The Artist and the Tourist: Gauguin in Tahiti

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1 Introduction
Tourism geographical imaginaries do not arise randomly, nor do they particularly rely on the touristic experience of a place itself. Rather, they exist prior to a tourist's visit, and it is when the tourist chooses his or her destination that this imaginary plays its greatest role. This image of a place and its people is formed from information learned at school, read in a book, a novel or a guide, or gleaned from images seen in newspapers, on the internet, or in museums, or viewed in films or on TV. Some of these texts and images are considered works of art; others are not, yet these too often refer, more or less deliberately, to artistic representations, by way of inspiration, imitation, quotation or parody. Consequently, Western (visual) culture, being notably indebted to artistic masterpieces, plays a significant role in the construction of tourists’ imaginings of places of travel; these artistic masterpieces being the things that (tourists’) dreams are made of.

With regard to tourism, the artist may acquire an even more seminal role. It has been said that some places were not considered as attractive, some landscapes not even gazed upon, before being represented in artistic masterpieces. As Roger (1997:18) asserts, 'No land ever primarily exists as landscape. The transformation of the former into the latter requires all the elaboration of art'. For example, the Sainte-Victoire Mountain and more generally the landscapes of Provence in Southern France attracted little attention before being made famous by Paul Cézanne and Vincent Van Gogh at the end of the nineteenth century. Inventing the (taste for the) Mediterranean landscape, they opened the way for the development of tourism in Southern France.

(Great) artists are often perceived as playing such a role because they are seen to perceive and express their feelings about the world in a different way, ways which, after their artwork based on these has been produced, becomes popular. Conversely, tourists are often perceived as being less inventive than artists, and as following the paths of these great artists. However, I do not completely agree with this view, mainly because it is based on an implicit hierarchy or dichotomy between artists and tourists, which in some cases makes little sense, as far as the history of art and of tourism are concerned. Why should the artist’s experience of place be necessarily genuine and authentic, and the tourist’s fake and inauthentic? This idea is based on a common romantic and elitist ideology, shared by many tourists, which idealizes the artists and despises the tourists. I suggest that

1 Please note that all translations of quotes from French texts in this chapter are author’s own translations.
the tourist’s and the artist’s geographical imaginary may actually have a lot in common.

In this chapter, I will show that the distinction between the artist and the tourist is not always easy to draw and that the role played by some famous artists in the 'invention' of touristic landscapes may have been overestimated. Paul Gauguin is a much celebrated and revered artist, whose image and late paintings are identified with Tahiti (despite the fact that he moved from Tahiti to the Marquesas in 1901, his name nevertheless remains linked to the most famous island of French Polynesia). I suggest that considering Gauguin as a tourist may give a better understanding of his life and work, and, of the development of tourism in French Polynesia. This rather iconoclastic hypothesis doesn’t necessarily lead to questioning the artistic value of his paintings. I am not suggesting he was not a great artist, the value of his work, especially in Polynesia, is incontestable (Shackelford & Frèches-Thory 2004), but rather, that he may have been both a great artist and a tourist, and furthermore, that his Tahitian paintings are real masterpieces not despite him being a tourist but because he was one.

I will first consider what Gauguin knew or imagined about Tahiti before going there. I will then look at his life in Polynesia. Finally, I will conclude with some remarks about Gauguin and contemporary tourist imaginaries. However, before that I think it is fair to contextualize my own experience of, and relation to, Polynesia and Paul Gauguin, and to inform the reader about my position regarding the place and the person. My experience of French Polynesia, where I have visited four times (in 2003, 2005, 2006 and 2010), was firstly that of a male French geographer concerned with postcolonial and gender issues while researching Paul Gauguin or attending academic meetings in Papeete; secondly that of a male French tourist when I was naively visiting the islands or delightfully swimming in the lagoon; and thirdly that of a male French novice tour operator when I was lecturing about Paul Gauguin on the Paul Gauguin cruise ship. This encompassed guiding wealthy American tourists to Hiva Oa, from the ship to site of the artist’s grave and to the local museum dedicated to his life and work on the island, destinations that the tourists and myself were discovering at the same time. Indeed, during my short stay in Hiva Oa (and perhaps in many other circumstances), I fulfilled all of these roles simultaneously. This may explain how and why I came to question who is a tourist and who is not.

