

Life & Times Exhibition

Gauguin Portraits

The National Gallery, London, 7 October 2019 to 26 January 2020

CHALLENGING AND THRILLING

Is it possible to love the art but loathe the artist? Eugène Henri Paul Gauguin's art is problematic. I hate so much of his behaviour and I'm struggling to reach beyond that. He was self-obsessed, arrogant, and petulant, brimming with hypocrisy and lacking integrity. He abandoned his wife and five children, and at the age of 43 years set sail for Tahiti. He used his French colonial privilege to satisfy his exotic fantasy of the primitive savage and had repeated sexual relationships with young girls.

Alternatively, a critic from *The Guardian* argued that The National Gallery is, in fact, being somewhat hypocritical and that the exhibition is: 'a buttoned-up, nervous and nude-light cop-out of a show' and that '... in an age of anxiety and anger about representations of race and gender, the National Gallery has turned its eyes away from Gauguin's most intense works of art. But this self-censorship doesn't just betray the

artist, it's also a somewhat futile gesture from a gallery whose collection is full of nude white women.'¹

So, it is with trepidation that I step inside the exhibition into a room of self-portraits. 'It's all about me', no doubt about that, Gauguin screaming from the canvas, vehement and vibrant.

Nothing seems to affect his outlook: the cultural influences, his emotions, his relationships, and what he chooses to reveal is the essence of his art. He presents himself as a creative primitive savage — free, raw and spiritual, or as Christ — suffering, misunderstood and abandoned (image, above).

Gauguin has overwhelming urges to be provocative and subversive. A portrait of a noble Breton teenager shows her gazing mournfully to which he adds his own sculpture of a woman menstruating.

He paints a fellow artist as an horrific devil in a missionary dress glaring at a beautiful Polynesian couple (image, left). He despises the Judeo-Christian tradition that forms much of his own character and admires the serenity of Buddhism.

Gauguin spends three intense months with Vincent van Gogh, painting side by side. The thick brushstrokes and earthier colours enhancing the psychological intensity of the subject in van Gogh's portraits contrasts with the simplification of form with clear, bold colours and flat bounded areas of paint.

A decade after van Gogh dies, Gauguin paints a still life of sunflowers. He becomes increasingly isolated and lonely and



Paul Gauguin. *Christ in the Garden of Olives*, 1889. Oil on canvas. 72.4 x 91.4 cm. Norton Museum of Art. Gift of Elizabeth C. Norton, 46.5. © Norton Museum of Art.

dies at the age of 54 years, his final self-portrait is simple; an intense glare, devoid of pretence.

I leave the exhibition surprised and buoyant. There is so much that is special about Gauguin's art. There is that exuberance of colour — cobalt blue, cadmium yellow, emerald green, and red ochre — springing from the canvas, bringing fresh perspective and a new form of energy. His avant-garde style with an affinity to primitivism is breathtaking — little wonder Matisse and Picasso were impressed. And then there are the subject matters of race, gender, religion, and social justice. In making moral judgements we explore our relationship to art, its value, and our responsibility.

Gauguin's art confronts my mind, heart, and soul in a way I find challenging, intellectually demanding, and emotionally thrilling — just as art should.

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REFERENCE

1. Jones J. Gauguin Portraits review — a buttoned-up, nervous and nude-light cop-out of a show. *The Guardian* 2019; 3 Oct: <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2019/oct/03/gauguin-portraits-review-national-gallery-censorship-prudery-exhibition> [accessed 8 Nov 2019].

Paul Gauguin. *Contes barbares*, 1902. Oil on canvas. 131.5 x 90.5 cm. Museum Folkwang Essen (Inv. G 54) © Museum Folkwang Essen / ARTOTHEK.

