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**BOSTON AND PARIS COLLABORATE ON INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITION
OF GAUGUIN'S TAHITIAN WORKS**

Museum of Fine Arts, Boston Welcomes Gauguin Tahiti to its only U.S. Venue

BOSTON, Mass. (February 2, 2004) — A little more than a century ago, the artist Paul Gauguin (1848 – 1903) began work on a canvas that he expected would be his final testament, as he privately thought that he would soon die — perhaps even by his own hand. The masterpiece he created, *D'où venons-nous? Que sommes-nous? Où allons-nous? (Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?)* 1897-98 Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), is the centerpiece for the international loan exhibition **Gauguin Tahiti**. Organized in France by the Réunion des Musées Nationaux and the Musée d'Orsay, Paris, and in the United States by the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (MFA), **Gauguin Tahiti** marks the centenary of Gauguin's death in 1903. On view at the MFA — the only U.S. venue — from February 29 to June 20, 2004, this exhibition features more than 150 works by Gauguin — paintings, carved wood sculpture, objects of decorative art, drawings, prints, and illustrated manuscripts. A group of objects from the South Seas that might have inspired Gauguin and documentary photographs of Tahiti will also be in on view.

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“**Gauguin Tahiti** is an exhibition of historic importance and dramatic beauty,” said Malcolm Rogers, Ann and Graham Gund Director of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. “Many of Gauguin’s closely-related masterpieces will be reunited for the first time in decades, including the majestic *D’où venons-nous? Que sommes-nous? Où allons-nous?*, which will be shown for the first time since 1898 with eight of the works originally created to be exhibited with it. This will allow for the artist’s intense, creative process to be explored in full.”

Gauguin Tahiti includes some of Gauguin’s finest works (dating from 1889 – 1903) from public and private collections around the world including objects from across Europe and North America, Russia, and Japan. A selection of approximately 25 works of art and sculpture from the South Seas are included in the exhibition as well, including *tikis* from the Easter Islands, artifacts from the Marquesas Islands, and objects of domestic use that Gauguin himself transformed into art. The exhibition will also include approximately 15 photographs including documentary photographs taken while Gauguin was living in Tahiti — such as a photo of *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* in his studio — as well as photographs owned by Gauguin. The curators of **Gauguin Tahiti** are George T.M. Shackelford, Chair of the Art of Europe, MFA, and Claire Frèches-Thory, Conservateur en chef, Musée d’Orsay, working in collaboration with colleagues in Paris and Boston.

Gauguin Tahiti is, in part, an attempt to answer the questions Gauguin posed in the title of his masterpiece *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*. “Where does the painting of a picture begin and where does it end,” Gauguin wondered a century ago. “At the instant when extreme feelings are merging in the deepest core of one’s being, at the instant when they burst and all one’s thoughts gush forth like lava from a volcano, isn’t that where the suddenly created work erupts...in a grand and apparently superhuman way?...but who can say exactly when the work was begun in one’s heart of hearts?”

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“*Where Do We Come From?* is a summa of Gauguin’s pictorial work and even sculptural work before 1897, and by extension, of his aesthetic philosophy,” explains George Shackelford in the exhibition’s catalogue. “Simply by tracing the genealogy of any of several figures in the painting, one can explore its origins in a complex series of borrowings and self-borrowings that bind Gauguin’s productions into an evolving, self-referential discourse.”

Gauguin was born in Paris in 1848; his mother descended from Europeans who had settled in the New World. He was taken as a toddler to Peru to live with his mother’s family, then returned to France, and at 17 joined the Merchant Marine and then the French Navy, with which he sailed around the world. His career at sea lasted until 1871. His grandmother, Flora Tristan, was a feminist and world-traveler. His guardian, after his parents died, was Gustave Arosa, photographer, publisher and art collector. After marriage to a young Danish woman, Mette Gad, in 1872, he settled in Paris and spent a decade as a successful businessman, all the while collecting contemporary art, including works by Renoir, Cézanne, Manet, and Pissarro. Gauguin had an interest in painting since the early 1870s, but it was not until 1876 that he exhibited his own work for the first time. He participated in the Impressionist exhibitions beginning in 1879, when he was invited to join the group by Degas and Pissarro. In 1885, he abandoned his wife and children in Denmark to devote himself to art.

