

COLNAGHI ELLIOTT

MASTER DRAWINGS

Paul Gauguin
(Paris 1848 – 1903 Atuona)

Head of a Tahitian

Monogrammed in black chalk at the upper right: *P. Go*
Coloured chalks and pastel, heightened with touches of gold
Numbered No. 79-13 in red ink on the verso
31 x 21.2 cm. (12 ¼ x 8 ½ in.)

Provenance:

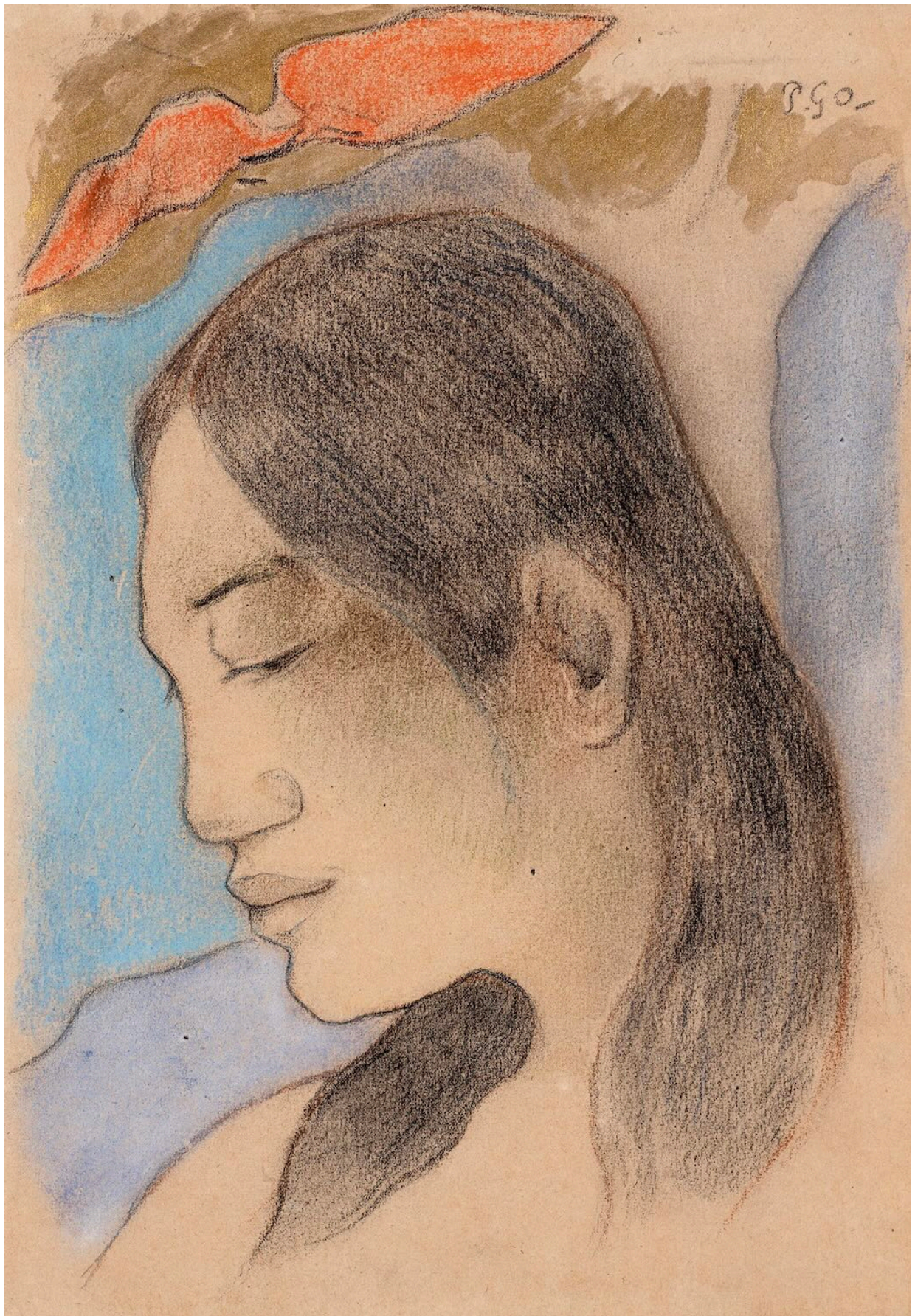
Lambert collection;
Anonymous sale, Paris, Palais Galliera (Ader Picard Tajan), 7 June 1973, lot 5;
Private collection (Philippe Derazay?), Paris;
Anonymous sale, Piasa, Paris, 26 March 2003, lot 120;
Jean-Luc Baroni;
Private Collection, UK.

