



The Mango Trees, Martinique, 1887

Works Collected by Theo and Vincent van Gogh

The Mango Trees, Martinique

Paul Gauguin

The Mango Trees, Martinique is the most ambitious work that Gauguin produced during his campaign on the Caribbean island of Martinique. He stayed from mid-June until the end of October 1887 in this French colony, where he had gone in search of new, 'exotic' motifs and a 'primitive' way of life. As far as we know, he made seventeen paintings there. ⁰¹ For *The Mango Trees, Martinique*, which is among the three largest paintings that Gauguin made in Martinique, he used the standard-size 50 *figure* canvas. ⁰² Of these three works, however, this is the only one with large, elaborate figures; indeed, one of the spearheads of Gauguin's Caribbean campaign was the production of an 'exotic' figure painting. In the months before his departure he had already painted several large figure pieces, including *Breton Shepherdesses* (1886, Neue Pinakothek, Munich) and *Two Women Bathing* (1887, Museo Nacional de Bellas Arts, Buenos Aires); in Martinique he continued in this direction with *The Mango Trees, Martinique*.

The *porteuse*

Shortly after his arrival in Martinique, Gauguin wrote a letter to Emile Schuffenecker (1851–1934) in which he expressed his enthusiasm for the Martinican people, particularly the female portion of the population, as a motif for his art: ‘What delights me the most are the figures, and every day there is a constant coming and going of black women, dressed up in coloured clothes, with graceful movements of infinite variety. [...] While carrying heavy loads on their heads, they chat incessantly. Their gestures are very distinctive, and the hands play a great role in harmony with the swaying of the hips.’⁰³ Gauguin was describing the *porteuses*, the women who carried produce on their heads, day in and day out, from the plantations to the markets in the nearby harbour town of Saint-Pierre.⁰⁴ The topos of the Black *porteuse* as a symbol of Martinican culture had appealed to the Western imagination since the eighteenth century. In the representation of Martinique in paintings, prints, photographs and travel accounts, the *porteuse* invariably plays a central role.⁰⁵ So, too, in Gauguin’s figure painting: the most prominent figure in the composition is a *porteuse*, seen from the back.

Studies and other examples

Gauguin's strategy for tackling his 'exotic' figure piece was to begin by making numerous sketches of the porteuses he saw coming and going every day on the footpaths of Martinique. After that, his plan was to 'make them pose' for larger, more detailed drawings.⁰⁶ In Martinique, Gauguin produced three such drawings from a model. He used *Martinican Women* (fig. 1), the largest and most elaborate of the three, for *The Mango Trees, Martinique*.⁰⁷ The figures on this large sheet were drawn in unerring, thick black contour lines, followed by subtle and meticulous colouring-in with pastel chalk. Gauguin then applied squaring lines to the sheet to enable the systematic transfer of the figures to the canvas. The sitting figure was transferred one-to-one; the porteuse is approximately one and a half times larger. Research into the material and technique has thus far been unable to show that a grid was applied to the canvas, but this does not mean that no squaring was used.⁰⁸



Paul Gauguin, *Martinican Women*, 1887, pencil, black and coloured chalk on paper, 49 × 63.5 cm, private collection

Other elements of the composition were also derived from studies. The goat at left, for example, is based on a drawing from the so-called 'white sketchbook' (fig. 2), one of the three sketchbooks that Gauguin had with him in Martinique.⁰⁹ The dog and the cats were likewise based on examples from this sketchbook (fig. 3 and fig. 4).¹⁰ *The Mango Trees, Martinique* also contains elements from canvases Gauguin had previously painted in Martinique. The slender tree at right, for instance, was taken from *Martinique Landscape* (1887, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen Munich - Neue Pinakothek, Munich), and the fruit-bearing papaya tree at left is loosely based on the specimen in *Martinique Landscape* (1887, National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh).

Material and technique

Gauguin cut the canvas from a large roll of ungrounded canvas that he had taken with him to Martinique.¹¹ He mounted it on the spot, on a stretcher of the standard format, size 50 *figure*. Standard-size stretchers could be purchased in Paris at shops selling artists' supplies. Gauguin must have taken various sets with him to Martinique, because other paintings from the series also display standard formats. After mounting the canvas, Gauguin applied a very thin ground layer of animal glue and chalk. Such a ground dried quickly and was absorbent, which caused the oil paint to dry with a matte finish.¹² On this ground layer, Gauguin transferred his figures from the large study sheet in clear lines of diluted blue paint. He also drew in other elements of the composition, such as the two figures in the background, the tree trunks and the dog at lower right. In this first phase, moreover, Gauguin already broadly indicated the areas of colour with a thin layer of diluted paint, thus laying in the orange in the foreground, the green of the grass and the dark green of the foliage.¹³ This underlayer can be seen fairly well with the naked eye. The colour of this layer is less saturated than the brushstrokes that Gauguin applied over it.

