

ne of Gauguin's most important (and expensive) sculptures may not be quite what it seems. *Head with Horns*, which was acquired by the Getty Museum in 2002, is a

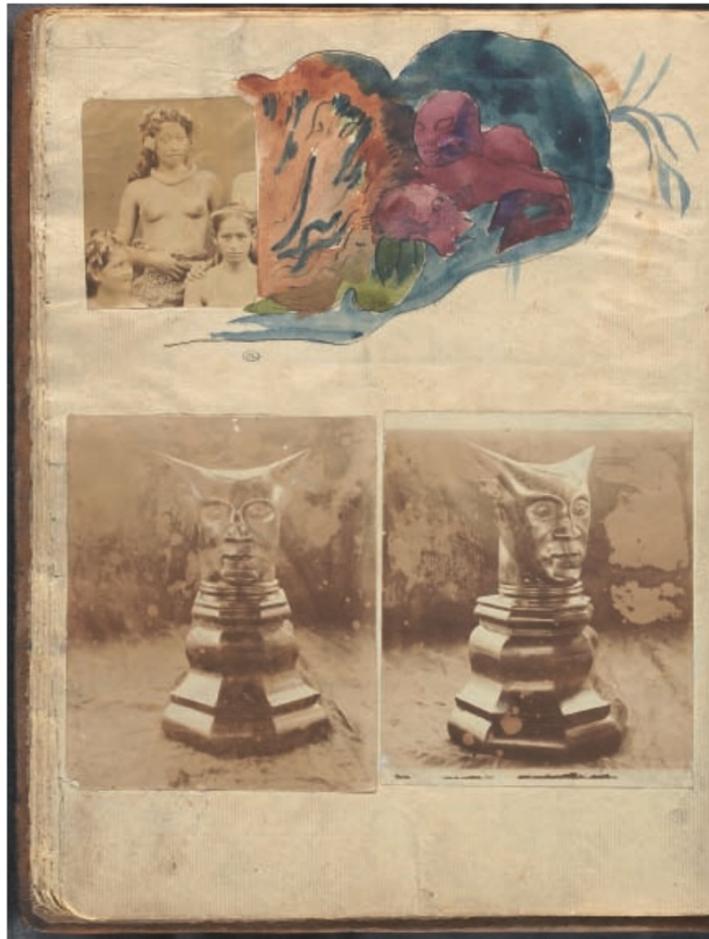
mysterious work, which reappeared after it had been missing for a century (Figs. 2 and 4). However, a photograph from the French colonial archives reveals that this wooden sculpture was once regarded as having been made by a Polynesian craftsman.

Head with Horns was first exhibited in 1997, when it was unveiled at the Fondation Maeght in Saint-Paul, on loan from a private collection.¹ The sculpture had long been known about, since two photographs of it were glued into the illustrated version of Gauguin's Tahitian album *Noa Noa*, which was completed in the late 1890s (Fig. 1).² However, until its recent re-emergence the actual sculpture had never been seen, and was assumed to have been lost during Gauguin's lifetime.

In 1998 *Head with Horns* was lent to the Gauguin exhibition at the Fondation Pierre Gianadda in Martigny.³ Its third presentation was at the Metropolitan Museum, in a show of Gauguin works from New York collections that opened on 18 June 2002.⁴ Just nine days later it was formally announced that the Getty Museum had privately purchased *Head with Horns*. Although the price was not disclosed, it was reported to have been over \$3m, a record for a Gauguin sculpture.⁵ The Getty has not named the previous owner, but we understand that it was Wildenstein, the gallery whose family foundation publishes the *catalogue raisonné* of Gauguin's paintings. Wildenstein is believed to have acquired the sculpture in Switzerland after World War II.

The Getty dates *Head with Horns* to 1895-97, during the early years of Gauguin's second stay in Polynesia. In announcing the acquisition, the museum suggested that that it 'may be a symbolic self-portrait, as the sculpture suggests Gauguin's own features, possibly mixed with the attributes of Tahitian natives.'⁶

The attribution of *Head with Horns* has not been seriously discussed in print, but since its rediscovery two illustrations have emerged that raise questions. The first, dating from 1899, is in a booklet by Jules Agostini, *L'Océanie française: Les Iles sous le Vent*. On the last page, there is an engraving of *Head with Horns*, with the caption 'Idole des Iles sous le Vent' (Les Iles sous le Vent, or Leeward Islands, comprise the part of French Polynesia lying to the west of Tahiti).⁷ The engraving (Fig. 7) is clearly based on the left-hand



The works illustrating this article are by Paul Gauguin (1848-1903), unless stated otherwise.

¹ *Noa Noa*, fol. 30v. Late 1890s. 31 x 24 cm. The two photographs of *Head with Horns* that Gauguin pasted into this album made in Tahiti were the only widely known record of the sculpture before its reappearance in 1997. Musée du Louvre, Paris

² *Head with Horns*: a detail of Figure 4

photograph in *Noa Noa*, which depicts the sculpture straight on.⁸

Gauguin first stayed in Tahiti from 1891 to 1893, before returning to France for two years. He arrived back in Tahiti's capital, Papeete, on 9 September 1895, and met Agostini, who was head of public works, very shortly afterwards. They both sailed on *L'Aube* on 26 September, for a voyage to Huahine, Bora Bora and Raiatea-Tahaa (Iles sous le Vent), on a French government mission to reestablish colonial control. Gauguin was invited and presumably curious to see the outlying islands. The voyage took only a few days and *L'Aube* returned to Papeete in early October.

Gauguin and Agostini remained friends. In November 1895 Gauguin moved to the village of Punaauia, eight miles south of Papeete. Agostini later took a photograph of the exterior of Gauguin's wooden house, built in June 1897.⁹ Agostini finally left Tahiti in January 1898.

It is difficult to see how Agostini could have miscaptioned the image of *Head with Horns* in his 1899 booklet. He was a friend of Gauguin, and would

IDOL OF THE ISLANDS

In 2002 the J. Paul Getty Museum bought an extraordinary sculpture by Gauguin that had been lost for over a century. **Martin Bailey** investigates the many mysteries surrounding this wooden horned head. The greatest puzzle of all is whether it really is by Gauguin.