Exhibited:

Martigny, Fondation Pierre Gianadda, *Paul Gauguin*, 1998, no. 78;
London, Tate Modern, *Gauguin. Maker of Myth*, 2010, no. 104;
London, Royal Academy, *Impressionists on Paper. Degas to Toulouse-Lautrec*, 2023-2024, no. 60

Literature:

Richard Brettell et al., *The Art of Paul Gauguin*, exh. cat., Washington, National Gallery of Art, and Chicago, Art Institute of Chicago, 1988–1989, illustrated p. 270, no. 148;
Victor Merlhès, 'Le "Cahier pour Aline": Histoire et signification', in *Paul Gauguin, "A ma fille Aline, ce cahier est dédié"*, facsimile ed., Bordeaux, 1989, p. 36;
Ronald Pickvance, *Paul Gauguin*, exh. cat., Martigny, Fondation Gianadda, 1998, illustrated p. 133, pp. 234–235, no. 78 and pp. 279–280, no. 78.
Elisabeth Vedrenne, 'Gauguin, l'atelier des tropiques', *L'Œil*, July–August 1998, ill. p. 73;
Isabelle de Wavrin, 'Un marché de pénurie', *Beaux-Arts Magazine: Gauguin-Tahiti*, 2003, illustrated, p. 87;
Belinda Thomson et al, *Gauguin. Maker of Myth*, London, Tate, 2010, pp. 154-55 and illustrated p. 168, no. 104
Impressionists on Paper. Degas to Toulouse-Lautrec, exh. Cat. London, Royal Academy of Art, 2023, illustrated p. 125, no. 60.



Paul Gauguin's *Head of a Tahitian* is an image of psychological depth and symbolic resonance, belonging to the first, formative phase of artist's encounter with Tahiti following his arrival on the island in June 1891. During this crucial period, before embarking on major oil paintings, Gauguin devoted himself intensively to drawing as a means of research and visual exploration. As he wrote in late 1891, he was producing "a great deal of research" rather than finished paintings, gathering material that would nourish his work for years to come.¹ Within this context, the present drawing emerges as an unusually ambitious and fully resolved work.

Gauguin travelled to Tahiti in 1891 in deliberate opposition to European artistic conventions, seeking what he imagined as a more elemental and spiritually authentic culture. During his first stay on the island, from 1891 to 1893, he focused largely on drawing, using portrait heads and figure studies (fig. 1) not as straightforward preparatory works but as vehicles for visual exploration and symbolic invention. These works mark a decisive turning point in his practice, as observation, memory and myth increasingly merged into the highly personal visual language that would define his mature Tahitian oeuvre.

