Paul Gauguin

Eugène Henri Paul Gauguin was born on June 7, 1848, to Clovis Gauguin and Aline Chazel in Paris, France, during the second French Revolution. His father was a liberal journalist who went into exile during the revolution and his mother of Peruvian decent was the daughter of Flora Tristan, a political speaker and friend of the Peruvian president. When he was three, Gauguin, his younger sister and parents left to visit Peru to escape the political climate; tragedy struck on route with the death of his father. His mother decided to remain in Peru for four years, returning to France when the children were older. At seventeen, Gauguin enlisted in the merchant marines and spent his days making numerous voyages across the Atlantic Ocean.

In 1871, his life changed. His mother died, he left the service of the marines, began a career as a stockbroker in Paris and took up painting as a hobby. Two years later, he met and married Mette Sophia Gad, a young Danish woman and eventually had five children. They lived a comfortable life with his steady income. Gauguin returned to Pont-Aven in 1889 for a period of four years.

It came as a complete surprise to his wife, when in 1883, Gauguin announced that he was giving up his lucrative banking job to devote himself full time to painting. His wife, stunned, quickly developed a plan to keep living costs low when the banking income ceased. They moved to her hometown of Copenhagen, Denmark, where she had the support of relatives and could possibly earn some money teaching French. Within a few months, Gauguin failed miserably with his first exhibition closing early because it didn’t generate interest or sales. His job as an art dealer also failed. His financial condition put stress on his marriage and created ill feelings from the relatives. He felt defeated and in 1885, Gauguin abandoned his wife and children and returned to Paris. He sacrificed family, wealth, security, and peace of mind to be an artist.

Within a year he moved to the small French town of Pont-Aven located in the north-west region of Brittany. Here, he found the cost of living considerable cheaper than Paris. He was also intrigued by the rugged and primitive nature of the landscape, people and the houses. He became so intrigued with the notion of a primitive lifestyle that he traveled on to Panama and Martinique where he created some paintings of the sights. Unfortunately, he contracted a severe case of dysentery and found the climate overbearing so he soon returned to Pont-Aven to recover. It was in Pont-Avon where he met the painter, Emile Bernard. Bernard painted with both Japanese and Cézanne influence which used flatter color surrounded by a bold outline known as cloisonism. This process greatly impacted Gauguin’s painting as he gradually transitioned away from his Impressionistic tendencies and simplified his forms on the canvas using brighter, bolder and purer colors. He also choose to maintain a flat plane to his colors, a style he called, Synthetism. Of course, this almost identical approach to painting caused some conflict between Gauguin and Bernard.

The Impressionists were a tight group and worked as a whole to advance their artistic style. Vincent van Gogh invited Gauguin to visit him in Arles with his brother, Theo van Gogh, an art dealer who financed the trip. The stay in Arles lasted for two months and proved to be a very unpleasant experience as the two artists disagreed on almost every point. They had different opinions which they expressed violently, even dangerously. The artists van Gogh admired were Gauguin’s least respected artists. Van Gogh was a romantic landscape painter with very loose brushstrokes and Gauguin was a primitive painter who outlined his flat forms. They had the idea of painting a portrait of each other which ended in disaster since neither appreciated how the other painted. They went to the café for dinner soon after the portraits were completed and began an argument which escalated into a terrible fist fight. Then on Christmas Eve, another outburst of rage provoked van Gogh to attack Gauguin with a razor. Having missed, van Gogh took the razor to his own ear. The nervous breakdown warranted hospitalization of van Gogh and Gauguin quickly departed to Paris without seeing van Gogh again.

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Discipline-Based Art Education
The following components are integral to students having a complete, well rounded art experience.

Art Aesthetics
Providing opportunities to develop perception and appreciation of visually expressed ideas and experiences.

Art Production
Providing opportunities to develop skills and techniques for creative visual expressions of emotions and ideas.

Art History
Providing opportunities to develop an understanding of the visual arts as a basic component of personal heritage.

Art Criticism
Providing an opportunity to develop an intellectual basis for analyzing and making aesthetic judgments based on an understanding of visual ideas and experiences.

ELEMENTS OF ART
- Line: A continuous mark
- Shape: Area enclosed by a line
- Color: Hue, reflection of light
- Texture: Surface quality, real or implied
- Form: 3D shape or illusion of 3D
- Value: Graduated areas of light/dark
- Space: Illusion of depth

PRINCIPLES OF DESIGN
- Repetition: Imagery repeating pattern
- Variety: Contrast/variation
- Rhythm: Issues of eye movement
- Balance: Even visual weight
- Emphasis/Economy: Dominance/minimality
- Proportion: Compare size relationships

COMPOSITION
- Symmetrical: Mirrored imagery
- Asymmetrical: Random placement
- Radial: Mirror image from center point
- Repetition: Repeating pattern, motif

ARTISTIC STYLES
- Realism: Realistic representation
- Abstraction: Personal interpretation
- Non-Objective: No recognizable depiction

