

The New Spirit:
Pamphlets from the
Infamous
1913 Armory Show

Élie Faure
Paul Gauguin
Walter Pach
Vincent van Gogh



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Noa-Noa

Paul Gauguin

[*Selections—Translated by Walt Kuhn*]

The Princess entered my chamber, where I lay upon the bed, attired only in a Paréo, surely not the way to receive a lady of rank. “Ja orana (I greet thee) Gauguin” said she, “You are ill, I come to see you.”

“—And your name?”

“—Vaitüa.”

Vaitüa was a veritable princess, if there still are any such, since the Europeans have lowered everything to their level. In truth she came as a simple mortal with naked feet, clad in a black dress and a fragrant flower worn behind her ear. She wore mourning for King Pomare, whose niece she was.

Her father, Tamatoa, in spite of the unavoidable contact with officers and officials, in spite of the receptions of the admiral, never wanted to be anything but a royal Maorie, a gigantic roisterer in moments of anger, and a famous drinker in the orgies of the evenings—he had died; one said that Vaitüa re-

sembled him greatly.

With a sceptical smile upon my lips, I looked upon this fallen princess, with the impudence of a freshly landed European. But I wanted to be polite.

“It is kind of you Vaitüa that you came—shall we drink an absinthe together?” and with my finger I point to a bottle which I have just purchased.

Without expressing either unwillingness or pleasure she went and stooped to get the bottle.

This movement stretched her light transparent dress across her thighs, thighs which could have carried a world! Oh verily she was a princess! Her ancestors? proud and brave giants. Solidly her proud wild head sat upon her broad shoulders.

At first I only saw her cannibalistic jaw, her teeth prepared to tear asunder, the lowering look of a cruel cunning animal, and found in spite of her beautiful and noble brow, that she was ugly. I feared that she would get a notion to sit upon the bed! Such a weak frame could not hold us both—

But that is just what she did. The bed groaned but held us after all.

We exchange a few words while drinking. However the conversation will not become animated.

Finally she tires and silence reigns. I watch the princess intently, she watches me furtively from a corner of her eye, time

passes and the bottle grows empty.

Väitüa drinks bravely. She rolls a Tahitian cigarette and stretches herself upon the bed to smoke—Her feet mechanically and continually stroke the wooden foot of the bed—her breathing grows quieter, and visibly softer, her eyes gleam and an even whistling escapes her lips. I seemed to hear the purring of a cat which thinks of bloody pleasures.

As I am changeable, I now find her quite beautiful, and as she said with a voice full of emotion “I like you,” a feeling of great unrest overcame me.—The princess was without a doubt, delicious—

To please me, no doubt, she began to recite a fable of La Fontaine’s “The Cricket and the Ant.”

A memory of her childhood among the nuns who had taught her.

The entire cigarette was aflame. “Do you know, Gauguin,” said the princess, as she rose, “I do not like your La Fontaine.”

“What? Our good La Fontaine?”

“Maybe he is good, but his moral is ugly—”

“Ants!” * * * (and her mouth expressed disgust).

“Yes, crickets, they, yes—singing, singing, always singing!”

And proud, without glancing at me, with lighted eyes looking

into the distance she added—

“How beautiful was our domain before anything was sold! our song through the entire year—”

“Singing always! always giving!—”

And she went.

I lay back again upon my pillow—and long sounded flatteringly within me, the words “Ja orana, Gauguin.”



My decision was soon taken. I decided to leave Papeete, to remove myself from the European centre.

I felt that if I fully shared the life of the natives in the bush, I would gradually win the confidence of the Maorie—I would learn to know them.

And one morning I set forth in a wagon put at my disposal by an amiable officer, to find “my hut.”

My Vahina, by name of Titi accompanied me—Half English, half Tahitian extraction, she spoke a little French—for the trip she had put on her most beautiful dress, Tiaré behind the ear, her hat trimmed on top with a ribbon, and underneath with straw flowers and a festoon of orange colored shells, her long black hair hanging loosely over her shoulders. She was proud to ride in a wagon, proud to be the Vahina of a man whom she held to be influential and rich—and she was really pretty in

her pride which contained nothing ridiculous. So well does the majestic mien fit to this race, whose memory of its ancient traditions of rulership and uncertain line of great chiefs preserve this glorious pride. I knew, however, that her extremely calculating love, would not have weighed heavier in the eyes of a Parisian than the purchasable favor of a harlot.

