Beyond the Surface
Examination and Contextualization of Paintings by Paul Gauguin in the Courtauld Gallery

Morgan Wyder | Courtauld Institute of Art | morgan.wyder@gmail.com

Introduction

The Courtauld Gallery contains three of Paul Gauguin's painted masterpieces, one from his experimental years in Brittany, Haystacks, 1889, painted from his second and final trip to Tahiti, Nevermore, 1897, and Te Rerioa (The Dream), 1887. This study reviewed technical and historical information from an initial 1983 examination of the three paintings, and presented new images and data from additional technical analysis. Referencing recent technical studies of Gauguin's paintings in museum collections, as well as scholarship from major exhibitions, new images and data were used to place the three paintings within the context of Gauguin's known artistic practices. This poster will highlight some of the findings from the more comprehensive study.

New Insights into Underdrawing

As has been seen from Gauguin's sketchbooks and technical examination of his paintings, Gauguin's painting preparation often began with field sketches or photographs. Later, he frequently composed more detailed drawings, sometimes using studio models, in order to construct a composition to transfer to canvas. Although Gauguin often transferred figures and large compositions, he also executed some paintings in a more spontaneous manner without a rigid transfer process. Haystacks was most likely planned out to some degree, but Gauguin's choices of aspects of the composition as he worked. Infrared photographs indicate that another farm animal, plow, and figure were initially sketched in the underdrawing at top right, but not were not painted into the final composition. In X-radiographs, we can see that a different cowherd was initially painted, but then subsequently covered and replaced with the current main cowherd figure. The previous figure relates the painting more closely with the drawing Sketch with Two Cows, 1889 (Albertina, Vienna), thought to be a preparatory sketch for Haystacks (Pickavance, 1970).

In contrast, technical imaging and microscopic examination suggest that both Te Rerioa and Nevermore compositions were most likely fully planned before painting: very few alterations were made in the painting process. Te Rerioa was initially drawn out in unbound charcoal, while Nevermore was first drawn with dilute blue paint. An exact transfer method could not be determined, but Gauguin is known to have used both grid systems and pouncing to scale up and transfer figures and compositions in Tahiti.

Ground Effects

Paul Gauguin is recognized for the matte surfaces and bright colors he produced, partially through his choice of grounds. Historical research and technical analysis of several of Gauguin's paintings have shown that, like many of his Impressionist predecessors and Neo- and Post-Impressionist contemporaries, Gauguin preferred to paint on an oil-based, absorbent grounds to preserve bright paint colors, to shorten drying time of the paint layers (allowing for rapid paint application), and to achieve a matte finish across the painting surface. Research suggests that he began priming his original canvases fairly consistently from around 1887; his priming recipe, recorded in 1886, was generally composed of chalk and animal glue (Christensen, 1993) (Jirat-Wasiutynski and Newton, 2000). Technical analysis from the present study confirmed that Haystacks, 1889, is indeed painted on a thin, artist-applied, chalk-glued ground. Painted several years later in Tahiti, a composition under Nevermore was also initially painted on an artist-applied chalk-glued ground. However, perhaps short on painting supplies, Gauguin re-used the canvas to paint the Nevermore composition. This study found that the second priming was composed of zinc white greatly extended with barium sulfate in drying oil; this was most likely a cheap, commercial decorators’ paint, like the ones he requested from Daniel de Monfreid in 1887 and Ambrose Vollard in 1902 from Paris (Hale, 1983). Te Rerioa was primed using the same zinc white paint. Gauguin’s use of oil-bound zinc white paint as a ground is somewhat surprising, considering it would not have been as absorbent as a chalk-glue ground. Perhaps Gauguin required an oil-based ground to properly adhere to the painting below Nevermore, and simultaneously used the same paint to prime the canvases for Te Rerioa, which he painted immediately afterwards (Thompson, 1993).

Carving a Primitive Aesthetic

In the final stages of the painting process of Te Rerioa, Gauguin reinforced contours of small details by incising into the wet paint layer and exposing the white ground below. Gauguin specifically utilized a needle tool (like those used in ceramics and printmaking) to carve into the wet paint layers, emphasizing the dialogue between his artworks in other media. Starr Figure testify to 1890, “carving had become more than a diversion and was a primary means for [Gauguin] to forge a new primitive aesthetic.” By carving lines into the paint layers of Te Rerioa, Gauguin perhaps contributes to his desired primitive aesthetic (Childs, Foster, and Figura, 1993).

References

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New Insights into Underdrawing

This cross-section from Nevermore shows a complex paint layering system, possibly indicating compositional revisions. The first priming layer (1) is composed of chalk and animal glue, the second priming layer (2) is composed of chalk in a protein glue. The ground layer (3) is composed of chalk-glue ground. The yellowing of the painting was likely caused by the yellow pigment, lead antimonate, and the extended barium sulfate layer below. The ground layer was modified by the artist during the painting process, perhaps contributes to his desired primitive aesthetic.

This cross-section taken from Te Rerioa shows a complex paint layering system, probably indicating compositional revisions. The priming layer (1) is composed of chalk and animal glue, the second priming layer (2) is composed of chalk in a protein glue. The ground layer (3) is composed of chalk-glue ground.

This detail of Haystacks shows underdrawing of a farm animal, plow, and another figure. These underdrawings were initially drawn out in the final composition. (left) This infrared detail of Haystacks shows underdrawing of a farm animal, plow, and another figure. These underdrawings were initially drawn out in the final composition. (right) This detail of Haystacks underdrawing is a detail of a cow, plow, and figures. These were painted out in the final composition. (left)

Details of Haystacks underdrawing showing the presence of a different cowherd figure. (right)