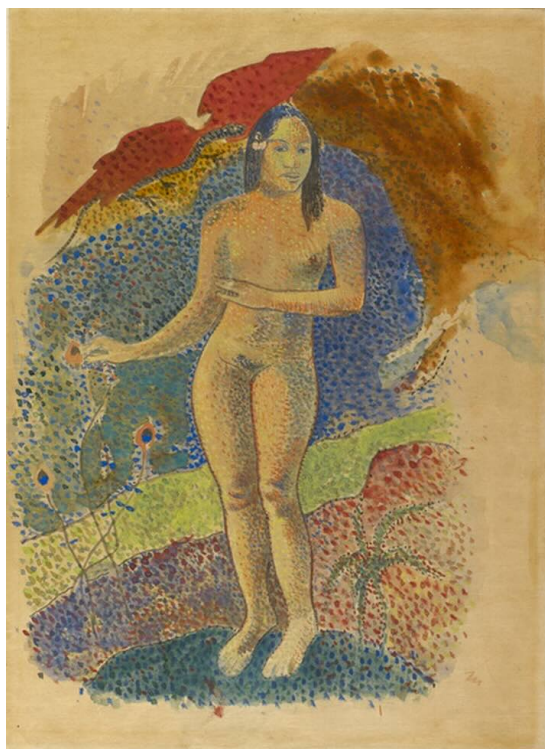


Fig. 1, Paul Gauguin, *Te Nave Nave Fenua*, 1892-93, watercolour, gouache, pen and ink on paper, 40 x 32 cm, Musée de Grenoble



Fig. 2, Paul Gauguin, *Head of a Tahitian Woman*, 1891, pencil with stumping and graphite wash on paper, 30.5 x 24.4 cm, Cleveland Museum of Art

Executed in coloured chalks and heightened with touches of gold, the present sheet stands apart from Gauguin's charcoal head studies of the same period (fig. 2). Where the charcoal drawings explore form through immediacy and directness, this work demonstrates a more sustained engagement with colour, surface and finish, revealing Gauguin's sophisticated

¹ Paul Gauguin, letter to Paul Sérusier, November 1891, cited in Belinda Thompson (ed.), *Gauguin by himself*, 2001, p. 168.

command of pastel, a medium he had explored since the early stages of his career. The subtle layering of colour, the delicacy of the modelling and the harmony between figure and ground indicate that the drawing was conceived as an autonomous work of art rather than a preparatory exercise. In this sense, the drawing asserts itself not as a step toward painting but as a complete and independent expression of Gauguin's Tahitian vision

The profile head, shown with closed eyes and simplified, monumental features, exemplifies Gauguin's pursuit of what he regarded as the essential and timeless character of Tahitian physiognomy. In *Noa Noa*, written shortly after this period, he articulated his fascination with the majesty and strangeness of Tahitian faces, seeking a beauty that departed radically from European classical ideals. The present sheet achieves this synthesis with remarkable economy and poetic restraint, combining introspection, sensuality and symbolic gravity.

A striking feature of the drawing is the abstract, bird- or lizard-like form hovering above the woman's head. This motif closely relates the sheet to Gauguin's painting *Te Nave Nave Fenua* of 1892 (fig. 3) where a similar chimera appears beside a female figure. Although the drawing is not a direct study for the painting, the shared imagery establishes a profound conceptual link. This creature has long been interpreted as an allusion to temptation, evoking the Biblical narrative of Eve transposed into a tropical setting.² In the present drawing, however, the motif is rendered with particular subtlety, intensifying its symbolic charge while preserving the overall serenity of the image.