PROLOGUE TO TAHITI: 1889 - 1891

After the Impressionist exhibit of 1886 in Paris, Gauguin painted in the French province of Brittany, on the Caribbean island of Martinique, and in the Provençal town of Arles. There he lived with Vincent van Gogh in what they called their “Studio of the South;” indeed, Gauguin originally planned to travel to Tahiti with Van Gogh to create a “Studio of the Tropics.”

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His fascination with the tropics was further fueled by a visit to the Universal Exhibition held in Paris in 1889. There, he visited the Javanese Pavilion, the Pagoda of Angkor, and exhibitions from Senegal, the Congo, Tonkin, Morocco and Tahiti. He first considered traveling to the new French protectorate of Tonkin, in Indochina, later Vietnam, and it was not until after the death of Van Gogh, in 1890, that he began to focus on Tahiti in French Polynesia. There, Gauguin imagined, he would live in a world unspoiled by Western civilization, where he would be free of bourgeois constraints like marriage and money, and get in touch with his own true nature. “May the day come — and perhaps soon — when I can flee to the woods on a South Sea island, and live there in ecstasy, in peace, and for art...” he wrote.

The exhibition in Boston begins with a prologue to the artist’s first trip to Tahiti. During his time in Brittany, Gauguin had already made a series of carvings in bas relief that experimented with exotic or “primitive” compositions and themes, including two of his most important sculptural works, *Be in Love and You Will Be Happy* (1889, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) and *Be Mysterious* (1890, Musée d’Orsay, Paris) reunited in **Gauguin Tahiti** for the first time in decades. They show flowers and animals such as the fox, which he called a “symbol of perversity among the Indians;” his own self-portrait as a monster; and women, whose strong, sensual bodies, carved in dark brown wood, anticipate the muscular, dark-skinned women whose beauty Gauguin was soon to celebrate in Tahiti.

TAHITI: 1891 – 1893

In 1891, Gauguin was appointed to a mission for the French Ministry of Fine Arts. “Mr. Gauguin, painter, has been charged with a mission to Tahiti, in order to study from an artistic viewpoint, and for the paintings that might result, the customs and landscapes of that country,” read the official document. In the spring of that year, Gauguin set forth for

Tahiti, with paper, canvas, brushes, charcoal, and his “portable museum” of photographs. His photographs included images of: the Javanese temple sculpture at Borobudur, horses and riders from the Parthenon frieze, Renaissance paintings, giant statues from Easter Island, and works by his contemporaries, especially Degas and Cézanne. “I am taking along photographs and drawings, a whole little world of friends who will speak to me every day,” he wrote. Many of these photographs will be on view in **Gauguin Tahiti**.

Gauguin’s first months were spent studying the culture, sketching, and learning the Tahitian language. Soon he moved from Papeete to a smaller village, Mataiea, where he began to make drawings of the people and the landscape, animals and flowers, and to create a new vocabulary of artistic forms for his new life. There he lived with his *vahine* — a young native girl named Tehamana, who became his mistress, model and muse. Gauguin drew and painted Tehamana again and again, standing, sitting, with native fruit and flowers, or as Eve in the Garden of Eden. In *The Ancestors of Tehamana* (1893, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago), she is shown in a modest, high-collared, long-sleeved “Missionary” dress, her long dark hair crowned with flowers, holding a fan; in the background is an idol of the moon-goddess Hina, glyphs from Easter Island, and three tupapaus, or ancestral spirits.

