Three Tahitians is included in *Botticelli to Braque: Masterpieces From the National Galleries of Scotland,* at the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, Texas, until September 20.

provoked Vincent van Gogh to violent behavior. In 1891, he left European civilization in pursuit of a South Pacific fantasy, but what he found in Tahiti was a culture that had already been adulterated by Western influence. A poster child for occidental despoliation, Gauguin impregnated his teenage lovers, ostensibly sought an authentic primitive life while living in comfort, drank, brawled and attempted suicide. Sentenced to jail for insulting French colonialists, he died of what is often cited as a morphine overdose, though the possibility of cardiovascular syphilis is also frequently mentioned.

He was, to put it delicately, a miserable soul. In a 2010 review of an exhibition, a British critic asked, "Is it wrong to admire Paul Gauguin's art?" The question addresses our wont to confuse the artist with the work: how can someone so reprehensible have created such beautiful paintings, and do we have a moral responsibility to ignore his art? Gauguin's erstwhile mentor, Camille Pissarro, believed Gauguin's art was a cynical calculation, an attempt to play on Westerners' interest in exotic subjects. If so, Gauguin didn't profit from the strategy until too late.

When Gauguin couldn't find the idyllic myth he sought, he created one instead. The tangle of his motives is reconciled in the serenity of paintings like *Three Tahitians*, a frieze-like composition of three standing half-figures. A young man, seen from behind, is flanked by two young women. He is closest to us and exactly centered, yet the women rise above him and dominate the design; one looks toward him, the other directly at us. The figures are joined by the warm coloring of their skin, painted in ocher tones that shift subtly from red to green, as well as by the abstract horizontal bands of color in the distance. Standing in shadow, the figures are nonetheless modeled by light coming from different directions. These inconsistencies, and Gauguin's juxtaposition of flat patterns of color with a more traditional modeling of form, create pictorial tension.

Much emphasis is justly placed upon Gauguin's mastery of color, but it's his use of value that cements the design. By far the darkest tones are saved for the figures' hair, and the strip of blue loincloth worn by the young man. These accents arrest our visual journey through the painting, and account for the image's power.

That Gauguin's Arcadian vision seduces us with its lushness is a tribute to his artistry. *Three Tahitians* is a resolution of disparate influences and approaches—there are elements of Primitivism, Symbolism, Japonisme and Classicism. As such, it's emblematic of Gauguin's extraordinary ability to extract serenity from the chaos of his life. According to the National Galleries of Scotland, the painting may depict the classical subject of a young man choosing between virtue and vice, the one symbolized by a woman holding flowers, the other by a woman with an apple. This would be an appropriate metaphor for Gauguin, whose outrageous life found a measure of equanimity in art. When we admire the work, we acknowledge the best part of the artist, and, by extension, ourselves. ■

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