In general Gauguin applied his paint in parallel hatched strokes, with the direction of the strokes differing in each part of the composition. The seawater in the background, for example, is painted in horizontal brushstrokes, the foliage is diagonal and the grass vertical. Gauguin also integrated some diagonal strokes into this grass, which makes the rendering somewhat more dynamic. Applying paint in evenly spaced brushstrokes is a device that Gauguin probably borrowed from Paul Cézanne (1839-1906), by whom he owned six paintings.¹⁴ In 1884, Gauguin, following the example he saw in the paintings by Cézanne in his collection, began to employ parallel hatched brushstrokes.¹⁵ From 1885, his hatching displayed ever finer brushstrokes, which resulted in the style seen in *The Mango Trees, Martinique*.¹⁶

When applying the uppermost layer of paint, Gauguin partly covered the blue lines of the underdrawing. He generally left some of these lines visible in the finished painting, so that the various parts of the composition retained obvious contour lines. The arm and the waist of the sitting figure clearly show how solidly laid in these lines initially were.

Cézanne, Pissarro and Degas

The clear division of the landscape of *The Mango Trees, Martinique* into three horizontal zones also ties this work to Cézanne, one of Gauguin's most important sources of inspiration at this stage in his career. The painting *The Chateau of Médan* (c. 1880, The Burrell Collection, Glasgow Museums), which Gauguin had in his possession from at least 1883, must have provided an important example in this regard.¹⁷ The simple horizontal bands of which this work consists became a compositional model to which Gauguin often reverted. In a picture in which the figures feature prominently, this division provides a clearly defined compositional framework that does not distract from the main points of interest.

While Gauguin's work is related to Cézanne's as far as composition and brushwork are concerned, it was Camille Pissarro (1830–1903) and Edgar Degas (1834–1917) whose work informed the rendering of his figures. Gauguin saw many compositions by Pissarro that featured large figures in a landscape, which must have stimulated him to follow suit. His own collection boasted Pissarro's *Peasant Women Chatting* (c. 1881, private collection, Switzerland), for instance. Nevertheless, both the poses of the two models in *The Mango Trees, Martinique* and the viewpoint bear a closer resemblance to the work of Degas, whom Gauguin saw frequently in 1886.¹⁸ That year he also saw Degas's sensational series of ten nudes at the eighth and final Impressionist exhibition. The various poses of Degas's models and the unusual perspectives he chose must have inspired Gauguin to make similar studies, first in Pont-Aven and subsequently in Martinique.¹⁹ In both locations he drew, in the manner of Degas, women seen from the back, in all kinds of seated poses. In contrast to Degas, however, Gauguin drew few nudes and was more interested in the local dress, which was a way of tying his work to the location and enriching it with *couleur locale*. After all, he sought out destinations with a supposedly 'primitive character' and wanted this to be reflected in his figures' costumes.²⁰

Gauguin thus spent a great deal of time studying the clothing of the *porteuses* and the fruit-pickers in preparation for his painting *The Mango Trees, Martinique*. The two large figures in the foreground and the stooping woman behind them all wear a *douillette*, a wide, simple dress worn by many Black Martinican women.²¹ A belt or cloth served to hold the dress up, keeping the feet free. The women in the painting also wear headdresses of brightly coloured Madras fabric.²² The rearmost figure wears, over her headdress, a *bakoua*, a traditional Martinican sun hat made of the dried leaves of the bakoua tree. The *porteuse* seen from the back wears, moreover, a colourful silk scarf, which was often worn around the shoulders. This detail is not present in the study; Gauguin added it in the painting.

Gauguin's Martinique

The fact that the figures in *The Mango Trees, Martinique* are based on carefully made preparatory studies means that they were not painted *in situ*. Just where the models did pose is unclear, though it was probably by the hut where Gauguin lived.²³ After drawing the models, Gauguin integrated them into his methodically devised scene. Around the figures Gauguin grouped the vegetation in a very clear-cut, almost static arrangement. This *mise-en-scène*, in which the compositional elements seem to be pasted onto the landscape in the manner of a collage, recalls *A Sunday on La Grande Jatte* by Georges Seurat (1859–1891) (1884–86, Art Institute of Chicago) or *The Sacred Grove, Beloved of the Arts and the Muses* by Pierre Puvis de Chavannes (1824–1898) (1884, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lyon).

The practical, well-ordered construction of the picture indicates that it was painted from the imagination.²⁴ Gauguin himself was very satisfied with the result; near the end of his campaign in Martinique he wrote to Schuffenecker: 'I've never painted so clearly and so lucidly (a lot of imagination, for example).'²⁵ By 'imagination' Gauguin was referring to the painting of scenes that had not been observed in reality but which had been constructed – as he had constructed *The Mango Trees, Martinique* – by combining imagined elements with motifs taken from studies, sketches and his own previous paintings. The fantasy world that Gauguin thus created was that of a fertile, tropical paradise.²⁶

Gauguin studied the women with an analytical gaze before incorporating them into the 'tropical paradise' of *The Mango Trees, Martinique*. Their identity thus changed from Martinican women posing to 'exotic sirenes' who imagined themselves to be in a 'tropical Eden'.²⁷ The women were thereby situated in a context that reflected the Western, exoticist view of the Caribbean colonies. Gauguin's choice of fruit-picking as the subject of the painting makes the message even more explicit. The association with the Garden of Eden is unmistakable, and Martinique is thus presented as an unspoilt paradise.

