Gauguin’s Ia Orana Maria, or Hail Mary, which recently entered the Museum collections, was described by the artist in a letter to his friend Daniel de Monfreid of March 1892 in the following terms:

“A yellow-winged angel points out Mary and Jesus to two Tahitian women. Mary and Jesus are likewise Tahitians, and naked, except for the pareo, a flowered cotton cloth tied to the belt as suits one’s fancy. In the background very dark mountains and blossoming trees. Foreground emerald green. To the left bananas…”

The theme of Ia Orana Maria is that of the angelic salutation. It is an old one in the art of the West. But here not only is the Madonna in Tahitian garb; the fruit at Mary’s feet is laid on a “fata,” an altar of a type once used by the Polynesians to make offerings to their idols; and the whole scene displays a sensuality that is hardly in keeping with traditional Christian iconography.

Ia Orana Maria was painted in 1891, the year of Gauguin’s arrival in Tahiti, and, aside from its aesthetic merits, it is interesting in that it marks the beginning of a new phase in his art.

The artist wrote in the same letter to Daniel de Monfreid that this was the only painting of importance, as distinct from “sketches or rather studies,” that he had done since his arrival and that he was fairly pleased with it. It was exhibited in Paris in 1893 at the Durand-Ruel exhibition of his work and was bought by the dealer and collector Michel Manzi for two thousand francs, a comparatively high price for a Gauguin in those days. In 1919, at Manzi’s death, it was sold at auction for fifty-eight thousand francs and passed into the collection of Adolph Lewisohn. It was recently bequeathed to the Museum by Samuel A. Lewisohn.

Gauguin’s departure to Tahiti concludes one of the most painful episodes in his life. By the time he sailed in 1891 he had long ago given up the comforts of a well-to-do home and the satisfaction of family life to adopt the Bohemian ways and the impecunious existence of an unrecognized artist. He had abandoned his position as a stockbroker in 1883 and had been separated from his wife since 1885. From that time on he had lived mostly in Brittany in the company of his artist friends of the Synthetist group.

Apparently indifferent to the absence of a wife he did not love and to the scorn of a public he openly despised, Gauguin had nevertheless many grounds for despondency. A devoted and affectionate father, he felt deeply the absence of his children, one of whom was at a boarding school near Paris, the others with their mother in Copenhagen. Moreover, he was aggressive and somewhat ambitious; he became increasingly dispirited by the slow progress of his artistic development and is even reported to have become completely discouraged over the last work in his Breton style, La Perte du Pucelage, which, however much we may admire it today, was never completed to the artist’s own satisfaction. To make matters even worse, during this period his hitherto excellent health began to break down, undermined by what may well have been the first inroads of an incurable disease.

Under these conditions Gauguin decided to leave Europe and start a new life in the tropics. He and as many of his painter friends as cared to join him were to set up “l’atelier des tropiques” in a remote land. There, free from the bondage of money and beyond the reach of the nefarious influence of a corrupt civilization, they would dedicate themselves to art.

The idea was neither as bold nor as new as it might seem. Since the beginning of the century several groups of artists had organized themselves into brotherhoods with the express purpose of fighting the growing materialism of an industrial age. The French Secte des Primitifs, the German Nazarenas, and the British Pre-Raphaelites had all attempted to cultivate the
*Ia Orana Maria*, by Paul Gauguin (1848-1903), painted in 1891. This was the first of Gauguin’s Tahitian paintings and it began a new phase in his work. Bequest of Samuel A. Lewisohn, 1951
simplicity of earlier styles and in some cases to return to a more primitive way of life in order to recapture the spirituality of times past. And within the Post-Impressionist movement Van Gogh, with all the fervor of his ardent soul, had advocated the formation of a group of artists who would live together and dedicate themselves with a common faith to the creation of a new form of artistic expression.

There is evidence that Van Gogh and Gauguin discussed the idea on several occasions, and the two men even tried to implement it when Gauguin joined his friend at Arles to found “l’atelier du midi”—a venture that came to a tragic end with Van Gogh’s first bout of insanity.

Gauguin developed the idea yet further: the group was to migrate to the tropics. In his letters to his friends he argues quite convincingly that if the members of “l’atelier des tropiques” should live like the natives they would not only be free from all financial worries but also expose themselves to the “types, religion, mysticism, symbolism” of a truly primitive culture.