My work on Paul Gauguin and his geographical imaginary is based on the analysis of five different types of sources: his (abundant) private correspondence; his theoretical and literary writings; his artistic work; testimonies of his contemporaries; and the extensive literature from his biographers (especially Danielsson 1988; Eisenman 1997 and Sweetman 1995). In addition, I also draw on my own book-length publications on Gauguin (Staszak 2003 and 2006a). While continuing to admire the artist holding great affection for his work, I became more critical of Gauguin the person as I realized, at a relatively late stage and partly on the occasion of my first stay in Tahiti,
that he was far from being the *Grand Homme* in Polynesia that he is taken for in France (see for instance Spitz 2003).

2 Gauguin’s project and geographical imaginary

Gauguin was not the first European painter to sail to Tahiti. Several English and French artists, for example William Hodges (1744-1797) and Charles Girault (1851-1932), visited Polynesia before him. Hodges travelled with James Cook as the official painter for his expedition: his task was to provide the English public with images of these new lands (Quilley and Bonehill 2004). Gauguin’s project was quite different, indeed coming much later to Tahiti (1891), he was not an explorer in this sense. As such to understand what he was looking for requires greater consideration of the place of Tahiti as it existed in the European imaginary from the 1770s to the 1880s.

The island was visited or 'discovered' by Samuel Wallis in 1768. The French explorer Louis Antoine de Bougainville arrived a year later, and it was he who made the island famous. Bougainville had read Rousseau and knew about the theory of the *bon sauvage*\(^2\). Tahiti for him was the living illustration of the idea that human beings, before becoming ‘corrupted’ by civilization, enjoyed an easy and happy life. According to the first impressions of Bougainville, the Tahitians knew nothing about original sin and enjoyed guilt-free sexual freedom, an idea based on a tragic misunderstanding (Baré 2002, Salmond 2010, Tcherkézoff 2004) but which nevertheless located the island at the very heart of the Western erotic imagination. On April 15 1768, he wrote in his log book:

> Nature has given Tahiti its laws. Tahitian people follow these rules in peace, and are maybe the happiest society on Earth. Politicians and Philosophers, you should come here and see accomplished what your imagination did not even dream of. As far as I live, I will celebrate the happy island of love. It is the true utopia.  

*(Bougainville, 1771)*

When Bougainville returned to France and wrote about Tahiti, it became a philosophical issue. Discussing Tahitian society from the Enlightenment perspective, Denis Diderot wrote the *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville* (*Addendum to the Journey of Bougainville*) in 1772. Interestingly, the covers of several contemporary editions of his book are illustrated with Gauguin’s paintings. Despite the anachronism, it makes some sense to illustrate Diderot with Gauguin, as the latter was much influenced by the philosopher.

\(^2\) Since the end of the XVIII\(^{\text{th}}\) century, Genevan philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712-1778) was erroneously associated with the idealization of the « state of nature » and the Noble Savage (*bon sauvage*) myth, even if he did not use the last terms. Indeed, Rousseau conceived the state of nature as a fiction characterizing the hypothetical situation of Human beings when there is no society. He did not describe this situation as good or bad, and did not confuse it with the real situation of the newly discovered “savages”. Neither did he think that humankind should or could go back to the state of nature.
The second important moment in the construction of Western, and especially French, imaginaries about Tahiti took place at the end of the nineteenth century. In 1880, Tahiti became a French colony, subsumed into the French Empire. The very same year, Julien Viaud (whose artistic pseudonym was Pierre Loti) published *Rarahu*, later reprinted as *Le Mariage de Loti* [*Loti’s wedding*]. The novel tells the love story of the narrator, a French Navy officer, with a young vahine during his stop in Tahiti. The tremendous success of the novel culminated in it being one of the greatest best-sellers published in France. Because of the exoticism of the scenery and the eroticism of the narrative, Tahiti became a fashionable and exciting fantasy. For French and European readers of Bougainville, Diderot and Loti, Tahiti was the island of love and freedom, the home of the happy savages. Thus, when Gauguin sailed to Tahiti ten years later, in 1891, Tahiti was already firmly established as an attractive site in the French geographical imagination.