Gauguin's painting makes us feel as though we are witnessing everyday activities in Martinique. The relative inaccessibility of the women in the foreground – one stands with her back to the viewer, the other looks dreamily into the distance while eating a mango – gives the scene a voyeuristic touch. In creating this picture, Gauguin ignored the real-life status of the women who posed for him. After all, *porteuses* were the descendants of the enslaved African population of Martinique: though free since 1848, their structural underpayment kept them dependent on the plantation owners and they enjoyed little real freedom. They belonged to Martinique's lowest social class and had few rights. Gauguin omitted these aspects in favour of an inviting, picturesque image of Martinique. Although dedicated to a modern style of painting, Gauguin was well aware that such portrayals of the colonies were in great demand on the Paris art market, and he wanted to return with colourful, 'exotic' and marketable canvases.²⁸

The sale

Gauguin returned to Paris on 14 November 1887 and soon afterwards succeeded in selling *The Mango Trees, Martinique* to Theo van Gogh, who paid 400 francs for the canvas.²⁹ It was one of Theo's most expensive acquisitions ever.³⁰ The transaction possibly came about during a visit by the Van Gogh brothers to Gauguin, who was then staying in Schuffenecker's apartment.³¹ Perhaps Gauguin showed them some of his Martinique canvases, from which the brothers chose the most ambitious, or Gauguin might have praised it himself as the most successful work of the campaign. But however it happened, on 4 January 1888, Gauguin sent Theo a note confirming receipt of 400 francs for the painting.³²

Before parting with the painting, however, Gauguin made several rapid sketches of the figures, not only of the woman sitting in the foreground – of whom he already had a large study – but also of the women in the background (fig. 5).³³ Gauguin often made sketches of works he sold or otherwise parted with, so that he could reuse the motifs later on. For example, after the Impressionist exhibition in 1886, he hastened to make a sketch of his sculpture *La toilette*, which was the property of Pissarro and would go back to Pontoise after the exhibition.³⁴ Gauguin also decorated a fan with the motif of the sitting Martinican woman eating a mango (fig. 6). For this design he did not use the sketch after his painting; instead, he based it on his large study sheet, where the figure displays exactly the same details, right down to the shadows and the shape of the mango. These details were not included in the sketch after the painting.



Paul Gauguin, *Scene of Martinique*, 1887, pencil, black chalk, gouache, watercolour and pastel on paper, 12 × 42 cm, The National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo. Photo: NMWA/ DNPartcom

It was a smart move on the part of Gauguin to form a bond with Theo and Vincent van Gogh by selling them *The Mango Trees, Martinique*. Theo, a dealer with an eye for avant-garde art, was charmed by Gauguin's Martinican work, and after this transaction he acted as his dealer. Although the market for Gauguin's work was still very limited, Theo did what he could for him.³⁵ In December 1887, for example, he exhibited work by Gauguin at Boussod, Valadon & Cie, including a painting from the Martinican series.³⁶ Theo did this again in April 1888, and afterwards he continued to be of great value to Gauguin.³⁷ Both exhibitions at Boussod's garnered words of praise from the critic Félix Fénéon.³⁸

The further life of *The Mango Trees, Martinique*

After Theo had acquired *The Mango Trees, Martinique*, Vincent had two months to enjoy the painting before leaving for Arles. In this period he studied the work carefully, and he subsequently wrote about the painting often in his letters, such as this one to Emile Bernard: 'Ah, you do darned well to think of Gauguin - they're high poetry, his negresses - and everything his hand makes has a sweet, heart-rending, astonishing character.'

³⁹ Van Gogh and Bernard had admired the painting together in Theo's apartment, where it hung above the sofa; both men knew it well. ⁴⁰ Bernard later wrote, in 1904, that the work 'may be the best that Gauguin painted at that time'. ⁴¹

In a letter to his sister Willemien, Van Gogh compared the painting to the Pierre Loti's exoticist novel *Le mariage de Loti*. ⁴² This connection shows that the 'exotic', 'paradisaical' overtones of *The Mango Trees, Martinique* had not escaped Van Gogh's notice. Loti's writings were an expression of the same romantic colonial fantasy as the pictorial culture to which Gauguin subscribed with his representations of Martinique. Van Gogh was gripped by that book, which he read just after the purchase of *The Mango Trees, Martinique*. ⁴³ After finishing it, he could well 'imagine that a painter of today might make something like one finds described in the book by Pierre Loti, *Le mariage de Loti*' ⁴⁴. Gauguin's painting and Loti's book had aroused Van Gogh's interest in 'exotic' art and literature. Later in 1888, when Gauguin was with him in Arles, the two men talked a lot about Martinique, and Van Gogh declared that the art of the future would have 'the tropics as its homeland'. ⁴⁵