The fascination that the exotic and the primitive exerted on Gauguin corresponds to a broad cultural trend which had already found its full expression in the poetry of the late romantics. Baudelaire had sought to lose himself in the intricacies of “paradis artificiels”; Leconte de Lisle had quelled his own romantic longings in the pursuit of splendid and barbarous ancient myths; and Rimbaud, before Gauguin, had followed his escapist impulses to the extent of partaking in the life of a primitive tribe in Africa.

There can be no doubt that Gauguin was influenced by these poets, and more particularly by Leconte de Lisle, whom he greatly admired. But it is clear also that he had a strong personal affinity for tropical life. Indeed he speaks of the tropics as if they could provide the surroundings best suited to his temperament and as if he would find there the fulfillment of some deep-rooted emotional longings, particularly the security and the sensual satisfactions which he had been denied during the first part of his life as a painter. “May the day come,” he once wrote to his wife, “when I shall flee to the woods of an island of Oceania and live there on ecstasy, quiet, and art, surrounded by a new family, far from this European struggle for money. There, in Tahiti, I shall be able in the silence of the beautiful tropical nights to listen to the sweet murmuring music of my own heart in amorous harmony with the mysterious beings around me.”

There are many elements in the life of the artist that explain this attitude. Gauguin was of mixed origin; he had a Peruvian grandmother whose dark complexion, angular features, and fiery temperament he had inherited. Moreover, he had been taken to Lima as a young child, and the years he spent there may well have been the happiest and most secure of his life. In later years, the artist, who was keenly aware of his foreign ancestry and exotic appearance and often referred to himself as a “pariah” and a “savage from Peru,” must have looked back to that country with considerable nostalgia. Indeed, it is likely that all through a difficult adolescence his memories of the tropics became an imaginary refuge to which he could flee in times of anxiety. One could almost say that they may have subconsciously evoked the security and warmth of a pre-natal state.

Gauguin attempted a first expedition to the tropics in 1887. He and his friend Laval went to Panama and Martinique with the double intention of painting exotic scenery and of en-

*The Vision after the Sermon, 1888. It is characteristic of Gauguin's Breton period. Reproduced from Malingue, "Gauguin," 1943.*
riching themselves quickly. But the trip proved to be a failure: both men were soon sick and penniless, and they returned to France that same year. Far from being discouraged, however, Gauguin was determined to repeat the experiment, and this time in an even more remote land. “The experience I gained in Martinique is decisive,” he told his friend Morice. “Only there did I feel that I really was myself, and if one wants to know who I am one has to look for me in what I brought back from there still more than in my Breton works, . . . so I want to go to Tahiti . . .”

One by one, all the friends who were to join him decided otherwise, and Gauguin sailed alone. Upon arriving in Tahiti he spent some time in the capital, Papeete, then settled in the country some distance away, where he could live more cheaply and be less accessible to the “rotten” influences of the West that were already pervading that city.

As might have been expected, Gauguin’s trip to Tahiti was to have a profound effect on his art. Even such an early work as Ia Orana Maria is quite different from the works that he executed in Brittany. But we shall see that all the changes are due not so much to the direct influence of the “types, religion, mysticism, symbolism” of Tahiti, as to the natural development of tendencies already present in his earlier work. Gauguin’s new surroundings acted merely as catalytic agents.

What Gauguin has attempted to describe in Ia Orana Maria is perhaps best expressed in a passage from his autobiographical notes Noa-Noa:

“The gods of old still live in the memory of the women, and it is singularly moving to see the national gods of Tehura [Gauguin’s Tahitian ‘wife’] wake up and quiver in the veils in which the protestant missionaries thought they had shrouded them.”

One should perhaps add that the picture does more credit to the work of the missionaries than the artist would care to admit, for Ia Orana Maria is imbued with that spirit of true Christian piety which recognizes in a mother of whatever race or color the holiness of Mary.

At any rate, what the artist has tried to do here is to interpret in vivid pictorial terms the naïve and wholehearted religious beliefs of a simple and humble people. This type of subject is by no means new in the art of Gauguin, and if the artist represents here the graceful and sensuous women of Tahiti instead of angular and austere Bretonnes, the device is nevertheless the same as in the Breton Calvary of 1890, the Yellow Christ of 1889, and the Vision after the Sermon of 1888, in which Breton peasant women are intensely watching the fight between Jacob and the Angel.

