is possible that he was trying to convey a message. Gauguin stated in a letter to his friend Daniel de Monfried that “if you want to deform nature in order to express yourself a little mysteriously, in parables,...always have before you the Persians, the Cambodians and a little of the Egyptian.”116 Gauguin was deforming nature by simplifying it, while also heightening its intensity. While analyzing *La Orana Maria* for *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, Henri Dorra pointed out that in addition to the hierarchy of the figures, the lines of the bodies “lack
articulation," and the simple modeling of their flesh resembles the “frank sensuality” of Indian statuary.\textsuperscript{117}

Alternatively, Dorra believed that Gauguin did not necessarily need to distort reality because in the unfamiliar land of Tahiti everything was a symbol. According to Gauguin, Tahiti was “anywhere out of this world” and yet also a place “carrying the weight of objective reality.”\textsuperscript{118} In another comment regarding the Tahitian environment Gauguin stated, “It is the stillness of the atmosphere that gives the strange vision such profound intensity, it is the simplification of the lines that project forms into infinity.”\textsuperscript{119} Dorra interpreted that Gauguin expressed this feeling not by distorting known objects, but by reducing the forms of the unfamiliar world that surrounded him, while also preserving its powerful concentration of color. What we see in \textit{la Orana Maria} is undoubtedly a strange vision. The scene is not so distorted that it is utterly abstract, yet is simplified enough to separate it as a whole from previous depictions of the Adoration of the Virgin and Child that Gauguin may have seen at the Louvre, where he studied the masters with his friend Schuffenecker.\textsuperscript{120}

The use of a readily recognizable theme, the Adoration, supported by Christian iconography, and based on the physical properties of “primitive” works of art could be Gauguin’s way of synthesizing the religions of Christianity and Buddhism. This would satisfy his Symbolist beliefs in that this work of art is “Synthetic” because it captures forms and symbols in a broadly comprehensive manner, and support the theosophical principle that all religions are one.\textsuperscript{121}
Conclusion

Gauguin led a tumultuous life, largely a result of his choice to abandon “civilization” to pursue artistic and spiritual truth in “primitive” lands. His paintings are often a biographical testament not only to his state of mind, and quite possibly to his mental health, but also an exploration of his spirituality. Towards the end of his life and after nearly a decade living on and off of Tahiti, Gauguin was despondent. Known for his manic temperament, in the years after painting *La Orana Maria* Gauguin’s mental state swung back and forth between depression and exhilaration. He was constantly suffering from myriad illnesses including heart and eye disease, and syphilis, not to mention anxiety from financial woes. In 1893 Gauguin returned to Paris out of loneliness and financial necessity. Two years later he returned to Tahiti where he built a studio on Punaania that was also his home.

He was very productive, painting voraciously at this time, despite his poor health. In 1897 Gauguin received the crippling news that his daughter Aline had died. He was especially wounded by her death because he believed she held some artistic promise. At this point, Gauguin descended into deep depression and decided to set a deadline for his own demise. He planned to kill himself the following year if his life did not improve. He wanted to paint one final masterpiece, to force upon the world his artistic opinion one last time. It was with this mentality that he created his most famous painting *Where Do We Come From?, What Are We?, Where Are We Going?* (1897) (Fig. 14). This work, over twelve feet long, is a sweeping commentary on the human condition and the cycle of
life. In a letter to his friend Daniel de Monfried, Gauguin spoke about the creation of this painting:

I must tell you that I made up my mind [to commit suicide] during the month of December. So, before I died, I endeavored to paint a big picture I had in mind. I worked day and night that whole month in an incredible fever... The appearance is terribly rough... People will say it is slapdash, unfinished. True, no one is a good judge of one’s own work; but I do believe not only that this painting is the best thing I have ever done, but that I’ll never do anything better nor anything to approach it. Before dying I put into it all my energy, such aching intensity under appalling circumstances, a vision so clear, needing no correction, that the hurried execution disappears and it suddenly comes alive...  

Using Polynesian imagery, reading from right to left the painting depicts the cycle of life, starting with a sleeping baby, and ending with an old woman seated, with her head in her hands. He indicates that two figures dressed in purple are pondering their destiny, and that the old woman has resigned to her death. It may be that this is analogous to Gauguin’s own cycle of life. He had spent much time thinking about metaphysics and notions concerning man’s life and death, but had finally reached a point where he could accept that his life and earthly sufferings would end.