That Gauguin himself was satisfied with the work is apparent from the fact that he selected it for two exhibitions in 1889: the VI^{me} Exposition des XX in Brussels and the Exposition de Peintures du Groupe Impressionniste et Synthétiste, better known as the Volpini Exhibition, held just outside the grounds of the Exposition Universelle in Paris. In Brussels, *The Mango Trees, Martinique* was one of two Martinican works among a total of twelve paintings by Gauguin; in Paris it was the only one in the selection of fourteen paintings. Gauguin's efforts to assume the image of a 'wild' and 'primitive' artist must have played a part in the selection of this 'exotic' work. No less important was the fact that *The Mango Trees, Martinique* was the property of Theo van Gogh, which meant that the catalogue would show, in the provenance listing, that Gauguin's work had already been bought by a collector. ⁴⁷ In the catalogue of Les XX, the painting was called *Aux Mangos (Tropiques)* and in the Volpini catalogue *Les Mangos - Martinique*. ⁴⁸ The present title of the work is based on these two early catalogues. ⁴⁹

The reviews of Les XX took little notice of the paintings submitted by Gauguin; not once was *The Mango Trees, Martinique* commented upon individually. The progressive critics were very enthusiastic about the neo-impressionist work of Seurat and Pissarro but paid little heed to Gauguin's paintings. ⁵⁰ Still, the painting can be seen in a satirical print ridiculing the work of the Vingtists (fig. 7) . ⁵¹ After the Volpini Exhibition, the critics were more positive about Gauguin's work, and *The Mango Trees, Martinique* was referred to by name in reviews. For instance, Jules Antoine wrote that Gauguin 'already enjoys a certain reputation, which I find deserved, with mild reservations. It is certain that *Dancing a Round in the Hay [...]* *The Mangoes - Martinique*, etc. are the works of a painter.' ⁵² Felix Fénéon observed that 'for him [Gauguin] reality was no more than a pretext for exotic creation; he reorganizes the material with which it provides him'. ⁵³ Fénéon could not have given a more accurate description of the artistic process that led Gauguin to create *The Mango Trees, Martinique* and other, later works that were shown at the Volpini Exhibition.

The Mango Trees, Martinique retained its value for Gauguin. In 1894, when he was in France between his two Tahitian campaigns, he even tried to get the work back from Jo van Gogh-Bonger. Jo and her son Vincent Willem had inherited the painting after Theo's tragically early death in 1891. Gauguin possibly hoped to profit from the knowledge that had died with Theo, for he now wanted to ask 1,500 francs for the painting, a considerably higher price than the 400 francs for which he had sold it to Theo. ⁵⁴ Jo, however, would not dream of parting with the painting. She, too, recognized its artistic value, and just as her late husband had done, she had it hanging above the sofa (fig. 8) .

Joost van der Hoeven
March 2023



Interior of Jo van Gogh-
Bonger's house at
Koninginneweg 77, 1905, Van
Gogh Museum, Amsterdam
(Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

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Object details

The Mango Trees, Martinique

Artist

Paul Gauguin (1848 - 1903)

Location

Martinique

Date

1887

Medium

oil on canvas

Dimensions

86 cm x 116 cm

Inscriptions

P Gauguin 87

Inventory Number

s0221V1962

Credits

Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)



The Mango Trees, Martinique

Front & Back The Mango Trees, Martinique by Paul Gauguin



Provenance

The Mango Trees, Martinique

Sold by the artist, Paris to Theo van Gogh, Paris for FRF 400, 4 January 1888; after his death on 25 January 1891, inherited by his widow, Jo van Gogh-Bonger, and their son, Vincent Willem van Gogh, Paris; administered until her death on 2 September 1925 by Jo van Gogh-Bonger, Bussum/Amsterdam/Laren; transferred by Vincent Willem van Gogh, Laren, to the Vincent van Gogh Foundation, Amsterdam, 10 July 1962; agreement concluded between the Vincent van Gogh Foundation and the State of the Netherlands, in which the preservation and management of the collection, and its placing in the Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh, to be realized in Amsterdam, is entrusted to the State, 21 July 1962; on permanent loan to the Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh from the opening of the museum on 2 June 1973, and at the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam, since 1 July 1994.