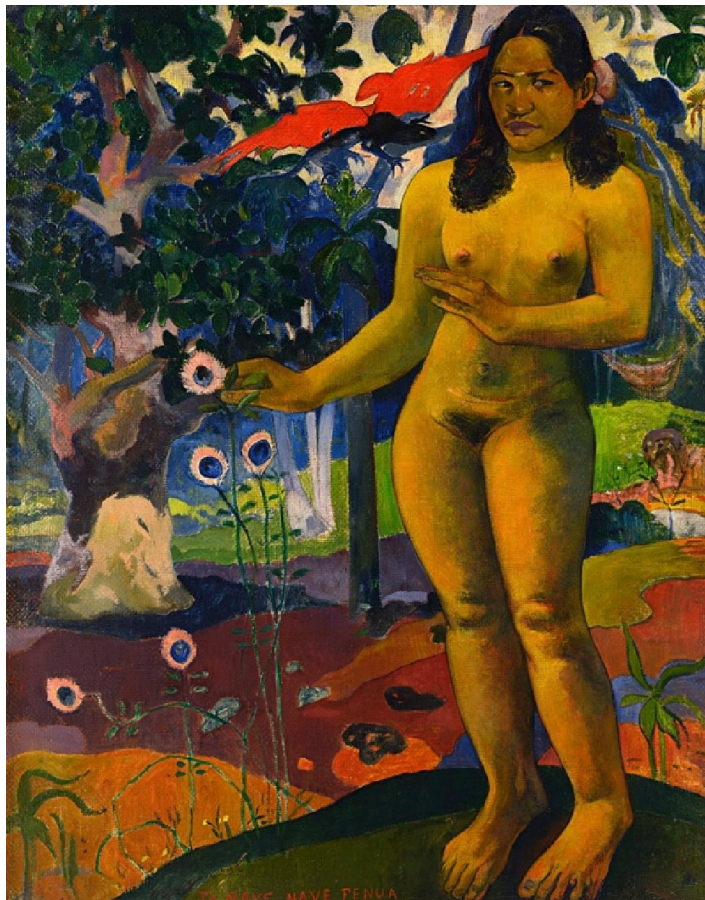


Fig. 3, Paul Gauguin, *Te Nave Nave Fenua*, 1892, oil on canvas, 91.3 x 72.1 cm, Ohara Museum of Art, Japan

² See Richard Brettell., *op. cit.*, pp. 269-70.

The exceptional importance of *Head of a Tahitian* is further underscored by its close relationship to the *Cahier pour Aline*, Gauguin's illustrated scrapbook dedicated to his daughter, on which the artist worked between December 1892 and March 1893. The discovery in 1977, during restoration, of a nearly identical profile head hidden (fig. 4) within the notebook confirms that this motif occupied a central place in Gauguin's most personal and experimental thinking during his first Tahitian stay. Closely related to the present sheet is a further drawing by Gauguin, depicting the profile head of the same woman but in reverse, known through an archival photograph in the Druet collection of the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris (fig. 5). The recurrence of this image across three distinct works attests to its sustained importance within Gauguin's œuvre.

