

**Sotheby's**

**Impressionist & Modern Art, Part One**

**New York | 04 Nov 2004, 07:00 PM | N08022**



**LOT 15**

**PROPERTY OF A PRIVATE COLLECTOR**

**PAUL GAUGUIN**

**1848 - 1903**

**MATERNITÉ (II)**

**Signed and dated Paul Gauguin 1899 (lower right)**

**Oil on burlap**

**37 1/4 by 24 in.**

**94.6 by 61 cm**

**ESTIMATE 40,000,000-40,000,001 USD**

Lot Sold: 39,208,000 USD

## **PROVENANCE**

Sale: Vente Gauguin, Papeete, 1903, lot 104

Commandant Cochin, Paris (acquired at the above sale)

Jean Cochin (acquired from the above)

Bernheim, Paris (acquired from the above on February 28, 1910)

Alphonse Kann, Paris (acquired on February 28, 1910)

Michel Manzi, Paris

Dikran Khan Kelekian, New York (sold: American Art Galleries, New York, January 30 & 31, 1922, lot 152)

Stephan Bourgeois, New York (acquired at the above sale)

Adolph Lewisohn, New York

Sam Lewisohn, New York (by descent from the above)

Wildenstein & Co., New York (acquired from the above in 1942)

Mrs. Henry Huttleston Rogers (acquired from the above in 1943)

Wildenstein & Co., New York

Mr. and Mrs. Edwin C. Vogel (acquired from the above in 1952)

David Rockefeller, New York (by 1959)

Barbara Piasecka Johnson, Princeton (acquired in 1978 and until at least 1990)

Neville Keating Pictures, Ltd., London

Acquired from the above

## **EXHIBITED**

Paris, Grand Palais, Salon d'Automne, 4me Exposition, 1906, no. 213 (titled Un Tableau)

Brooklyn Museum, Modern French Masters, 1921, no. 119

New York, Metropolitan Museum, Impressionists and Post-Impressionists, 1921, no. 48

New York, Union League Club, 1924

Cleveland Museum of Art, 1926

San Francisco, Museum of Art, Gauguin, 1936, no. 19

Washington, D.C., Phillips Gallery, Annual Fall Exhibition, 1938

Brooklyn Museum, 1938

San Francisco, Golden Gate Galleries, Masterworks, 1939, no. 148 (as dating from 1896)

New York, Wildenstein, Gauguin, 1946, no. 7

New York, Wildenstein, Six masters of Post-Impressionism, 1948, no. 17 (as dating from 1896)

New York, Paul Rosenberg, Masterpieces of French art from New York private collections, 1953, no. 27

Paris, Orangerie, de David à Toulouse-Lautrec, 1955, no. 20

New York, Wildenstein, Gauguin, 1956, no. 45

Chicago, Art Institute; New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gauguin, Paintings, Drawings, Prints, Sculpture, 1959, no. 61

Tokyo, The National Museum of Art; Aichi Prefectural Art Gallery, Paul Gauguin, 1987, no. 120