Exhibitions

The Mango Trees, Martinique

Brussels, Musée de Peinture, *VI^{me} exposition des XX*, 2 February-3 March 1889, no. 1, *Aux Mangos (Tropiques)*

Paris, Café Volpini, *Exposition de peintures du groupe impressionniste et synthétiste*, May 1889-[enddate unknown]1889, no. 32, *Les Mangos - Martinique*

Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, *Moderne Kunst Kring: Ouvrages de peinture, sculpture, dessin, gravure: exposée au Musée Municipal Suasso*, 6 October-7 November 1912, no. 14, *Les négresses*

Antwerp, Feestzaal Meir, *L'art contemporain*, 29 April-28 May 1922, no. 270, *De negerinnen (Martinique) / Les négresses (Martinique)*

London, Leicester Galleries, *An exhibition of works by Paul Gauguin (1848-1903)*, July 1924-[unknown], no. 60, *Les Négresses (Martinique)*

Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, *Exposition rétrospective d'art français*, 3 July-30 September 1926, no. 58, *A Tahiti*

Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, *Vincent van Gogh en zijn tijdgenooten*, 6 September-2 November 1930, no. 154, *Vruchtenpluk op Martinique*

Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, *De verzameling van Theo van Gogh : met uitzondering van de werken van zijn broer Vincent*, 31 March-11 May 1953, no. 28, *Vruchtenpluk op Martinique*

The Hague, Gemeentemuseum Den Haag, *De verzameling van Theo van Gogh : met uitzondering van de werken van zijn broer Vincent*, 11 June-2 August 1953, no. 28, *Vruchtenpluk op Martinique*

Otterlo, Kröller-Müller Museum, *De verzameling van Theo van Gogh : met uitzondering van de werken van zijn broer Vincent*, 5 September-15 November 1953, no. 28, *Vruchtenpluk op Martinique*

Antwerp, Zaal Comité voor Artistieke Werking, *Vincent van Gogh*, 7 May-19 June 1955, no. 385, *Vruchtenpluk op Martinique*

Edinburgh, Royal Scottish Academy, *Paul Gauguin : paintings, sculpture and engravings*, 30 September-26 October 1955, no. 17, *Fruit Pickers : Martinique*

London, Tate Gallery, *Paul Gauguin : paintings, sculpture and engravings*, 30 September-26 October 1955, no. 17, *Fruit Pickers : Martinique*

Palm Beach (Florida), Society of the Four Arts, *Paul Gauguin 1848-1903*, 4 February-4 March 1956, no. 5, *Fruit Pickers, Martinique*

Coral Gables, Lowe Gallery of the University of Miami, *Paul Gauguin, 1848-1903*, 8-28 March 1956, no. 4, *Fruit Pickers, Martinique*

New York, Wildenstein & Company, *Loan exhibition, Gauguin: for the benefit of the Citizen's Committee for Children of New York City*, 5 April-5 May 1956, no. 7, *Fruit Pickers*

Mons, Museum voor Schoone Kunsten, *Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890). Son art et ses amis*, 22 March-5 May 1958, no. 89, *la cueillette*

Amsterdam, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, *Collectie Theo van Gogh*, 29 January-29 February 1960, no. 45, *Vruchtenpluk op Martinique*

Otterlo, Kröller-Müller Museum, *Collectie Theo van Gogh*, 12 March-29 May 1960, no. 45, *Vruchtenpluk op Martinique*

Ostend, Musée des beaux-arts (Oostende), *Europa 1900*, 3 June-30 September 1967, no. 36, *Plukken van de vruchten in La Martinique*

Amsterdam, Museum Fodor, October-December 1969

Stockholm, Nationalmuseum (Stockholm), *Gauguin i Söderhavet*, 5 March-10 May 1970, no. 4, *Mangoskörd*

Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario, *Vincent van Gogh and the Birth of Cloisonism*, 24 January-22 March 1981, no. 46, *Among the Mangoes: Martinique*

Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh, *Van Gogh en zijn Franse vrienden. Het cloisonisme als stijl 1886-1891*, 9 April-14 June 1981, no. 46, *Among the Mangoes: Martinique*

Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *Theo van Gogh 1857-1891. Kunsthandelaar, verzamelaar en broer van Vincent*, 24 June-5 September 1999, no. 176, *Onder de mango-bomen op Martinique*

Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *Van Gogh en Gauguin. Het atelier van het zuiden*, 9 February-2 June 2002, no. 11, *Les Négresses (Onder de mango's) (Aux Mangos [Tropiques])*

New York, The Morgan Library & Museum, *Painted with Words: Vincent van Gogh's letters to Emile Bernard*, 28 September 2007-6 January 2008, no. 18, *Among the Mangoes*

Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *Van Goghs brieven. De kunstenaar aan het woord*, 9 October 2009-3 January 2010

Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *Paul Gauguin. De doorbraak naar moderniteit*, 19 February-6 June 2010, no. 38, *Onder de Mangobomen op Martinique (La Cueillette des Fruits of Les Mangos)*

Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *Van Gogh aan het werk*, 1 May 2013-13 January 2014

Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *Munch : Van Gogh, 24*, September 2015-17 January 2016, no. 78, *De mangobomen, Martinique*

Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *Gauguin en Laval op Martinique*, 5 October 2018-13 January 2019, no. 67, *De mangobomen, Martinique*

Amsterdam, Van Gogh Museum, *Kiezen voor Vincent. Portret van een familiegeschiedenis*, 10 February-10 April 2023



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- Anonymous, *Exposition rétrospective d'art français*, exh. cat., Amsterdam (Rijksmuseum) 1926, no. 58, p. 44; BVG19061