The notion of leaving Europe and forming an artist studio in the Tropics was suggested to Gauguin by Vincent van Gogh during their common stay in Arles in 1888 (Druick and Zegers 2001). In March of this year, three months before Gauguin’s visit, Van Gogh wrote in a letter to his sister: I can imagine that a painter of today might make something like one finds described in the book by Pierre Loti, *Le Mariage de Loti*, where nature in Otaheite [*Tahiti*] is described’ (Letter 590, from Vincent to Willemien Van Gogh, 30 March 1888 (http://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let590/letter.html, accessed 02.05.2013). In pointing to Tahiti, Van Gogh recognized the potential of capitalizing on Loti’s success. However, Van Gogh was not the first to request Tahitian paintings, for example in a popular magazine dedicated to travel and geography, which published three papers on Polynesia (1860, 1875, 1876), an explorer wrote:

> I would like to analyse the feelings that the sight of these scenes of picturesque beauty, nearly unique in the world, evoked in me during my stay [in Tahiti] … And the local people! How they animate this luscious spectacle! … What a picture for an artist! (Paihîès 1876: 86)

Gauguin never acknowledged what his project (and his art) owed to Van Gogh, nor did he ever, at any stage, mention Loti as a source of inspiration. As an artist aspiring to radical originality, Gauguin could not admit that he was following Loti’s path. As arguably occurs with many tourists, Gauguin was also a victim of the ‘Armstrong syndrome’ (Urbain 1993), wanting to be the first in the place he visited.

If Gauguin's Tahitian artistic project was not entirely original, what about his geographical imaginary? Before sailing to Tahiti, Gauguin read many books where he gathered information about French Polynesia, which he then shared with the journalists to whom he explained his project and the friends and artists he had hoped (unsuccessfully) would join him. For instance, in August 1890 he wrote to Emile Schuffenecker:

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3 Letter 590, from Vincent to Willemien Van Gogh, 30 March 1888 (http://vangoghletters.org/vg/letters/let590/letter.html, accessed 02.05.2013)
While on the opposite end of the earth, men and women meet their needs only after ceaseless labour, struggling with the rigours of cold and hunger, beset by misery and every kind of deprivation, Tahitian men and women, on the contrary, happy inhabitants of the unknown paradieses of Oceania, know nothing but a sweet life. For them, to live is to sing and to love. (Merlhès 1995: 48)

Gauguin’s geographical imaginary of Tahiti seems quite stereotypical, finding obvious inspiration in Bougainville, Diderot and Loti. Interestingly, the sentence in his letter to E. Schuffenecker is not Gauguin’s. It is an exact quotation of a book of colonial propaganda, published for the Universal exhibition in Paris in 1889 (Henrique 1890). At the time, French society had not fully embraced colonization, and the government endeavoured to convince French (mainly male) citizens to leave Europe and join the French empire (Blanchard and Lemaire 2003).

Gauguin preconceived Tahiti as a lost paradise, where native people live innocently and happily, beholden only to natural laws, not only because he shared the geographical imaginary of his time, but also because he was a (possibly a consenting) victim of colonial propaganda. The visual exoticization and erotization of Tahiti did not begin with Gauguin’s paintings. To understand Tahiti’s (sex) appeal and the importance of images in the process even before Gauguin, I suggest going back to Loti, who has much in common with Gauguin. In his autobiography, published in 1890, one year before Gauguin’s departure to Tahiti, Loti recalls his readings as a young boy:

[My brother] gave me as a present a big gilded book which was precisely *A Voyage to Polynesia* [most probably Delessert 1848], with many pictures, and it was the only book that I loved in my early childhood. I flipped through the book at once with immediate curiosity … I spent many hours of my break time to paint the images … With extreme care, I first colored the flowering branches, the groups of birds … As for the two *Young Tahitian women at the Ocean’s Edge*, I made them white, oh white and rose-colored, like the sweetest dolls. (Loti 1890: 96 and 110)

