Gauguin’s paradise is recreated in a Florida garden

Artist’s woodcuts and lithographs are on show among the tropical greenery of the Marie Selby Botanical Gardens

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A garden is integral to the very idea of paradise. The artist most readily associated with paradise on earth is Paul Gauguin, famous for his paintings on Tahiti and the remote Marquesa islands. Until June 30, the Marie Selby Botanical Gardens in Sarasota, Florida, is running a show called Gauguin: Voyage to Paradise.

Florida is still billed as “paradise” in brochures and the Selby garden has the world’s biggest collection of epiphytic orchids, the type which grows on other plants. Partly with their help, its tropical greenhouse evokes the paradise which Gauguin sought in the Pacific Ocean. A small art exhibition shows images of Tahiti as it was in the 1890s when Gauguin arrived by boat. As French colonialism and Christian missions were already well advanced, paradise, he found, was elusive.

The show’s treasures are 10 of his woodcuts and lithographs. He was a genius of the genre but on the Pacific islands, he had to work with simple self-made tools. These images deteriorate if exposed to full daylight. They are much less often seen than his paintings.
Gauguin’s career still resonates with male financiers in early middle age. He became a broker on the Paris exchange but gave up, aged 35, after the crash of 1882. He spent a few years trying to sell tarpaulins to the Norwegians. He then went off to impoverished Brittany to pursue his obsession, painting. He visited the island of Martinique. Aged 42, he left his wife and five children in Paris and decamped to Tahiti.

Between 1885 and his death in 1903, his paintings included scenes of Polynesian girls, often topless or naked. Many of them wear flowers behind one ear and are set against lush nature. They have become a battleground for indignant feminists and anti-colonialists. Others, like me, continue to marvel at their composition, their brilliant colours and their way of implying more than they make explicit. They often use flowers and trees as symbols.

In the Selby garden’s main greenhouse Mike McLaughlin, head of horticulture, and Angel Lara, maestro of orchids and tropical culture, have faced rather different problems. One has been how to conjure up a paradise for Gauguin when their collection already evokes it through tropical greenery and orchids.

Whereas many of Selby’s special orchids are epiphytic, Tahiti’s are terrestrial, growing at ground level. The gardeners have decided to use their collection’s strengths but to add features to evoke life on the Pacific islands. They have planted a circle of bromeliads with blazing red bracts to suggest the firepits Gauguin knew around Polynesian houses. On wires and tall bamboo sticks they have set Pacific coconuts, hollowed out to make homes for flowering orchids. Little canoes have been carved from single blocks of wood and filled with sub-tropical begonias and rich dendrobium orchids. There is also a musical setting. Gauguin admired the traditional Tahiti songs and in the 1960s a selection was performed and recorded. They accompany visitors through Selby’s indoor walk.

The most famous flowers in Gauguin’s paintings are hibiscus and scented *tiare*, the flower which is worn by girls on Tahiti. If they are single and unattached, they wear it behind their right ear; if not, behind their left. *Tiare* is Gardenia tahitensis, intensively cultivated on Pacific islands. In a tropical greenhouse, Lara realised, it would soon flag and attract mealy-bugs. Hibiscus is also unhappy indoors in heat, so both of Gauguin’s iconic flowers have been planted outdoors.

In one of them a grass hut has been recreated among white sand and palm-trees, and the sea beyond the hut smiles at the Ringling causeway. “The sun returns; the lofty coconut trees lift up their plumes again,” Gauguin wrote in his journal, “man does likewise . . . the sea smiles.” In Sarasota, the sea smiles towards the Ringling causeway bridge, built by John Ringling, the master-impresario of the circus. Circus elephants helped to build its first version.
The audience at the show’s opening was addressed by Gauguin’s great-granddaughter, Mette Gauguin. Herself a printmaker and a keen gardener, she descends from Gauguin’s marriage to his Danish wife. He then married three other young “wives” in the Pacific islands. Girls there were married at the age of 14, just as they once were in classical Athens, the admired parent of western civilisation. When Mette visited the Marquesa islands, she asked to meet descendants of Gauguin. She was greeted by a crowd of girls, the results of many post-Gauguin marriages at very young ages since 1903. She invited them to look around their kinswoman’s boat. Their main interest, she recalls, was its minibar, whose contents they promptly cleaned out.

In notes written on Tahiti, Gauguin contrasted the “amorous passion of the Maori courtesan” with the “passivity of a Parisian cocotte”. There is a “fire”, he wrote, in the blood of Polynesian girls. Nonetheless, he considered they spoke with love, not just with material calculation.

In paintings and woodcuts, he related them to biblical, Christian and even classical imagery. In a woodcut in the show he presents pagan Europa being abducted by a bull, the Greek god Zeus in disguise, while a peacock looks down, the classical symbol of Zeus’s jealous wife Hera. Significantly, a Polynesian girl stands beside the bull’s front. Gauguin drew ideas from printed images which accompanied him in books. Poses from Buddhist sculptures in Java and even from the Parthenon in Athens underlie poses adopted by his figures. Mette also stresses his interest in theosophy, the theory, fashionable in the 1880s, that all religions trace back to the same source. In the Pacific, Gauguin inter-related Christian angels, Buddhist poses and Polynesian figures.

Gauguin’s notes and journals do not endorse French colonialism or the superiority of western civilisation. He learnt Maori. He deplored Protestant “hypocrisy” and wrote a satirical magazine about French administrators. He credited Tahitians, though “savages”, with skills and understanding which westerners lacked. He struggled to survive on native food but he had to resort to French brandy. On flowers and gardens he also had a double range.

Long before he left for the Pacific, some of his earliest paintings had been of flowers, in an Impressionist style. On Tahiti he continued to paint flowers, aware that in Paris they were more likely to sell than puzzling Polynesian figures. When he learnt of the death of his daughter Aline, he commemorated her by painting a vase of Pacific flowers, not a scene of Polynesian myth. In October 1898, I have just found, he wrote to his close friend Daniel de Monfreid in Paris and asked for items for the “plantation” around his Polynesian house. He requested dahlias, nasturtiums and sunflowers, thinking they would survive the heat.

Was he a botanical imperialist, ignoring native flowers? Not really. He noticed that the islands had only a very few annuals. The flowers he requested were flowers beloved by artists in France, by Monet, Renoir and of course Van Gogh. They were also flowers he had painted memorably before leaving France. He told Monfreid: “I adore flowers.” How lucky for us. His flowers are not only
flowers on Tahiti which seemed to point to paradise lost. They are also flowers which travelled in his mind, from gardens and images in his own early life.

Robin Lane Fox travelled as a guest of Visit Sarasota County and the Selby Botanical Gardens

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