ELEMENTS OF DESIGN IN PICTURE BOOKS
Literature that relates to this lesson due to elements of art or story content are:
- First Impressions: Paul Gauguin by Howard Greenfeld
- Gauguin by David Spence
- Paul Gauguin (Getting to Know the World’s Greatest Artists) by Mike Venezia
- Paul Gauguin by Paul Flix
- Smoking Mirror: An Encounter with Paul Gauguin by Douglas Rees
- The Yellow House: Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Gauguin Side by Side by P. Falvey

REFERENCE/BIBLIOGRAPHY

months when he produced a great deal of paintings. While he did build a group of admirers of his work, he never found material benefits. The longing to seek out far away lands was a constant and in 1891 he sold his art collection and sailed to the remote French island of Tahiti hoping to find an easier life, one without the constraints of money. He located himself twenty-five miles from the capital to avoid other Europeans. Now living in the jungle of Tahiti, he dressed like a native and lived with a native woman and went about learning the ways of the native people.

Gauguin was committed to further developing his own style. He softened his outlines and created a clearer distinction between foreground, mid-ground and background with a heightened focus on composition. In 1893, he returned to Paris and opened a show of his new works that resulted in few sales. Unexpectedly, he received a sizable inheritance from an uncle that funded an apartment in Paris. He painted the walls with bright colors and began to dress the same—he was turning his life into his art. He took as a mistress a half-

Indian, half Malayan girl, Annah, to complete the exotic look. One evening, he broke his foot in a brawl and had to be hospitalized. Annah took advantage of the situation and sold or took everything he has in his apartment. Once again, defeated, he returned to Tahiti with ankle pain and open sores on his legs from syphilis contracted during his time in Paris. His inability to work caused depression. His debts accumulated and quarrels with the colonial government were common, prompting him to move to another village. The government sued and sentenced him to three months in prison and a fine of five hundred francs. The longing to seek out far away lands was a constant and in 1891 he sold his art collection and sailed to the remote French island of Tahiti hoping to find an easier life, one without the constraints of money. He located himself twenty-five miles from the capital to avoid other Europeans. Now living in the jungle of Tahiti, he dressed like a native and lived with a native woman and went about learning the ways of the native people.

Gauguin’s use of the elements and principles of design led to masterpieces of his art. He found a way of painting that was true to his self and his tastes. He softened his outlines and created a clearer distinction between foreground, mid-ground and background with a heightened focus on composition. In 1893, he returned to Paris and opened a show of his new works that resulted in few sales. Unexpectedly, he received a sizable inheritance from an uncle that funded an apartment in Paris. He painted the walls with bright colors and began to dress the same—he was turning his life into his art. He took as a mistress a half-

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About the Art
Tahitian Landscape was painted by Paul Gauguin, oil on canvas, in 1893 and is in the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Minneapolis, Minnesota. It measures 26 3/4 x 36 3/8 inches. As in all of his painting from Tahiti, Gauguin succeeded in his choice of vibrant colors that simplified imagery. He presented Tahiti as he saw, experienced and felt it. Notice the lightening of the dark outlines that were part of his earlier work. Away from the constraints of European critics, his work flourished.

Directed Observation
Show students an image of Tahitian Landscape and tell them it was painted, oil on canvas, in 1893 by Paul Gauguin. Offer students biographical information about Gauguin. After some time for thinking, encourage students to share what they see. Welcome all comments. The following questions are provided to help students use art vocabulary to talk about the work.

1. This landscape is composed off-centered with upward eye movement to the top of the latter hill. The vibrant clouds on the upper left of the composition counter-balance the imagery. Visually, the top half of the painting is more complex than the lower half. Discuss what about the lower half counter-balances the top (vibrant green).
2. What purpose do the curved pathways serve in terms of the composition?
3. Notice how the colors are repeated in the painting - the blues, greens, and browns.
4. Tahiti is in a hot climate. Does this painting reflect this? How so?
5. Gauguin desired a primitive location. What about this painting addresses a primitive environment?
6. Do you think this is a good painting? Defend your reply. How does Gauguin’s style compare to those of van Gogh or other Impressionist painters.
7. Gauguin’s style is identified as Post-Impressionism.

Things to Do
1. Look through magazines for images of landscapes or use a landscape from your neighborhood or favorite vacation spot. Sketch the landscape onto sturdy paper or a canvas pad. In order to “free yourself” as Gauguin did, use complementary colors (opposite on the color wheel) to those you see. Or, brighten up your work by mixing your acrylic paints with neon acrylic.
2. Pair with another student and paint each other in your own personal style.
3. You don’t have to go to a primitive location to paint primitively. Using simple shapes and painting flat (without shading), execute a composition of an imaginary outdoor location. Use color to communicate the climate.
4. Gauguin was passionate about his art and made many sacrifices. Discuss those sacrifices and share what you’d be willing to give up to follow your passion.
5. Use Tahitian Landscape and write a formal review of the work commenting on Gauguin’s use of the elements and principles of art.