It is worth noticing that these young Tahitian women are half-naked (see Figure 5.1) and that the book was published in 1848, which implies that erotic and exotic engravings of Tahitian vahines existed for more than 40 years before Gauguin sailed to Tahiti.
One hundred years after the island's 'discovery', the European imaginary of Tahiti was rich and attractive (Bachimon 1990, Boulay 2005, Kannibals & Vahinés 2001, Salmond 2010), and Gauguin’s fantasy about the island was nothing but a common (exotic and erotic) dream of the 1880s. But actually going to Tahiti in order to realize this dream nonetheless was exceptional. In spite of the early development of world-scale international tourism in the second half of the nineteenth century and despite efforts of the French government to promote colonization, Tahiti remained distant and isolated; indeed it took Gauguin 70 days to sail from Marseille to Tahiti in 1891. At the time, the island received very few visitors. If Gauguin came to Tahiti as a tourist, he was among the first. Gauguin’s project was rather that of a colonizer or an orientalist (Said 1979): he wanted to live and work in Tahiti, taking advantage of an easy life and finding inspiration in the local landscape and primitive arts. This dimension of his endeavour may be quite audacious and singular, but it was nevertheless based on geographical imaginaries of Tahiti which were already common and stereotypical, and similar indeed to those of would-be tourists.

In Tahiti, Gauguin would face disappointment similar to the disjuncture between imaginings and actual experiences that often occurs when tourists visit destinations.
3 Gauguin’s work and life in Tahiti

Gauguin never failed to project the authenticity of his experience in Tahiti, where he claimed to have lived as a native among the natives. But his assertions in this regard are questionable. Gauguin was one of the first artists to understand that, in order to sell his paintings, he had to sell his image. Successfully constructing his own myth, he worked hard to convince Western art critics, sellers and clients that he had become a real Tahitian. In fact, most of the time, he was living in or close to Papeete, the main Polynesian urban center and the headquarters of the colonial administration. He found his friends and clients exclusively among the European community, although Gauguin would turn more native when in Hiva Oa (Marquesas Islands 1901-1903).

Arguably there exists little of Tahiti in Gauguin’s work. For example *Ia Orana Maria* [*Hail Mary*] (see Figure 5.2) is one of his first famous Tahitian paintings. The Polynesian title provides an exotic touch, which sounds quite artificial. Gauguin, particularly at that time, knew little of the Tahitian language and it is likely that the title is taken from the missionary literature (missionaries going hand in hand with colonization and serving as intermediaries between European travellers and native population). The exoticism of the scenery rests on (i) the landscape: the lagoon and the palm trees in the background, the local fruit in the foreground (two kinds of Tahitian bananas and breadfruit), the wooden dish filled with bananas and the boathouse and (ii) the models: their ethnicity, their pareo sarongs and the strange way Mary carries her child on her left shoulder.

![Figure 5.2 Hail Mary, Paul Gauguin 1891](with permission from The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)
The inspiration of this painting, I believe, has other geographical and artistic origins. The Angel and the delicate flowers before him show the influence of Italian Renaissance artists, like Botticelli. The two women in the middle are inspired by figures of dancers of the Javanese Borobudur temple most likely inspired by photographs of the temple which Gauguin bought when he was visiting Paris Universal Exhibition in 1889 (Druick and Zegers 1991). Although it has been believed that the way Mary carries her son was something Gauguin may have observed in Tahiti, in fact, it is just a copy of a postcard he bought in Port Said, while his boat was making a stop at the Suez Canal, en route to Tahiti. And he was not the first painter using that body posture to exoticise his models (see for instance Léon Bonnat's *An Egyptian Peasant Woman and Her Child*, 1867, New York, Museum of Modern Art).