But the love glow of a Maorien courtesan is an entirely different thing from the passiveness of a Parisienne cocotte—entirely different. There is a fire in their blood which awakens love, its natural food, it breathes love. These eyes and this mouth cannot lie, whether selfish or not, they always emit love.

The trip through the rich landscape of continued monotony was soon covered. To the right, always the sea, the coral reefs and water falls which occasionally were dispersed like steam whenever the waves came in too vehement contact with the rocks. To the left the bush with the view of large forests.

By noon we had covered forty-five kilometers and had reached the district of Mataiëa.

I looked around and finally found a passably pretty hut, whose owner offered it for rent—he was building a new one at its side for his own use.

On the evening of the next day, upon our return to Papeete, Titi asked me if I did not want to take her with me—

Later, in a few days, when I am established.

In Papeete, Titi had a terrible reputation, having put several

lovers under the sod. But that did not make me turn from her. Being half white, in spite of deep, original and genuine Maorien characteristics, her many affairs had caused her to lose many “marks of race.” I felt that I could not learn much from her which I wanted to know and that she would not yield me much of the joy which I sought. Beside I felt that I would find that which I sought, there in the country, and had but to choose.

On one side the sea, on the other the mountains, cleft mountains, an enormous chasm, covered by a large Mango tree which leaned against the rocks. Between mountain and sea stands my hut of the wood of Bourao, adjoining another, which I do not inhabit. The “Faré Arnu” (food hut).



Quiet! I learned to know the quiet of a Tahitian night.

I perceived nothing but the beating of my heart.

But the moonbeams fall through the evenly separated bamboo stalks before my hut, upon my bed.

This regulated beam awakens within me the reproduction of a musical instrument. The reed-pipe of the old ones, which is known to the Maori and which they call “Vivo.”

Moon and reed exaggerate the design into an instrument which is silent by day, but thanks to the moon, recalls dear melodies to the dreamer—It was to this music that I fell asleep.

Twixt the heavens and me nothing but the high light roof of Pandanus leaves in which the lizards nest.

I am far away from those prisons the European houses! A Maorien hut does not separate man from life space and eternity—

Meanwhile I feel very lonely there. The inhabitants of the country and I observe each other mutually, and the line between us remains the same. Since the second day my supplies have been exhausted. What to do? I had believed that with money I could find all necessities, I had deceived myself. As soon as one leaves the city one must hold to nature for one's living and she is rich, she is generous, and denies no one his share of her treasures which are inexhaustibly stored on the trees, in the mountains and in the sea.

But one must know how to climb the high it and mountains to return heavily laden with booty. One must catch fish, dive, tear the strongly attached shells from the sea's bottom.

One must know, one must be able, I, the man of civilization, in this respect was far behind the savage—I envied them, I saw their happy, peaceful life about me, exercising no greater effort than their daily needs required without the least care as to money. To whom could they sell while the products of nature were at everyone's hand?—

There, while I sat with empty stomach on the sill of my hut, sad over my predicament, thinking over the unforeseen and perhaps insurmountable handicaps which nature has placed between herself and the man of civilization, I noticed a native

who called to me, aided by gesture. The most expressive gestures, replaced the words and I understood, that my neighbors invited me to dine—With a shake of the head I refused—Whereupon I withdrew into my hut. Shamed as much I believe because I refused the invitation as though I had accepted it—In a few minutes a little girl, without saying a word, placed cooked vegetables and fruit wrapped in clean and freshly picked leaves before my door. I was hungry and likewise without a word I accepted. Shortly after the man passed my hut, and said smiling in a friendly manner, without halting—

“Paia?”

I guessed—“are you satisfied?”

That was the beginning of mutual confidence between myself and the savages—

“Savages!” this word unconsciously came to my lips as I looked upon this black being with the cannibal teeth. But soon I recognized their genuine strange amiability. How that brown little head with its soft downcast eyes, that child under bushes of large leaves of the giromon, observed me one morning and dashed away, as my glance reached hers.—

As they were to me, was I an object for observation and a cause for amazement, one to whom everything was new, who knew nothing. For I knew neither their language nor their habits, not in even the simplest uses of the hand. As everyone of them to me, so was I to everyone of them a savage.

And which of the two is right?

I tried to work, I made various notes and sketches. But the landscape with its strong, pure color dazzled me, it made me blind.

I was always undecided. I searched and searched * * * * and after all it was so simple to paint, as it appeared to me. To place a red beside a blue without much consideration! Gilded figures in brooks and at the beach delighted me, why did I hesitate to fasten this joy of the sun upon my canvas.

