

Gauguin in Panama: A Forgotten Journey

Researched by George Plohn, following a question that came up at a recent Trivia session.

The question as enunciated by our moderator, Karen, was Who was the famous artist who helped to build a canal. When nobody could come up with a response, Karen gave as a hint, that the name is Gauguin, but asked then which was that canal? Still no answer. Somebody interjected Suez Canal. No, that was no good. Finally, Karen took us out from our misery by telling us that it was the Panama Canal. We were all flabbergasted, knowing only that he famously left his country to go not to Central America but to eternal love-play in French Polynesia in the Pacific Ocean, so the mystery continued to linger around. To satisfy my intellectual curiosity and emboldened by Karen, I took upon myself to clarify this issue, and here is what I found.

Eugène Henri Paul Gauguin (1848 –1903) the French **post-Impressionist painter** - while underappreciated until after his death, is now indeed very much admired and recognized for his new horizons and for his experimental use of color and what became known as a **Synthetist** style, meaning the outward appearance of natural forms, the artists' feelings about their subject, and the purity of the aesthetic considerations of line, color and form that were distinctly different from Impressionism and so clearly visible in his impressive output of warm hued scenes of Polynesian natives, especially women, his women.

However, few know that the Gauguin's first attempt to immerse himself in a primitive civilization took him first to the Central American nation of Panama.

When people think of the post-impressionist painter Paul Gauguin, they think of his groundbreaking paintings of Tahitians done in a somewhat primitive style, shall we say perhaps Gauguinian style, a new style uniquely his. Most, however, would not normally think of Panama. Nevertheless, Panama played a small but significant part in this painter's remarkable life. Gauguin lived on Isla Taboga, a stunning tropical

island 8 miles off the coast of Panama City, in the Pacific Ocean. Virtually penniless, **in 1887 he had left his wife and five children in Paris to try and make a name for himself as an artist.** En route to Martinique, he stopped off at the then Isthmus of Panama in 1887. While here, **he worked as a simple day laborer on the early, pre-US, disastrous French attempt to build the Panama Canal.**

In his own words, Gauguin wrote:

'I am leaving in order to have peace and quiet, to be rid of the influence of civilization. I want only to do simple, very simple art, and to be able to do that, I have to immerse myself in virgin nature, see no one but savages, live their life, with no other thought in mind but to render, the way a child would, the concepts formed in my brain and to do this with the aid of nothing but the primitive means of art, the only means that are good and true.'

But during his time in Panama he became extremely ill, and spent time in a Yellow Fever and Malaria Sanatorium on Isla Taboga. Nothing remains to bear witness of his stay here apart from a vibrant plaque donated in 1995 by the French Embassy in Panama.



The plaque in his memory



The house where Gauguin lived in Taboga

Accounts of this period suggest that Gauguin had a miserable time in Panama, effectively working as a slave on the canal, and remaining too ill to paint with his

usual fervor. His first major output of tropical paintings, as evidence would suggest, were produced on the next stage of his travels, in Martinique.

Gauguin painted a great variety of subjects throughout his colorful career, with those later of Tahitian girls being unquestionably the most well known. At the 2013 exhibition of his work: *El Sueño de Panama, (The Dream of Panama)* at the Canal Museum in Panama City, one would hope to see early examples of his primitive style, ideally those inspired by Panama. Unfortunately, examples from this period are difficult to come by, and shown were only paintings that he had executed while in France. Although it is well known that Gauguin was ill for much of his time in Panama, surely this prolific painter could not have left his easel and brush alone for long in such a brilliant landscape.

After his stint in Panama and Martinique, Gauguin returned to Paris before setting out once again on his travels. This subsequent journey took him to Polynesia, where he would produce the paintings that helped to establish his reputation as a great artist.

'I have come to an unalterable decision — to go and live forever in Polynesia. Then I can end my days in peace and freedom, without thoughts of tomorrow and this eternal struggle against idiots.' These were Gauguin's words expressing his inner thoughts.

Gauguin's Health

After briefly working on the Panama Canal he left for Martinique, a small French island in the Caribbean. In Martinique he contracted dysentery and malaria, two common illnesses associated with his era and that location. In developed countries it is a mild illness that usually subsides in a few days, but in Gauguin's time it could ravage a country and cause tens of thousands of deaths. Combined with the malaria, a parasitic disease transmitted by mosquitoes that causes fever, pain, and organ failure, Gauguin found it very difficult to work while in Martinique. Lacking money to buy food or medicine he spent much of his time bedridden. Only

occasionally was he able to paint or touch up previous paintings. Gauguin knew that if he wanted to get better he would have to return to France, which unwillingly he did.

While painting in Brittany, in 1894, Gauguin was involved in a brawl. During the fight he broke his ankle. This injury plagued him for the rest of his life and resulted in him walking with a slight limp. He was constantly in pain, relying on pills to relieve the symptoms, and spending days in bed.

The next year in Paris he contracted syphilis from a prostitute. The treatments for syphilis were painful and took a toll on his mental health. The next few years he spent travelling, always trying to escape his problems and find solace somewhere else.

Late in 1897 and into the beginning of 1898 Gauguin was still feeling the effect of all of his ailments. He was fighting bouts of flu, spitting up blood, and still trying to deal with ulcers in his leg. After painting what he thought would be his final piece, *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?*, Gauguin left his house and walked up a hill where he would attempt suicide by swallowing a large amount of arsenic. After falling asleep on the hill, he was awoken suddenly as he was throwing up the arsenic, but he would survive this attempt. Survived, but had to spend the next few months in bed, recovering from the incident.

Eventually, in 1903, Gauguin left for good to live in the French Polynesia in the Pacific Ocean, making out with local young women. Eventually he got in trouble for political activism, taking the side of the islanders against the French colonialists. While in prison all of his ailments caught up with him. Weakened by excessive drinking, improper nourishment, and an overdose of morphine to treat his syphilis, Gauguin died of a heart attack at 54 years of age.