After completing this painting, Gauguin withdrew to the hills to take his own life. He swallowed arsenic in an attempt to poison himself, but ingested so much that his body rejected it. Whatever amount passed into his system, it was not enough to do any serious damage, and he managed to find his way back to town where he was hospitalized. While he was recuperating, his painting reverted back to a more light-hearted, harmonious style, such as can be seen in The White Horse of 1898 and Two Tahitian Woman with Mango Blossoms of 1899. These works are evidence of Gauguin’s intention to paint man’s harmony with nature.
Eventually, Gauguin grew restless again, and developed increasing contempt for the colonial presence on Tahiti. He found himself embroiled in legal troubles with the authorities on Tahiti. In his self-published magazine, *Les Guêpes*, he voiced his fury on the detrimental effects of the corrupt colonial presence which, in turn, flooded him with libel suits. By 1900 he was becoming more dissatisfied with his life and work on Tahiti, partially because it was becoming more expensive. Gauguin decided to move to the Marquesas, where living was less expensive, and since it lacked major shipping lanes, was less influenced by the presence of Westerners. He believed this move would invigorate his art as well. However, he did not find peace in his new home. Gauguin settled into what he called his “House of Pleasure,” which was built on land owned by the Catholic Church. His debauched behavior caused the bishop to ban locals from visiting him.

In 1902, these incidents no doubt fueled him when he wrote *L’esprit moderne et le catholicisme*, his diatribe against the Catholic Church. His legal troubles resurfaced when he was required to go to court for charges of tax evasion. At this point his health was failing. He had heart trouble and open sores on his legs. He believed these troubles would be the end of him, and indeed, after being sentenced to three months in jail, Gauguin suffered a fatal heart attack. He died on the 8th of May, 1903. In accordance with his request, *Oviri*, which means “savage,” was eventually placed on his tomb.

It is evident in Gauguin’s work, specifically in *Ia Orana Maria*, and *Where Do We Come From?*, *What Are We?*, *Where Are We Going?*, that Gauguin was desperately seeking spiritual meaning, and an understanding of his place in the universe. We will never know if he ultimately made peace with these intense needs, but it is certain that
they inspired his artwork. Considering Gauguin’s propensity for seeking out meaning, it is likely that when he discovered Theosophy, he recognized it as a fitting set of beliefs that suited his sensibilities, as well as a useful reference for painting. Theosophy would have been a means by which Gauguin attempted to achieve enlightenment, and a way to symbolically inform his artwork.

In summary, in *La Orana Maria* Gauguin transformed images from the natural world to express his faith. The formal elements that Gauguin borrowed from “primitive” art, such as the lifting of images from the Barabudur photographs, the striation of the composition, and the simplification of forms and abstraction of colors indicate the influence of Theosophy on his art. Having absorbed theosophical notions from his friends and colleagues, and from literature, Gauguin infused this complex painting with those beliefs. Gauguin synthesized Christian, Buddhist, Egyptian, and Polynesian imagery, resulting in a spectacular painting that is full of Gauguin’s personal mysticism, and that is an expression of his Theosophy.
Fig. 8

Fig. 9
Notes


3 Ibid., 14.


5 Buser, 375.

6 Buser, 228.


8 Ibid., 228.

9 Buser, 377.

10 Ibid., 228.

11 Buser, 244.


14 Buser, 375.

15 Ibid., 230.


21 Ibid.


23 Ibid., 14.

24 Ibid., 27. The document Lévi helped to publish in 1846 was Tristan’s *Emancipation de la femme ou le testament de la Paria*. The author states that Gauguin owned Tristan’s *Promenades dans Londres*, a fact that he stated in a letter to his wife Mette, see: *Correspondance de Paul Gauguin*, ed. Victor Merlhes, Paris, 1984, vol. 1, p. 167 (6. XII. 1887).

25 Buser, 380.


32 Buser, 375.
<http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/artn/hd_artn.htm>
81 Ibid.
82 Gauguin: Paintings, Drawings, Prints, Sculpture, 14.
84 Hamilton, 85.
85 Gauguin: Paintings, Drawings, Prints, Sculpture, 14.
86 Ibid., 16.
87 Hamilton, 84.
88 Dorival, 118.
89 Ibid.
90 Amishai-Maisels, 293.
92 Cheetham, 17-18.
93 Jirat-Wasiutyński, 25.
94 Ibid.
95 Buser, 380.
96 Jirat-Wasiutyński, 24.
97 Ibid., 25.
99 Teilet-Fisk, 50.
100 Paul Gauguin, Noa Noa (New York, Noonday Press, 1972), 46-47.
102 Ibid., 50.
103 Ibid., 52.
104 Malingue, 210.
106 Ibid., XVIII
107 Landy, 242. Translation of French inscription was provided by Dr. Anne Betty Weinshenker of Montclair State University.
108 Ibid., 245.
109 Ibid., 246.
110 Sutton, 285.
111 Landy, 242.
112 Cheetham, 15.
113 Ibid.
114 Dorra, 255.
116 Dorra, 259.
117 Ibid.
118 Ibid., 258. The quotations are by Gauguin, although Dorra does not specify from which writing they originate.
119 Ibid.
121 Buser, 380.
122 Walther, 95.
123 Ibid., 78.
124 Cachin, 112.
125 Ibid., 128.
126 Walther, 80.
127 Ibid., 82-85.
128 Ibid., 85-86.
129 Ibid., 87-88.
130 Estienne, 11.
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