That the content of Gauguin’s first important Tahitian picture should be so closely related to the works he did in Brittany is not very surprising. Much more surprising is the fact that the subjects of his later works, which are drawn from Polynesian mythology, are even less related to his immediate experiences in Oceania. As René Huyghe has recently pointed out, by the time Gauguin reached Tahiti all traces of the ancient cults had disappeared, and the artist derived all his knowledge of the old reli-

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Two Tahitian Women, 1899. This painting is characteristic of Gauguin’s mature Tahitian style. Gift of William Church Osborn, 1949
region from _Voyage aux îles du Grand Océan_, a book written some sixty years earlier by the Dutchman J. A. Moerenhout.

Though the content of _Ia Orana Maria_ is still closely related to the Breton works, its style definitely marks the beginning of a new phase. Let us compare _Ia Orana Maria_ with the Vision after the Sermon, a picture executed three years before Gaugin's departure to Oceania, which is characteristic of his style during the latter part of his stay in Brittany.

In the Vision the paint is applied in large, uniform areas of bright color surrounded by dark outlines—strongly recalling the decorative effect of stained glass. In _Ia Orana Maria_ the modeling of the forms is fuller, the colors blend more gradually, the dark outlines are less pronounced, and the over-all design is less manifestly decorative.

In the Vision the laws of perspective have been deliberately and forcefully violated: for instance, the figures of Jacob and the Angel, which are small enough to be far beyond the women in space, appear to be fighting right over their heads. There are no such violent effects in _Ia Orana Maria_; the size of the figures corresponds approximately to their position in space.

In the Vision, Gauguin has striven so hard for an exciting organization of line and color in the manner of the Japanese print-makers that he has exaggerated some of the favorite compositional devices of the Impressionists to the point of caricature. Not only has he chosen an unusual angle of vision and shown most of the spectators from the back; he has also deliberately exaggerated the size of their heads so as to stress the clumsy appearance of Breton peasant women while making the utmost of the decorative value of their bonnets. Moreover, not content with cutting figures at the edges of the painting, he has separated two heads from their bodies, accentuating their features like grotesque masks. In _Ia Orana Maria_, on the other hand, the composition is simple and restrained, the point of view is not unusual, all the figures are well within the pictorial area, any intention of caricature has disappeared, and there is altogether a much greater respect for visual reality.

It is difficult to say exactly how much this deliberate simplification of Gauguin’s style is due to the direct influence of his surroundings. The change seems to be primarily a normal reaction against the excesses of the “synthetic” style of the Brittany period, and it is already apparent in the last works he executed before leaving France. In fact, it is quite possible that Gauguin decided to alter his style after his failure to complete to his satisfaction the most aggressively “synthetic” of his works, _La Perte du Pucelage_. Two of the other works which Gauguin executed before leaving France bear this out. One of them is a copy of Manet’s Olympia, which he may well have executed to re-familiarize himself with the more objective style of the great Impressionist master. The other one is a rather strange and most experimental painting which has already so strong a flavor of his Tahitian work that it was usually believed to have been executed in Tahiti and was even published under the title _Eve, Tahiti_, in the most complete book on Gauguin, although it bears the date 1890.

There can be no doubt, on the other hand, that Gauguin’s trip to Tahiti gave him an opportunity to free himself from the tyranny of his synthetist doctrine. Whereas in Brittany Gauguin had to distort reality with the utmost determination to stress what he called “the symbolic side of things,” in Tahiti he could afford to “paint as [he] saw, to lay on the canvas, without so much planning, a red, a blue.” In Tahiti there was no need to distort reality: here everything was symbol. In the artist’s own words, the island was a setting “anywhere out of this world”—a setting which had the merit of “carrying the weight of objective reality.” Accordingly Gauguin’s dream could be conveyed not so much by distorting familiar objects as by rendering with the greatest simplicity the unfamiliar world around him. “It is the stillness of the atmosphere that gives the strange vision such a profound intensity, it is the simplification of the lines that projects the forms into infinity.”