Gauguin’s paintings from his first trip to Tahiti show his exploration and assimilation of the people, landscape, and culture of his new world. From studying their ancient beliefs he created a personal Tahitian iconography, filtering the ancient Maori religion and mythology through his own heritage of European religious art. In *Hail Mary* (1891-92, Metropolitan Museum, New York) for example, he transforms a Tahitian woman and her baby in a sunny landscape filled with tropical fruit and foliage, into a radiant Madonna and Child, complete with golden haloes. His use of color, always original, became deeper, richer, more profound, “Color!” he later wrote, “What a deep and mysterious language, the language of dreams.”

FRANCE: 1893 – 1895

Gauguin returned to France in 1893 with 66 canvases and what he called “ultrabarbaric sculpture.” These years were critical to the development of his ideas about Tahiti and is seen in the sculpture *Oviri* (1894, Musée d’Orsay, Paris). Nothing illuminates Gauguin’s first sojourn to Tahiti as *Noa Noa* though, created by the artist to explain to the Paris audience what he had found there. The manuscript was reworked and published without his consent, but Gauguin had copied the text of the manuscript into a large book that he took with him when he returned to Tahiti. He continued to illustrate it by hand with wash drawings, watercolors, drawings and fragments of photographs until about 1901, and kept it with him until his death. *Noa Noa* is an intimate and revealing journal of the artist’s creative process. This exhibition in Boston marks the first time this masterwork has been on view outside of France since entering the Musée de Louvre in 1927.

BACK IN POLYNESIA: 1895 – 1897

In 1895, Gauguin sailed to Tahiti, never to return to his native land. This time, he moved to the village of Punaauia, south of the capital on the coast. From the coast near his hut, which he called “a great bird-cage railed in with bamboo, its roof thatched with coconut leaves...” he could see the island Moorea, legendary as a place of spirits. He took a new *vahine*, Pahura, who was the model for many of the great paintings he would produce in the next few years. In 1896 and 1897 he created a series of six important canvases, each measuring approximately 3 x 4 feet, larger and more ambitious than anything he had produced up to that date. In order to explore the connection to the origins and development of *Where do We Come From?*, four of these paintings are reunited in **Gauguin Tahiti**. These works include one of the artist’s most famous paintings, the celebrated *The Dream* (1897, Courtauld Institute Galleries, London) as well as *Canoe* (1896, State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg), *Delightful Day* (1896, Musée Beaux-

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Arts, Paris), and *Why Are You Angry?* (1896, Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago). This burst of creativity took place despite Gauguin suffering from a broken leg and painful sores that he believed were eczema, but were almost certainly symptoms of the syphilis that would kill him only a few years later.

***WHERE DO WE COME FROM? WHAT ARE WE? WHERE ARE WE GOING?:
1897 - 1898***

At the end of 1897, Gauguin began work on a major composition, using a thick, burlap-like canvas more than four feet high by twelve feet wide. Across the canvas Gauguin placed figures of women and children, and in the center a man who reaches up, like an Adam of the South Seas, to pick a red fruit. Gauguin indicated that the painting should be read from right to left, with three major figure groups illustrating the questions posed in the title. In this reading, the three women with a child represent the beginning of life; the central group symbolizes the daily existence of young adulthood; and in the final group, according to the artist, “an old woman approaching death appears reconciled and resigned to her thoughts;” at her feet “a strange white bird...represents the futility of words.” Upon completion of the painting, which he inscribed with the title *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*, Gauguin said that he went up into the mountains, swallowed arsenic, and almost died. Fortunately, the poison failed, and after a night of terrible suffering he returned to the studio, regained his will to paint, and put the finishing touches on his masterpiece.

Gauguin Tahiti recreates the first exhibition of this monumental painting, which was held at the Galerie Vollard, Paris at the end of 1898. In addition to *Where Do We Come From?*, a group of smaller paintings of identical size were created for the exhibition, each elaborating in some way the motifs presented in the larger work. Eight of these are shown in **Gauguin Tahiti**: *Vairumati* (1897-98, Musée de Orsay, Paris); *Landscape with Two Goats* (1897-98), *The Harvest* (1897-98) and *The Idol* (1897-98), all from the State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg; *Bathers at Tahiti* (1897-98, Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham, England);

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Delightful Water/Delectable Waters (1897-98, National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.); *Te Bourao (II)* (1897-98, private collection in Tahiti); and *Tahitian Woman* (1897-98, Ordrupgaard Museum, Charlottenlund, Denmark). When brought together, they permit the visitor to comprehend, for the first time in more than a century, this historic exhibition — which was certainly the most important presentation of Gauguin’s Tahitian work to take place during his lifetime.

