

Hopeless Escape

November 20, 2010

Currently showing in London (Tate Modern) is an exhibition of another great master of modern art – or is that a contradiction in terms? – the French painter Paul Gauguin (1848–1903). Men need pictures, as they need a vision of what life is all about. Today, electronics largely supply the pictures, but in Gauguin's time painters still had an enormous impact.

Born in Paris in 1848, Gauguin after various travels and occupations became at the age of 23 a stockbroker, and two years later he married a Danish woman who gave him five children over ten years. At this time painting was for him only a hobby for which he had talent, but after a failed attempt in 1884 to go into business in Denmark's capital, Copenhagen, he abandoned his young family in the following year and returned to Paris to become a full-time artist.

In 1888 he spent nine weeks painting together with Van Gogh in Arles, but it ended stormily. Back in Paris he was not gaining enough money or recognition, so in 1891 he set sail for the tropics, "to escape everything artificial and conventional." The rest of his life, except for one prolonged return to Paris, he spent in Tahiti and the Marquesas Islands, colonies then of French Polynesia in the South Pacific. There he produced most of the paintings on which rests his fame, but still he was fighting against Church and State, and only his death in 1903 prevented him from having to serve a three-month prison sentence.

Like Van Gogh, Gauguin began to paint in the somber and conventional style proper to later 19th century art. However, as with Van Gogh and at about the same time, the colours became much brighter and the style rather less conventional. In fact Gauguin was the founder of the Primitivist movement in

art, and soon after his death had a considerable influence on the brilliant but also rebellious Picasso. Primitivism meant going back to primitive sources, because Europe felt as though it was burnt out. Hence the turning to African and Asian models, a notable example being "Les Femmes d'Alger" of Picasso. Hence Gauguin's flight to Polynesia in 1891, where he regretted the intrusion of Catholic missionaries, and where he studied and built into his art pagan gods of the local pre-Catholic mythology, including several quasi-devilish figures.

But does the vision of the Tahitian paintings of Gauguin, which are surely his best, represent a viable solution to the problems of the decadent West which he spurned and left behind him? One may think not. The paintings now on show in the Tate Modern exhibition are original and colourful, but the Tahitian people he paints, mostly young women, remain somehow torpid and dull. Gauguin's Tahiti may be an escape, but it is not a hope. Gauguin may have been right about the decadent West, but the earthly paradise he fabricated in his Polynesian art left him restless, and he died still rebellious. There remains some problem that he has still not solved.

Interesting is the fictional version of his life by the well-known English 20th century writer, Somerset Maugham. See next week's "Eleison Comments."

Kyrie eleison.