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Letters

The Mango Trees, Martinique

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- Paul Gauguin, letter to his wife Mette Gauguin, Paris, first week of January 1888, in Victor Merlhès (ed.), *Correspondance de Paul Gauguin: documents, témoignages: tome premier, 1873-1888*, Paris 1984, no. 138, p. 168; BVG06121
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- Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh, Arles, 31 July 1888, [↗ 652](#)
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- Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh, Arles, 4 or 5 October 1888, [↗ 697](#)
- Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh, Arles, 8 October 1888, [↗ 699](#)
- Vincent van Gogh, letter to Theo van Gogh, Arles, 10 November 1888, [↗ 718](#)
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- Paul Gauguin, letter to Claude-Emile Schuffenecker, Arles, December 1888, in Maurice Malingue (ed.), *Paul Gauguin: lettres à sa femme et ses amis*, Paris 2003, no. LXXVII, p. 172; BVG17801

Figures



Fig. 1

Paul Gauguin, *Martinican Women*, 1887, pencil, black and coloured chalk on paper, 49 × 63.5 cm, private collection



Fig. 2

Paul Gauguin, detail of *Two Sketches of Goats*, 1887, black chalk on paper, approx. 16 × 12 cm, private collection

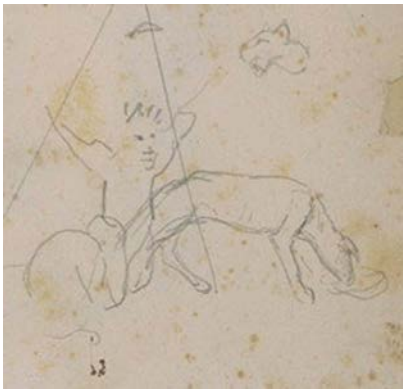


Fig. 3

Paul Gauguin, *Sketches of Animals and a Figure with Raised Arms*, 1887, black chalk on paper, 18.6 × 13.8 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris. Photo: (C) RMN-Grand Palais (musée d'Orsay) / Stéphane Maréchalle



Fig. 4
Paul Gauguin, *Various Sketches of Pigs, Cats and a Hatted Man*, 1887, pencil on paper, 18.9 × 14.6 cm, Collection Dr Axel and Georgia Franz, Germany



Fig. 5
Paul Gauguin, *Sketch of a Sitting Martinican Woman; Head Reworked; Two Martinican Women*, 1887, black chalk on paper, 34.5 × 23 cm, musée d'Orsay, Paris. Photo: (C) RMN-Grand Palais (musée d'Orsay) / Adrien Didierjean

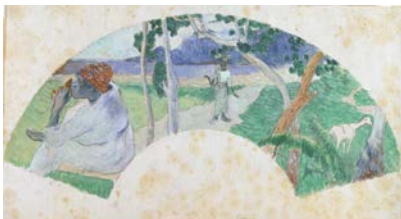


Fig. 6

Paul Gauguin, *Scene of Martinique*, 1887, pencil, black chalk, gouache, watercolour and pastel on paper, 12 × 42 cm, The National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo. Photo: NMWA/ DNPartcom



Fig. 7

'L'art décadent à l'exposition des XX', satirical print in *Le Patriote illustré*, 10 March 1889, Bibliothèque royale, Brussels. *The Mango Trees, Martinique* is reproduced at an angle near the lower right-hand corner.



Fig. 8

Interior of Jo van Gogh-Bonger's house at Koninginneweg 77, 1905, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation)