There is yet one other important difference between the style of _Ia Orana Maria_ and that of Gauguin’s Breton works. In _Ia Orana Maria_ we find stylizations that recall several preclassical
The Meeting of Buddha and the three monks, a frieze from the Javanese temple of Barabudur. Gauguin had photographs of the sculpture of Barabudur in Tahiti, and many of his figures were derived from them. The worshipers of Ia Orana Maria are copied from the first and third figures from the left. Reproduced from N. J. Krom, “Beschrijving van Barabudur,” 1925-1931

traditions, particularly those of the ancient East: there is a deliberate simplification of the outline of the bodies, the wrists and ankles lack articulation, and the toes are represented by simple parallel lines; furthermore the figures show that combination of grace and hieratic quality which one finds in the art of India and Java.

What the artist has tried to achieve is conveyed in a letter to Daniel de Monfreid. He writes: “If you want to deform nature in order to express yourself a little mysteriously, in parables, . . . always have before you the Persians, the Cambodians, and a little of the Egyptian.” It is significant that he does not add “Tahitian.” As a matter of fact Gauguin found the art of Tahiti as disappointing as its current religion, and what elements of exoticism and primitivism we find in his Tahitian style come almost exclusively from the traditions of the ancient East and Central America. Bernard Dorival has pointed out that Gauguin “lifted” figures for a good many of his compositions from photographs of ancient monuments which he had with him in Tahiti, and that the two worshipers of Ia Orana Maria are copied from a frieze of the Javanese temple of Barabudur. We see, therefore, that even the most “primitive” element in Gauguin’s Tahitian style is due more to his general interest in primitive art than to his direct contact with Tahiti.

The new elements that we have found in the style of Ia Orana Maria were to characterize all his later work. We have only to examine Two Tahitian Women, also in the Metropolitan Museum, which Gauguin painted some eight years later, to realize that the forms are fuller, the colors more subdued, the outlines less pronounced, and the composition more restrained. The stained-glass effect has been abandoned and the artist has returned to the traditional use of nuances. The elements of stylization borrowed from the ancient East are also present: the graceful figures are somewhat hieratic in their aloofness, and the modeling of their flesh has a directness and simplicity that recalls the frank sensuality of Indian statuary.

It appears, then, that Gauguin’s art was little affected by the direct influence of his new surroundings. Compelled to escape to the tropics by the combined effect of atavism, dissatisfaction with his condition and his art, and a strong dislike of the conventions of the “rotten” West, Gauguin sought primarily to fulfill his emotional longings and to give free rein to his individuality as an artist. The most that can be said is that his new surroundings helped him to accomplish changes that were already incipient
in his earlier work. “You say,” he wrote to his wife from Tahiti, “that I am wrong to stay away from the art center of the world. No, I am right, my artistic center is in my own mind and nowhere else.”

Gauguin’s Polynesian venture was to have far-reaching consequences. In his endeavor to “paint as [he] saw, to lay on the canvas, without so much planning, a red, a blue,” the artist has affected in a large measure a new generation of painters, particularly the Fauves, who attempted to lay on the paint with the utmost directness according to their immediate sensation. Moreover, his escape to the tropics became the core of a legend that did much to foster a taste for primitivism in art among the public at large. “The future,” he once wrote, “belongs to the painter of the tropics which have never been painted” because “the stupid buying public needs something new in the way of subject matter.” Little did he know that he was fostering a broader understanding of the un-classical in art, which makes us, the public of today, as sensitive to Indian statuary and to early American portraiture as to the frieze of the Parthenon.

Unless otherwise stated, all the quotations are from the writings of Gauguin. They were drawn from the manuscript of Noa-Noa (facsimile edition); Letters to Ambroise Vollard and André Fontainas (John Rewald ed., 1943); Lettres à Georges-Daniel de Monfreid (1920); Lettres à sa femme et à ses amis (Maurice Mallingue ed., 1946).

Bernard Dorival has written on the sources of the art of Gauguin in the Burlington Magazine, vol. 93 (1951), p. 118. René Huyghe has discussed the subject matter of Gauguin’s Polynesian pictures in Présentation de l’ancien culte Mahorie (1951). The most detailed biography of him is Jean de Rotomchamp’s Paul Gauguin (1923); among the recent ones the best is the short introduction in John Rewald’s Gauguin (1938).