Warsaw, Royal Castle, The Collection of Barbara Piasecka Johnson, 1990, no. 49

## LITERATURE

- Victor Segalen, "Gauguin dans son dernier décor," *Mercure de France*, Paris, June 1904, discussed pp. 679-85
- Charles Morice, *Paul Gauguin*, Paris, 1919, illustrated opposite p. 164
- Jean de Rotonchamp, *Gauguin*, Paris, 1925, p. 221
- John Rewald, *Gauguin*, Paris, 1938, illustrated p. 141
- Charles Kunstler, *Gauguin, peintre maudit*, Paris, 1947, illustrated pl. 36
- Raymond Cogniat, *Gauguin*, Paris, 1947, illustrated p. 94 (as dating from 1896)
- Sam A. Lewisohn, *Painters and Personality, A Collector's View of Modern Art*, New York, 1948, illustrated pl. 28
- Lee van Dovski, *Gauguin*, Basel, 1950, no. 332, pp. 351-352
- Charles Estienne, *Gauguin*, Geneva, 1953, p. 54
- Charles Chassé, *Gauguin et son temps*, Paris, 1955, discussed pp. 147-148
- Georges Wildenstein, "L'Ideologie et l'Esthétique dans deux tableaux-clés de Gauguin," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts*, Paris, January-April 1956, p. 137 and 152
- Charles Sterling, *Le Musée de l'Ermitage...*, Moscow, 1957, pp. 132 and 134
- Georges Wildenstein, *Gauguin*, vol. I, Paris, 1964, no. 582, illustrated p. 245
- Robert Goldwater, *Paul Gauguin*, New York, 1957, illustrated pl. 135 (as dating from 1896)
- Die Weltkunst*, no. 11, Munich, June 1959, discussed
- Giorgio M. Sugana, *L'opera completa di Gauguin*, Milan, 1972, no. 403, illustrated p. 110
- Richard Brettell, *Françoise Cachin, Claire-Frèches-Thory, Charles F. Stuckey, The Art of Paul Gauguin* (exhibition catalogue), National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; The Art Institute of Chicago, 1988-89, discussed p. 423
- Paul Gauguin e l'avanguardia russa* (exhibition catalogue), Palazzo dei Diamanti, Ferrara, 1995, discussed pp. 120 and 126
- The Lure of the Exotic, Gauguin in New York Collections* (exhibition catalogue), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2002, featured in photographs of installations, pp. 196 and 167

## CATALOGUE NOTE

Among the most visually engaging images of Western art are the oils that Gauguin painted while he was living in the South Pacific in the 1890s. One of the few European artists of his generation to visit this part of the world, Gauguin fell in love with the mystique of the tropics and incorporated the region's lush colors and organic forms into his paintings, drawings, and sculptures. Not since the days of Gerôme and the Salon painters of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century had a French artist been so transfixed by the Orient and enraptured by the strength and beauty of its people. But unlike his predecessors, Gauguin's approach to these exotic themes was unprecedented in its creativity and imaginative flare. The wholly new aesthetic that he created with these works would come to define his career and would have a profound impact on the work of Picasso and Matisse over a decade later. Most precious among Gauguin's production from this era are his iconic depictions of Tahitian women. Whether harvesting fruit, relaxing in the privacy of an interior, or posing for more formal portraits, the Tahitian women of these pictures possess a beguiling and exotic beauty that was unseen in the painting of the avant-garde at the turn of the century. Gauguin was indulgent in his portrayal of the overwhelming seductive appeal of his young models, some of whom were his lovers. His attraction to these women resulted in depictions that are raw with sensuality.

The present work, painted in 1899 while Gauguin was living in the Punaauia district of Tahiti, is an ode to fertility. The subject of this painting is maternity, and the artist has rendered this time honored-theme with a rich and highly personalized interpretation. The painting was completed around the time that Gauguin's 17-year-old Polynesian mistress, Pahura, gave birth to the couple's son in April 1899. The figure nursing the baby at the bottom-right of the composition symbolizes this event, while the two attendants holding their bounty of maiore fruit and flowers reiterate the beauty and abundance of nature. Gauguin also completed another slightly larger related composition, *Maternité*

(I) (W. 581, Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, see fig. 1), which is also known as *Femmes sur le bord de la mer* and was titled as such when it was exhibited at Ambroise Vollard's gallery in 1903. In that picture, Gauguin includes the characters of fishermen and a dog, the latter being a symbol of the artist's alter-ego. In the present work, however, the composition excludes these narrative details and is pared down to images of the three women, creating a bolder statement about the importance of motherhood.

Richard Brettell has pointed out that the title *Maternité* was probably not given to these pictures by Gauguin, but instead, by art historians who have admired these paintings for over a century. Brettell has also discussed the stylistic differences of these two works, noting how the present work presents a much greater realization of Gauguin's interest in vibrant color. He writes that *Maternité* (II) "is much more brilliant in hue. It is signed, but not dated, and we know it was kept by Gauguin because it was included in the sale of his estate in Tahiti. The smaller version has a light-struck background of acid yellow-green, and a salmon-pink cloud floats behind the figures. Here, the women recline in the shade. This smaller painting has never been adequately explained. While Gauguin had painted two versions of several earlier compositions, none but this is known from the last decade of this career. For that reason, his motivation in translating the composition into another language of color is not clear. That he was deeply concerned with the expressive and pictorial power of color is evident, for he had sent an essay on that subject to Morice for publication in 1898" (Richard Brettell, et al., op. cit., p. 423). Recent technical analysis of this picture has shown that, contrary to Brettell's observation, *Maternité* (II) is indeed dated, and the date 1899 appears faintly above the signature in the lower right corner of the painting.