As soon as Gauguin arrived in Tahiti, he endeavoured to obtain items of primitive art, albeit it was almost impossible to find any in Tahiti. This was firstly because Tahiti had never been an important centre for the production of primitive art, unlike the Marquesas Islands. Secondly, most of the items had been destroyed or hidden when the local people were evangelized at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Gauguin could not even find anyone to tell him stories of the Polynesian gods and heroes. So there is no tiki, no ritual, and no story he could insert in his paintings. That is probably the reason his first paintings in Tahiti do not owe much to Polynesian arts and culture. More would come later, but it never came from his own experience of Tahitian culture: he found all the information in Western ethnographic books and during his visit to the Auckland museum in New Zealand, in 1895. Considering where Gauguin found his information, it could be concluded that he was definitely more a tourist than an ethnographer. The kind of scenery, from an artistic point of view, that attracted Gauguin during his stay in Polynesia, is quite similar to the images on the postcards sold in Tahiti. The style is of course quite different, but the picturesque and exotic scenes he chooses to depict are similar (Tréhin 2003). Even in 1902, when Gauguin lived in the Marquesas Islands, he still may have found inspiration in postcards (see Figure 5.3 and 5.4). The similarities between Gauguin’s paintings and postcards do not disqualify his work, but show the degree to which his imaginary and his view of Tahiti paralleled those of other travellers and photographers.
Figure 5.3 Two Women, Paul Gauguin c. 1901/1902 (permission from The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York)

Figure 5.4 Postcard from the beginning of the twentieth century (Photograph by Henri Lemasson, 1897)
However, this was not something Gauguin wished to be known for. Explaining his inspiration for *Pape moe [mysterious water]* (1893 private collection), Gauguin wrote in his (much contrived) autobiography (Gauguin 2001) that he went to the mountain in Tahiti, where he saw a young woman drinking water from a cascade in a sacred Polynesian site, mysterious scenery he tried to figure in this painting. In fact, Gauguin’s painting was conspicuously inspired by a photograph shot in 1888 by Charles Spitz, which he bought in a Tahiti curio shop. This doesn’t question the quality of Gauguin’s work, but rather the way he wished it to be perceived. Gauguin’s refusal to admit that he drew his inspiration from a postcard and his apparent lies about his serendipitous encounter takes us back to questions of authenticity. Gauguin claimed to have direct experience and knowledge of local life and people, seeking to elevate the originality of his work and distinguish himself from the local colonizers or tourists and, correspondingly, between his art and postcards. But Gauguin’s claim for a rare and authentic experience of the 'real' local people fails to differentiate him from tourists: they look at exactly the same things. And when tourists return home and want to tell the story of their journey, and the places visited, they too may rearrange the truth to suit expectations, and to make their experience more authentic and adventurous, just as Gauguin did. Denying one's status of a tourist can be seen as a typical tourist attitude.

Given the length of time Gauguin spent in Tahiti (eight years) he could not be classified as a tourist and he was certainly much more of a colonizer than that of a native. However his interest in Tahitian culture and landscape was similar to that of tourists. One could argue that this assertion is anachronistic, considering there were almost no tourists at that time in Tahiti. Still, it was not because tourism did not yet exist, or the place was not attractive, but rather because it was out of reach for most people. The development of tourism in French Polynesia had to wait for the opening of regular steamship connection between California and Tahiti in 1924 and Tahiti international airport in 1961. A few wealthy travellers did nevertheless make stops in Tahiti, buying the same postcards which provided Gauguin with inspiration.

If Gauguin was in some ways a tourist in Tahiti, what kind of tourist was he? He was surely anticipating ethnic (I'll come back to this later) tourism, but sex tourism as well. Loti confessed the importance of the erotic appeal of Tahitian vahines to his imagination of Polynesia, but Gauguin wrote nothing about it before sailing to Tahiti. He mentioned his sexual expectations when he considered other destinations (Madagascar) and aimed to convince in June 1890 his friend, Emile Bernard, to join him in his project: 'women down there are, so to speak, inevitable' (Gauguin 1992: 192). In Tahiti, Gauguin was a regular client for local sex workers, and as far as colonial prostitution anticipated sex tourism, Gauguin in Tahiti was perhaps the first sex tourist.
4 Gauguin and contemporary touristic imaginaries

What does the recent development of tourism in Tahiti owe, exactly, to Gauguin? Gauguin’s paintings present a beautiful image of Tahiti. Being well known and widely appreciated, they are free advertising for tourism in Polynesia. Gauguin's work and the myths they construct are utilised to promote Tahiti as a tourist destination. Tourist guides and tourism brochures often refer to Gauguin. Many tourists, if not most of them, have seen Gauguin’s paintings. Gauguin’s paintings remain central to tourist imaginaries about Tahiti.