Footnotes

- 01 Daniel Wildenstein, Sylvie Crussard and Martine Heudron, *Gauguin: premier itinéraire d'un sauvage: catalogue de l'œuvre peint (1873-1888)*, Milan 2001. (Hereafter Crussard 2001) Sixteen Martinican paintings are included in this catalogue raisonné. Since then, one painting has been added: *Path under the Palms* (1887). See Sotheby's New York, *Impressionist and Modern Art Evening Sale*, 14 May 2019, lot 18.
- 02 The other works in this format are *Martinique Landscape* (1887, Bayerische Staatsgemäldesammlungen Munich - Neue Pinakothek, Munich) and *Martinique Landscape* (1887, National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh).
- 03 Paul Gauguin, letter to Emile Schuffenecker, beginning of July 1887, in Victor Merlhès (ed.), *Correspondance de Paul Gauguin: documents, témoignages: tome premier, 1873-1888*, Paris 1984, no. 129: 'Ce qui me sourit le plus ce sont les figures et chaque jour c'est un va et vient continuel de négresses accoutrées d'oripeaux de couleur avec des mouvements gracieux varies à l'infini. [...] Tout en portant de lourdes charges sur la tête elles bavardent sans cesse; leurs gestes sont très particuliers et les mains jouent un très grand rôle en harmonie avec le balancement des hanches.'
- 04 Joost van der Hoeven, 'Martinique Experienced', in Maite van Dijk and Joost van der Hoeven (eds.), *Gauguin and Laval in Martinique*, exh. cat., Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum), Bussum 2018, pp. 64-72.
- 05 Rémi Poindexter, 'Images of Martinique in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries', in Joost van der Hoeven and Maite van Dijk (eds.), *Van Gogh Museum Studies 3: Gauguin and Laval in Martinique*, forthcoming.
- 06 Paul Gauguin, letter to Emile, beginning of July 1887, in Merlhès 1984, no. 129: 'At the moment I'm limiting myself to making sketch after sketch, in order to absorb their character, and then I will make them pose.' ('Actuellement je me borne à faire croquis sur croquis afin de me pénétrer de leur caractère et ensuite je les ferai poser.')
- 07 The other two drawings are *Study of a Martinican Woman*, and *Study of Martinican Women* (1887, private collection, Switzerland, see Van Dijk and Van der Hoeven 2018, p. 106).
- 08 Squaring lines cannot be discerned with either the naked eye, the stereomicroscope or infrared reflectography (IRR). A grid could have been applied so thinly or sparsely that it is barely visible under the other paint layers. It is also possible that, during the painting process, the artist - whether intentionally or not - brushed it away or blended it into subsequent paint layers. Moreover, squaring lines could have been applied in a non-carbonaceous drawing material, which does not show up in IRR. With thanks to René Boitelle, paintings conservator Van Gogh Museum, April 2022.
- 09 Sylvie Crussard and Joost van der Hoeven, 'A Tale of Three Sketchbooks: The Early Provenance of Gauguin's Martinican Sketchbooks', in Van der Hoeven and Van Dijk (eds.), forthcoming.
- 10 See Sylvie Crussard, 'The Martinican Sketchbooks of Gauguin', in Van Dijk and Van der Hoeven 2018, pp. 121-22. Gauguin depicted the dog in reverse, but this was not unusual for him. See the text box on p. 343 in Crussard 2001.
- 11 René Boitelle, Renate Poggendorf and Lesley Stevenson, "'A Decisive Experience": A Technical Examination of Martinique Paintings by Paul Gauguin and Charles Laval', in Van der Hoeven and Van Dijk (eds.), forthcoming.

- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Merette Bodelsen, 'Gauguin, the Collector', *The Burlington Magazine* 112 (1970), pp. 605-06.
- 15 In the summer of that year, Gauguin had seen, at Julien Tanguy's art supplies shop in Paris, four works that Cézanne had made at Pontoise, and wrote about them to Camille Pissarro in a letter of c. 11 July: 'At Tanguy's I saw four very elaborate Cézannes from Pontoise; here you have marvels of an essentially pure art that one never tires of looking at' ('j'ai vu chez Tanguy quatre Cézanne [*sic*] très travaillés de Pontoise; voilà des merveilles d'un art essentiellement pur et qu'on ne se lasse pas de regarder'). In Merlhès 1984, no. 49. Cézanne's Pontoise paintings, which are now known to have been in the possession of Tanguy, are all painted in very pronounced, hatched brushstrokes. After the summer of 1884, Gauguin began to work more and more in this style.
- 16 Joost van der Hoeven, 'Avant et pendant: Gauguin's artistic development before and during Martinique', in Van der Hoeven and Van Dijk (eds.), forthcoming.
- 17 See Walter Feilchenfeldt, Jayne Warman and David Nash, *The Paintings, Watercolors and Drawings of Paul Cézanne: An Online Catalogue Raisonné* 2020, FWN 149.
- 18 Camille Pissarro, letter to Lucien Pissarro, 30 November 1886, in Janine Bailly-Herzberg (ed.), *Correspondance de Camille Pissarro*, 5 vols., Paris 1980-91, vol. 2: 1886-1890 (1986), no. 360: 'Gauguin has again become very close to Degas and goes to see him often' ('Gauguin est redevenu très intime de Degas et va le voir souvent').
- 19 Van der Hoeven, 'Avant et pendant', in Van der Hoeven and Van Dijk (eds.), forthcoming.
- 20 This emerges from something Gauguin said in late February or early March 1888 in a letter to Emile Schuffenecker: 'I love Brittany, there I find the wild, the primitive. When my clogs resonate on this granite ground, I hear the dull sound, matte and strong, that I seek in painting' ('J'aime la Bretagne, j'y trouve le sauvage, le primitif. Quand mes sabots résonnent sur ce sol de granit, j'entends le ton sourd, mat et puissant que je cherche en peinture'). In Merlhès 1984, no. 141.
- 21 In the time of slavery, enslaved Black people were not allowed to wear the same clothing as the white European colonists. The Black population thus developed their own, characteristic costumes, to which the *douillette* belonged. See Lyne-Rose Beuze, *Costumes créoles: mode et vêtements traditionnels des Antilles françaises de 1635 à 1948*, Fort-de-France 1999, pp. 45-55.
- 22 Lafcadio Hearn, *Two Years in the French West Indies*, New York 1890, pp. 39, 106-08.
- 23 In Martinique, Gauguin lived in a type of hut that served as accommodation for the Black plantation workers and, before the abolition of slavery in 1848, for the enslaved population. Gauguin's hut was situated on a small fruit plantation on the coast, approximately two kilometres south of Saint-Pierre. See Van der Hoeven, 'Martinique Experienced', in Van Dijk and Van der Hoeven 2018, pp. 60-62.
- 24 Joost van der Hoeven, 'Martinique Visualized', in Van Dijk and Van der Hoeven (eds.), Bussum 2018, p. 96.

