



Paul Gauguin, French, 1848–1903  
***Tahitian Landscape***, 1891 Oil  
on canvas  
26¾ x 36½ inches  
The Julius C. Eliel Memorial Fund, 49.10

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## Key Ideas

Gauguin [go-gan] spent all of his life trying to "return to nature," first in the French countryside and then in the exotic South Sea islands. Gauguin sought to be among people who lived close to nature. In Gauguin's quest to express the true essence of his environment, he developed a style that was not concerned with painting places and things exactly as they appeared in nature, but rather to paint an emotional response to his surroundings.

## Imagination, Emotion and Spirituality

Gauguin went to Tahiti in search of a paradise untouched by urban capitalism, which he felt was artificial and spiritually bankrupt. He wanted to find a remote haven where he could live cheaply and work in nature. Like many artists of his time, Gauguin looked to pre-industrial cultures for artistic inspiration and a lifestyle that was believed to be simple and pure. Instead, Gauguin discovered a thoroughly colonized country whose native culture was fast disappearing as a protectorate of France. Ignoring this reality, Gauguin drew on his imagination to reveal the ideal Tahiti.

Rather than just describe the natural world, Gauguin explored the realms of emotion, imagination and spirituality. His paintings evoke an experience or idea in which the meanings cannot be literally represented but rather suggested indirectly. In *Tahitian Landscape*, Gauguin depicts this tropical site with simplified drawing, flattened space and intense color in a way which expresses such feelings as serenity and joy. Gauguin called his style *Synthetism*, because it synthesized observation of the subject in nature with the artist's feeling about that subject.

## Escape to the Tahiti

*Tahitian Landscape* dates from Gauguin's first trip to Tahiti in 1891 and reflects the painter's initial joy and happiness in his new surroundings, despite his disappointment that much of Tahiti had been colonized by the French. He immersed himself in what he believed to be the authentic aspects of the culture. Painted on the island of Mooa-rea, *Tahitian Landscape* depicts a paradise of palm trees, mountains, and grassy meadows. The scene is rare in that it is one of the painter's few pure landscapes; only a small, single figure and a dog are depicted in the center of the painting. Gauguin was profoundly affected by his new home; it was a respite from the activity, struggle, and tension of European life. He once said of his Tahitian paintings that he had been "eager to suggest a luxurious and untamed nature, a tropical sun that sets aglow everything around it...the equivalent of the grandeur, depth, and mystery of Tahiti when it must be expressed in one square meter of canvas."

## Forging a Style for Expression

In order to express his highly personal feelings to the viewer, Gauguin developed a style that broke with centuries of artistic tradition. Based on the use of line and color for emotional rather than descriptive effects, this style combined abstraction, motifs drawn from a variety of traditional cultures, symbolism, and an intentionally naïve child-like drawing style to produce sensuous, evocative works. His work laid the foundation for the development of avant-garde art in the early 1900s.

*Tahitian Landscape*, while more naturalistic than Gauguin's later works, is still an abstract representation of the scene. The landscape has been conceived as a series of flat shapes superimposed one on top of the other and differentiated by color. Repeated shapes in the mountains, trees and shrubs help to create a decorative effect and a unified composition. The colors in the painting have been carefully placed to heighten and intensify the beauty which Gauguin saw around him - gardenia, hibiscus, bougainvillea and palm trees set against a backdrop of mountains and blue sky – to create an expression of harmony and calm.

## A Life Unbound

Paul Gauguin was undoubtedly one of the most flamboyant personalities of his day. Born in Paris to a Peruvian mother and French father, Gauguin lived in Peru until the age of seven. As a young man, he spent six years at sea, in the merchant marine and the navy. These early experiences may have stirred the wanderlust that marked his life.

It was shortly after he lost his job in the stock market in 1882, that he left his wife and five children in order to find an unencumbered lifestyle and pursue his art full time. After sojourns in Brittany, Panama, Martinique, and Arles, Gauguin sailed for Tahiti in 1891. Although he returned to Paris for two years in 1893, he went back to Tahiti and later moved to the Marquesas, where he died in 1903.

## A Legacy of Experimentation

A potter, sculptor, painter, and printmaker, Gauguin's impact on the art of the 1900s was tremendous. Due to his tireless experimentation, Gauguin has been identified with a range of stylistic movements. He has been called a Post-impressionist, a Symbolist, and a Synthesist. Towards the end of his life Gauguin wrote, "The painters who reap benefits of this liberty today owe me something."

## Suggested Questions

1. Looking at this picture, what words would you use to describe Tahiti? What do you see that makes you say that?
2. Gauguin was more interested in recreating the feeling of a place than showing exactly how it looked. How would it feel to be "inside" this picture? How has Gauguin painted that feeling?
3. Imagine you are the person walking on the pathway in this painting. What sounds might

you hear in this scene? What kinds of things might you smell in the air? Where are you going to on your walk?

4. Gauguin titled this painting *Tahitian Landscape*. What other titles could he have used? Why? Which would you pick and why?
5. If you were to paint a painting of where you live, what time of year would you choose to paint? Why? What colors would you use to paint your picture?