But this does not mean that Gauguin was essential for the touristic development of the island. Tahiti was famous and attractive before Gauguin. Gauguin's paintings provided another set of representations which join Bougainville’s journal, Loti’s novel and, later, Frank Lloyd’s and Lewis Milestone’s *Mutiny on the Bounty* (1935, 1962) in putting Tahiti on the map of Western imaginaries, locating a lost paradise and a major Western social utopia in Polynesia. These myths have a longer history, going back to Rousseau’s noble savage, the biblical Eden and the Greek Golden Age. Gauguin’s work is surely revolutionary as far as art history is concerned, but he nonetheless painted a highly stereotyped and fanciful Tahiti. Contributing to the Western imaginary about Tahiti, Gauguin added his bright colours, he made it more vivid, but he did not invent or change it; he merely gave a new expression to an old dream. The painter, however, is so famous and his work so celebrated and reproduced that, for a tourist or anybody, it is nearly impossible to imagine or even to see Tahitian landscapes and people without reference to Gauguin’s art. And this is not without problems or consequences:

Firstly, the landscapes or the vahines made famous by Gauguin’s paintings can hardly be found in Tahiti. Most Tahitian women look quite different from Gauguin’s models, and they surely are not half-naked. Tahitian society and landscape is different from the way they appear in Gauguin’s paintings not only because Tahiti has changed since Gauguin, but also because Gauguin did not paint Tahitian reality but rather his own Tahitian fantasy, which is also the fantasy of most tourists. Correspondingly, Polynesian luxury resorts, which seek to meet visitors’ expectations, do not encourage independent exploration beyond their grounds and are 'physically managed to replicate an imagined space' (Kahn 2011: 131, Staszak 2006b). Wealthy tourists, particularly, have few opportunities to confront the 'real' Tahiti, and little chance of having their imagination falsified.

Secondly, many Tahitian people do not share the Western fascination with Gauguin. They think, and it is difficult to disagree, that his work has little to do with Tahiti. They do not like the false image he gave of them, and hate the idea he became rich and famous selling it. They do not want tourists to see their society and their island through the lens or under the brush of a man who was, according to them, nothing but a colonial painter.
These two issues relate to major discrepancies between Gauguin, his work and Tahiti. A third one deals with a discrepancy between Gauguin’s imaginary and practices and today’s tourists’. Gauguin almost never represented Tahiti’s lagoon and its blue waters, and indeed only sparingly used blue in his paintings (Vacher 2013). At the time, no one was particularly interested in the lagoon or the possibility of bathing in it. Gauguin and the local people were bathing in Tahitian lakes and rivers. Today, the lagoon is the main attraction. Most of the postcards one now finds in Tahiti show the pristine blue lagoon and have little resemblance to Gauguin’s paintings (or any of the turn-of-the-century postcards). If today’s postcards still show half-naked vahines, the background is different. The image of the lagoon, an essential element of the current Western imaginary of Tahiti, is too recent to owe anything to Gauguin. Tahitian people often feel ignored, even disparaged by these tourists who sail on the Paul Gauguin cruise ship, buy Paul Gauguin postcards and mugs, and, when they aren’t bathing in the lagoon, visit the Paul Gauguin’s museum and run to Paul Gauguin’s grave, without paying much attention to local culture and people. If Gauguin’s paintings are a billboard for Tahiti, they also stand as a screen and obstacle between the tourists and the actual people of Tahiti. But does Tahiti even exist? According to a website promoting Tahiti to North American tourists in 2002, the island is 'a destination so exotic, it exists only in one’s dream' (www.GoToTahiti.com, 2002 in Kahn 2003: 308)

When asked in 2005 the reason why they chose Tahiti as a destination, 20% of the tourists said they were following a dream (KPMG THL 2005). One could say they are following Gauguin’s dream, not because Gauguin invented Tahiti but because they share the same imaginary, which was built in Western Europe at the end of the eighteenth century. And the most recent slogan for the strategic development of Tahitian tourism, Polynesia, the last Garden of Eden, will not help change it (Tahiti Tourism Authority 2011).