The subject of women and newborn children had factored into several of Gauguin's compositions of this time, and some of these works made pronounced references to Christianity, such as *Nativité*, 1899-1900 (see fig. 2). Ziva Amishai-Maisels has discussed the religious iconography in Gauguin's work, calling the present picture and the related work "a Madonna and Child with believers." She points out, however, that Gauguin did not have to go to great lengths to invest these pictures with blatant spiritual meaning and could elevate "normal life activities to a symbolic level, creating a symbol of motherhood that has religious significance even without its reminiscence of the Madonna" (Ziva Amishai Maisels, 1985, p. 306).

*Maternité* (II), however, is much more than a modern reinterpretation of Christian imagery and is known to have been of great personal significance for artist. At the time of Pahura's pregnancy, Gauguin was already in his early fifties and had not seen his European family since he first left France for Tahiti in 1891. The artist's absence from his children, two of whom died while he lived abroad, and his relative isolation in Polynesia, made him long for familial relations. Despite his willful renunciation of his bourgeois life in France and his desire to place his art above all else, he missed his children, naming his new Tahitian son 'Emile' after his first son, born in 1874, with his wife, Mette. Robert Goldwater hypothesized that this picture enunciated the values of family and love that were important to the artist at this point in his life. He emphasizes that while Gauguin's Tahitian companions may have offered him a certain kind of domestic contentment, "Maternity is no genre anecdote of the primitive, full of realistic detail and incident. On the contrary, it has been stripped of all but its essential symbols of love and care: the nursing mother, guarded, as it were, by watchful and protective sisters; the fruit, of abundance; and the flower, of beauty. We do not know where they are, except that it is in some tropical garden of Arcady (and Poussin would indeed have recognized the group). Earth and sky (distinguishable only in color), move upward behind the group in soft, rounded shapes that echo the flowing contours of the figures. The warm colors of the foreground in close harmony, suggest the warmth and contentment of the human scene, and close it in, yet open out into the note of gaiety of the brilliant hues of the sky beyond" (Goldwater, op. cit., p. 134).

As Goldwater points out, *Maternité* (II) had several formal precedents, including the work of artists like Nicholas Poussin and Pierre Puvis de Chavannes (see fig. 3). The work also influenced numerous compositions in various

media that Gauguin completed around the same time. The figure on the left holding the flowers was inspired by the Javanese frieze of Borobudur and appears in several of Gauguin's paintings from the late 1890s, including *Trois Tahitiens*, 1899 (W. 573, Alexander Maitland Collection, Edinburgh, see fig. 4), *Faa Iheihe*, 1898 (W. 569, Tate Modern, London, see fig. 5), *Rupe Rupe*, 1899 (W. 585, Pushkin Museum, Moscow), *Te Avae No Maria*, 1899, (W. 586, The Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, see fig. 6) and *Les Seins aux fleurs rouges* (W. 583, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, see fig. 7). Gauguin also used the head and shoulders of the two standing figures for a title plate of his Tahitian newspaper, *Le Sourire*, and incorporated the figures in a wood relief, *War and Peace* and in a woodcut, *Rape of Europa*, all completed around the same time as the present work. The cropping of the flowering branch that extends from the top right edge of the oil is similar to that of the decorative compositions of Japanese ukiyo-e prints, with which Gauguin had been familiar since his days working in Brittany in the 1880s. The dramatic color and amorphous forms that represent sky and earth are also reminiscent of the Symbolist pictures that he completed in *Le Pouldu* and *Pont Aven* a decade earlier. But unlike those pictures, which focused on religious themes and the lives of the Breton peasants, this work emphasizes the overwhelming presence and physical desirability of the women of the South Pacific.