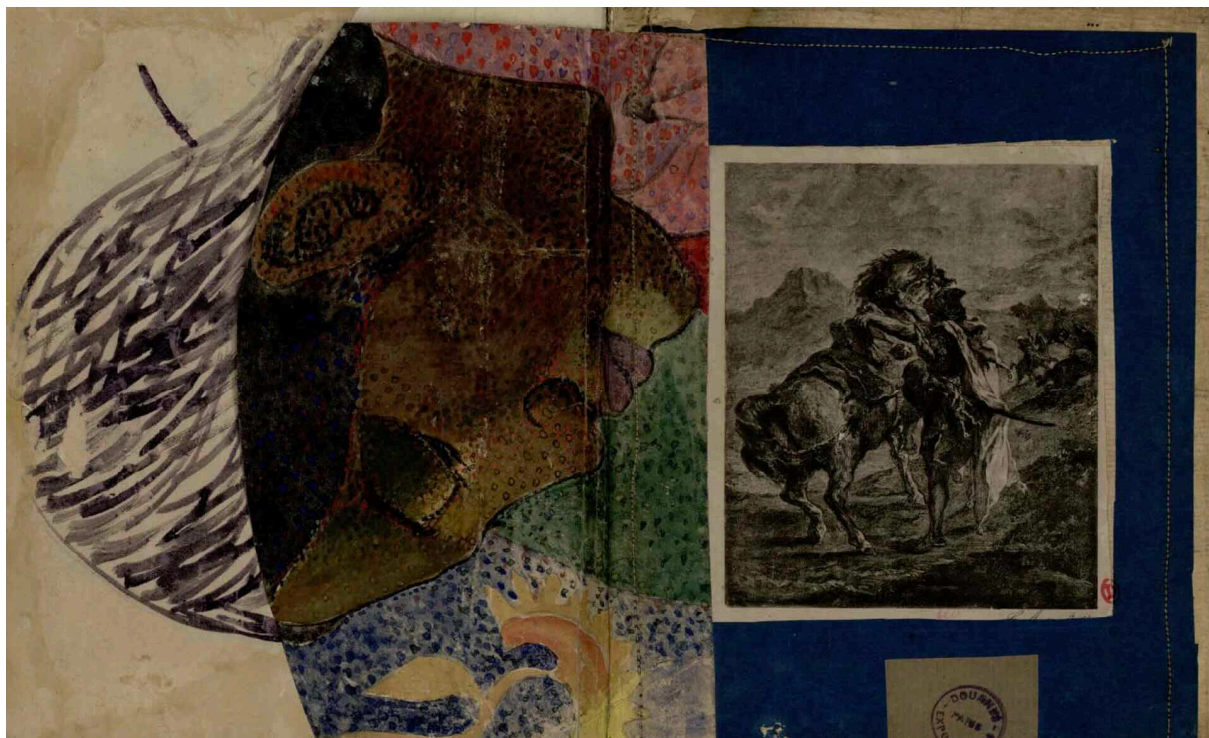


Fig. 4, Paul Gauguin, *Head of a Tahitian*, 1893, 21.5 x 17 cm, from the *Cahier pour Aline*, Bibliothèque de l'Institut National de l'Art, Paris

Among Gauguin's Tahitian portrait head studies, the present sheet must be regarded as one of the finest and most fully realized. Although differing in medium and visual effect, it is comparable in artistic ambition and quality to the celebrated charcoal head (fig. 6) in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, as well as to the exceptional drawing that appeared on the Swiss art market in 2017 (fig. 7). While these two sheets rely on a different chromatic register and a more overtly graphic handling, all three works share an extraordinary economy of line, a controlled simplification of form and a profound sense of inward stillness. In each, Gauguin suppresses descriptive detail in favour of structural clarity, allowing the contour of the profile to carry both psychological and symbolic weight. The present drawing, however, distinguishes itself through its more nuanced chromatic restraint and its softly fused surface, in which coloured chalks and touches of gold create a quieter, more atmospheric effect.

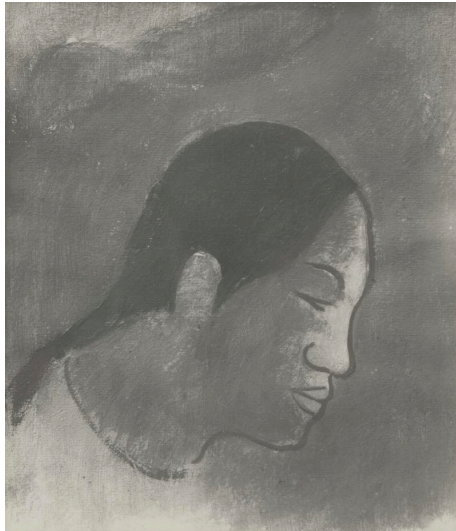


Fig. 5, Paul Gauguin, *Head of a Tahitian*, 1891-92, gouache on paper, Druet Collection Archives

More broadly, *Head of a Tahitian* exemplifies Gauguin's larger project in Tahiti: the construction of an imagined and poetic world shaped by memory, myth and personal ideology rather than documentary realism. The calm, timeless presence of the woman contrasts with the latent tension introduced by the chimera, encapsulating Gauguin's vision of the South Seas as a site of both harmony and danger, innocence and temptation. As such, this drawing stands not only as a masterful portrait but as a key work within Gauguin's Tahitian production and among the most important portrait head studies of his career.



Fig. 6, Paul Gauguin, *Tahitian Faces*, 1899, charcoal on laid paper, 41 x 31.1 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art



Fig. 7, Paul Gauguin, *Head of a Tahitian Woman with a second head in profile*, 1891-92, charcoal on laid paper, 44.8 x 31.3 cm, Private Collection