The genealogy of contemporary tourist iconography could be traced to the engravings following the 'discovery' of the island, continuing on to Gauguin’s paintings, turn-of-the-century postcards, chocolate wrappers, National Geographic illustrations and advertising photographs. These images show a never-ending fascination for the welcoming half-naked vahine (see Figures 5.5 and 5.6). Contemporary publishers of postcards perpetuate this image, their best-selling pictures being Gauguin’s paintings and photographs of attractive half-naked women, who pass for vahines merely by having a crown of leaves put on their head. Defending their sale of erotic images that many may consider offensive, they explain that they just 'create images that [they] think people want to buy' (Kahn 2011: 80-82), exonerating themselves and placing the blame on the tourist. They nevertheless play an active role in the exoticization and eroticization of Tahiti, like that of Gauguin. Their impact is the same, and their motivations are similar. Both take part in (re)producing a
Western geographical imaginary and (re)creating the landscape and the people that we then eventually seek in Tahiti.

Figure 5.5 Two Tahitian Women, Paul Gauguin 1899 (permission from The Metropolitan Museum of Art, NY)

Figure 5.6 Joined advertising campaign for Air Tahiti Nui and Tahiti Tourisme (2010-2011, ©tim-mckenna.com.)

5 Conclusion

Gauguin, in his life and work, blurred the line between the tourist and the artist. To assume that he was essential to the touristic development of the island would be a mistake. Still, Gauguin remains a major attraction for tourists in Tahiti. Not that there is much of his work or many traces of his presence in the island: two (rather disappointing) museums are dedicated to his life and work, one in Tahiti and one in Hiva Oa. Tourists buy all kinds of items reproducing his paintings such as books, postcards, posters, stamps, magnets, mouse pads, bags, lighters, mugs, T-shirts, soaps, perfumes and chocolate boxes. Art connoisseurs and historians may condemn this vile merchandising, but there is an ironic logic regarding Gauguin’s geographical imagination and expectations, in that he was not that different from contemporary tourists.

Exoticism did not rely on the (frightening) confrontation with the Other. The Other had to be transformed into a picturesque commodity in order to become the object of the exotic spectacle, which confirms the visitors’ geographical fantasies and provides them with the reassuring experience of domesticated people and landscapes and the conspicuous evidence of their own superiority (Staszak 2012). Colonization and liberal globalization played a major role in the domestication and commodification of the Other. In both narratives and images artists took part in
rendering the Other picturesque and this in turn drew the attention of many tourists. In this regard, Gauguin responsibility cannot be denied. However, I believe that even without him, Tahiti would nevertheless have become a well-known international destination, although tourists might have come with other images in mind, and perhaps in fewer numbers.

Gauguin’s major impact on tourism is indeed less direct, broader, deeper and more diffuse than that. His primitivism opened the way to the Cubists’ and Surrealists’ fascination for the Art nègre, and to the (ambiguous) appreciation of 'primitive' cultures and people by Westerners. Gauguin was the first to affirm that their artefacts deserved to be kept in Art museums, not just ethnographic or natural history museums. His interest in the culture of 'primitive' people and his willingness to share their life not only changed art history but also laid the foundations for a new kind of tourism which would later be called ethnic tourism. Gauguin’s influence is perhaps more discrete in Polynesia, where the lagoon remains a quasi-monopolistic attraction, than in other places, deep forests, sand deserts, high mountains and other tropical islands, where tourists, unsatisfied with modern Western civilization, come to meet 'primitive people', re-performing the first encounter and hoping for spiritual rejuvenation, just as Gauguin did more than hundred years ago.

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References