GAUGUIN’S LAST YEARS: 1898 - 1903

The exhibition closes by examining the years between the completion of *Where Do We Come From?* in 1898, and Gauguin’s death in 1903. In the months after completing his “testament” he went on to create such key works as *Two Tahitian Women* (1899, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), and *Three Tahitians* (1899, National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh). The works from this final four-year period of Gauguin’s life — Boston’s *Women and a White Horse* (1903, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston) for example — were marked by the decorative rhythms of *Where Do We Come From?* and by the radiant joyful color that belies the misery in which Gauguin found himself at this time.

Bringing **Gauguin Tahiti** full circle is the door-surround that Gauguin carved and painted for his home (1902, Musée d’Orsay, Paris), the most ambitious decorative ensemble he ever attempted in sculpture. Inspired by Maori dwellings, by his own previous sculpture, and by images from his archive, he carved five pieces of imported redwood in low relief with figures, animals, flowers, fruits, and voluptuous women. The lintel above the now-missing door was carved with the words “Maison de Jouir” (literally, “House of Pleasure”) and the two baseboards with inscriptions — “Be in Love and You Will Be Happy” and “Be Mysterious” — referring to the carved wood relief sculptures of 1889 and 1890 he made in Brittany, when his voyage to Tahiti was still just a dream.

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Admission to **Gauguin Tahiti** is by ticket only for a reserved date and time of entry at half-hour intervals. Although same-day tickets will be sold (when available) at the Museum's box office, advance reservations are recommended to ensure admission to the exhibition. Tickets can be purchased by calling 617.542.4MFA or by visiting www.mfa.org. Ticket prices follow:

- MFA members FREE
- Adults \$7 plus \$15 general admission
- Seniors/Students \$7 plus \$13 general admission
- Children 7-17 \$7.50 (free general admission)
- Children 6 and under FREE
- Audio Guide \$6 (members \$5, children \$4)

Entrance to **Gauguin Tahiti** requires the purchase of an exhibition ticket *in addition to* full-price general admission. Tickets include a free repeat visit to the Museum's collections within 30 days.

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DIGITAL PHOTOGRAPHY AVAILABLE UPON REQUEST, PLEASE CONTACT Jennifer Jandebaur Standley at 617.369.4058 or jjandebaurstandley@mfa.org.

Open seven days a week, the MFA's hours are: Saturday - Tuesday 10:00 a.m. - 4:45 p.m., Wednesday - Friday 10:00 a.m. - 9:45 p.m. (Thursday and Friday after 5:00 p.m. only the West Wing is open).

*General admission (which includes two visits in a 30 day period, but does not include admission to **Gauguin Tahiti**) is \$15 for adults, \$13 for senior citizens and students age 18 and above (students who are University Members are free), and free for children 17 years of age and under during non-school hours. Thursday and Friday evenings after 5:00 p.m., admission is reduced by \$2. Wednesdays after 4:00 p.m., admission is by voluntary contribution. The Museum is closed on Patriot's Day, Independence Day, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's Day. For general visitor information, visit the MFA website at www.mfa.org or call 617.267.9300.*

The Museum of Fine Arts, Boston is recognized for the quality and scope of its encyclopedic collection, which includes an estimated 400,000 objects. The Museum's collection is made up of: Art of the Americas; Art of Europe; Contemporary Art; Art of Asia, Oceania and Africa; Art of the Ancient World; Prints, Drawings and Photographs; Textile and Fashion Arts; and Musical Instruments.