Oh! these old European legacies! the timid means of expression of dissipated races! To familiarize myself with the peculiar character of a Tahitian face, I decided to paint the portrait of one of my neighbors, a young woman of pure Tahitian descent.

One day she took heart to enter my hut, to look at photographs of pictures, with which I had papered the walls of my room. She looked at them a long time, and at the Olympia with special interest.

“How do you like her?” I asked (I had learned a few Tahitian words during the past two months in which I spoke no French).

“She is very beautiful.”

I smiled at this remark and it touched me. Did she then have understanding for the beautiful? What would the professors of the Academy of Fine Arts say to that?

After a silence which generally precedes an extension of thought, she added suddenly.

“Is this your wife?”

“Yes—”

I did not shirk at this lie, I, the Tané of the beautiful Olympia!

While she inquisitively examined some compositions of the Italian primitives. I began rapidly, without her notice, to sketch her portrait.

Suddenly she noticed it, crying poutingly.

“Aita” (no) and ran away.

An hour later she was back dressed in a beautiful dress with a Tiaré behind her ear. Was it coquetry? to surrender willingly after the refusal? Or was it simply the lure of the forbidden fruit which one denies oneself? Or simple mood without any other reason, as the Maoriens do.

Without hesitation I went to work, without hesitation and feverishly, I was conscious that the physical and moral surrendering of the model depended upon my accomplishment as an artist and a speedy, silent and willing consent. According to our rules of the aesthetic she was hardly beautiful.

But she was beautiful.

Her features were of a Raffaelesque harmony, and the mouth

was modelled by a sculptor who understands how to put all joy and sorrow into one movable line.

I worked hastily and passionately, for I well knew that as yet I could not count on sanction—I trembled lest I read fear and desire for the unknown in these large eyes, the melancholy of bitter experience which lies at the bottom of all joys, like the unwilling sovereign feeling of self control. Such beings seem to yield when they give themselves to us, and after all yield only to their own will. They are ruled by a force which contains something superhuman or maybe something God-like animal.



Now I worked more freely and better. But my loneliness tormented me.

I did see, in this vicinity, young women and girls of quiet glances, genuine Tahitians and several among them would gladly, perhaps, have shared life with me—but I dared not address them, they really abashed me with their calm looks, the dignity of their bearing and their proud gestures.

But still they all desire to be “taken,” literally taken (Maï, to take) without a word. All have the secret desire to be raped, because through this masculine act, the woman retains absolute un-responsibility, for thereby she has not given her consent to a lasting love. Perhaps a deep reason lies at the bottom of this seemingly shocking force.—Perhaps, too, it may have its wild charm. I did think of it but did not dare.

Besides many of them were considered diseased. Afflicted with

that disease which is brought to the savage by the European as the first step of culture * * * * and when the old ones, pointing to one of them said to me—

“Mantera” (take this one), I had neither the necessary courage nor the confidence, I sent word to Titi that I would with pleasure receive her again.

She came at once.

The trial failed. The boredom I experienced in the company of this woman, accustomed to the banal luxury of the officials, allowed me to gauge what progress I had already made in the beautiful life of the savages.

At the end of a few weeks Titi and I separated for always.

I was again alone.



I had been gloomy for some time, my work suffered thereby. It saddened me to stand powerless before artistic problems which intoxicated me. But mainly. I was devoid of desire to work.

I had been separated several months from Titi. Several months I had not heard her frivolous childish chirping prattle about the same things, had not heard the same questions, to which I had always responded with the same stories, and this quiet was not good for me.

I decided to go away, to take a trip around the island, to which

I had fixed no definite goal.

As I made my preparations, a few light bundles for the necessities of travel, and while putting my studies in order, my neighbor and friend Anani watched me uneasily.

After long hesitation, after gestures begun and again interrupted, gestures the obviousness of which both amused and touched me, he at last decided to ask whether I was preparing to leave, "No," I answered, "I am only going on an excursion for several days, I will return."

He doubted me and began to weep.

His wife joined him and assured me of her affection, telling me that I needed no money to live among them, that, if I chose, I could rest for ever there, pointing to a grave, decorated with a small tree, close to her hut, and suddenly I had a longing—to rest—There, there at least no one would disturb me in all eternity, * * * *

"You Europeans are queer," added the wife of Anani! "You come and promise to stay, and when one loves you, you go again! You say 'to return,' but you never come back!"

"But I swear that it is my intention to return."

Later (I dared not lie) later. I did not know as yet —

Finally they let me go.





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