Gauguin was enthralled by the sensual power of these women, whose nudity was unabashed and whose physical availability was in stark contrast to the behavior of the more reserved women of Europe. He was also impressed by the independence and strength of the Tahitian women whom he encountered, many of whom would be considered under-aged by Western standards. The artist's interactions with these young women thrilled him and ultimately enriched his art. Living outside of the influence of the Catholic Church, he was free to explore a sensual freedom that would not have been condoned by the mores of traditional Western society. He found great value in these experiences, and they profoundly influenced his progressive social philosophies at this time of his life. In 1902, the artist wrote in his journal, "...woman, who is after all our mother, our daughter, our sister, has the right to earn her living. Has the right to love whomever she chooses. Has the right to dispose of her body, of her beauty. Has the right to give birth to a child and to bring him up – without having to go through a priest and a notary public. Has the right to be respected just as much as the woman who sells herself only in wedlock (as commanded by the Church) and consequently has the right to spit in the face of anyone who oppresses her" (quoted in *The Lure of the Exotic*, Gauguin in New York Collections, op. cit., p. 124).

Many of Gauguin's oils of Tahitian women did not survive the inhospitable climate and transport conditions from the South Pacific or were destroyed by European officials who deemed them morally reprehensible. *Maternité (II)* is a rare example of one that escaped this fate. Upon Gauguin's death in 1903, this picture remained in the artist's studio and was later offered at the auction of his estate in the Tahitian capital of Papeete. At that sale, the picture was purchased by a French naval officer, Commandant Cochin, for 150 francs. According to Cochin, the underbidder on the picture, Governor Petit, had only bid up to 135 francs. Cochin brought the painting back to France "between two shirts" and had it relined by Maurice Denis. In 1910, it was acquired by the great collector of Modern art, Alphonse Kann, and it was eventually sold to Dikran Khan Kelekian. Kelekian, a dealer and collector living in Paris, exhibited this work at important exhibitions at the Brooklyn Museum and The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in 1921 (see fig. 8) before selling it for \$7000 at the New York auction house (and corporate predecessor of Sotheby's, New York), American Art Galleries in 1922. After that sale, it was eventually acquired by the prestigious New York collector, Adolph Lewisohn, who hung this work in his home on Fifth Avenue alongside some of the greatest works in his collection (see fig. 9), including Gauguin's *la Orana Maria* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York). In 1948, Lewisohn's son, Sam. A. Lewisohn, wrote the following about his father's prized Gauguins: "Something in Gauguin's complicated Catholic soul seems to have demanded inner appeasement. In the 'la Orana Maria' or 'Maternity,' there is a Sabbath calm that is impressive and that repeats the achievements of the Italian masters of the fourteenth century. The contrasting curves repeated with rhythmic insistence give a sense of Handel's Largo – possibly a little sweet, but most arresting. In a curious way, the first, 'la Orana Maria,' reminds one of the Florentine master Gentile

da Fabriano – the second, 'Maternity,' because of its simpler construction, of Fra Angelico" (Sam A. Lewisohn, op. cit., p. 61).

Fig. 1, Paul Gauguin, Maternité (I), 1899, oil on canvas, Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg

Fig. 2, Paul Gauguin, Nativité, circa 1900, monotype on paper, pencil highlighting, Private Collection, Paris

Fig. 3, Pierre Puvis de Chavannes, L'Automne, 1864, oil on canvas, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lyon

Fig. 4, Paul Gauguin, Trois Tahitiens, 1899, oil on canvas, National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh

Fig. 5, Paul Gauguin, Faa Iheihe, 1898, oil on canvas, Tate Gallery, London

Fig. 6, Paul Gauguin, Te Avae No Maria, 1888, oil on canvas, The Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg

Fig. 7, Paul Gauguin, Les Seins aux fleurs rouges, 1899, oil on canvas, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Fig. 8, Installation view of 1921 exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. The present work is on the far wall, fourth from the left.

Fig. 9, Lewisohn apartment, 881 Fifth Avenue, New York City, circa 1939. The present work is on the right.