- 25 Paul Gauguin, letter to Emile Schuffenecker, second week of October 1887, in Merlhès 1984, no. 133: 'je n'ai jamais eu une peinture aussi claire, aussi lucide (par exemple beaucoup de fantaisie).'
- 26 Van der Hoeven, 'Martinique Visualized', in Van Dijk and Van der Hoeven (eds.), Bussum 2018, p. 102.
- 27 Emilie Sitzia and Rachel Esner, 'Gauguin on the Brink: Martinique and the Image of Women', in Van der Hoeven and Van Dijk (eds.), forthcoming. Sitzia and Esner rightly describe this transition as a shift from an 'ethnographic gaze' to a 'colonial gaze'.
- 28 Van der Hoeven, 'Martinique Visualized', in Van Dijk and Van der Hoeven (eds.), Bussum 2018, p. 102.
- 29 Paul Gauguin, letter to Mette Gauguin, first week of January 1888, in Merlhès 1984, no. 138: 'Last Sunday someone from Goupil's came [Theo van Gogh], who was very enthusiastic about my pictures and in the end he bought three pictures from me for 900 francs and will (so he says) take others' ('Il est venu dimanche dernier quelqu'un de chez Goupil qui a été très enthousiaste de mes tableaux et finalement m'a acheté trois tableaux pour 900f et doit (dit-il) m'en prendre d'autres'). If this letter does indeed date from the first week of January, as Merlhès asserts, the Sunday on which Theo bought three paintings for 900 francs from Gauguin must have been New Year's Day. One of these paintings - *The Mango Trees, Martinique* - was acquired for the personal collection of Theo and Vincent, the other two were bought for the gallery of Boussod, Valadon & Cie (Goupil), for whom Theo worked. One of these paintings was *Bathing Boys at the Watermill in Bois d'Amour* (1886, Hiroshima Museum of Art). The other work has not been identified. See John Rewald, 'Theo van Gogh, Goupil and the Impressionists', *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 81 (January-February 1973), pp. 16-18.
- 30 Sjraar van Heugten and Chris Stolwijk, 'Theo van Gogh, The Collector', in Chris Stolwijk and Richard Thomson (eds.), with a contribution by Sjraar van Heugten, *Theo van Gogh, 1857-1891: Art Dealer, Collector and Brother of Vincent*, exh. cat., Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum) / Paris (Musée d'Orsay), Amsterdam & Zwolle 1999, p. 173.
- 31 Rewald 1973, p. 19. Gauguin and the Van Gogh brothers met shortly before the purchase of *The Mango Trees, Martinique*. This could have come about in a number of ways. For example, Emile Bernard could have introduced them to one another at the exhibition *Peintres du Petit Boulevard*, which Van Gogh organized in the Grand Bouillon-Restaurant du Chalet in Paris. It is also possible that Theo became acquainted with Gauguin through Degas, Pissarro or Armand Guillaumin (1841-1927), whose work he dealt in. See Maite van Dijk, 'Martinique Continued', in Van Dijk and Van der Hoeven (eds.), Bussum 2018, p. 126.
- 32 Paul Gauguin, letter to Theo van Gogh, 4 January 1888, in Douglas Cooper, *Paul Gauguin: 45 lettres à Vincent, Théo et Jo van Gogh: collection Rijksmuseum Vincent van Gogh, Amsterdam, The Hague & Lausanne* 1983, no. 1: 'Received from Mr van Gogh the sum of four hundred francs for a picture, "Negresses"' ('Reçu de Monsieur van Gogh la somme de quatre cents francs pour un tableau "Negresses"').
- 33 There are two arguments that support this theory. First of all, the sheet on which these sketches were made came from the so-called Album Briant (Musée d'Orsay, Paris), which does not contain any other drawings with Martinican motifs. Second, the verso of this sheet contains sketches for sculptures that Gauguin produced after returning from Martinique. Therefore these drawings must have been made after the (finished) painting, after his return to France.

- 34 Suzanne Folds McCullagh, 'Gauguin, Cat. 4, *Bust of a Breton Woman* (1955.1023 R/V): Commentary', in Gloria Groom and Genevieve Westerby (eds.), *Gauguin Paintings, Sculpture, and Graphic Works at the Art Institute of Chicago* (online, Art Institute of Chicago, 2016), para 6. Gauguin had given the sculpture to Pissarro in 1882.
- 35 Rewald 1973, p. 14.
- 36 This work was *Coming and Going, Martinique* (1887, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid). See Crussard 2001, p. 328.
- 37 *Tropical Conversation* (1887, private collection) was shown on this occasion. See Crussard 2001, p. 341
- 38 Félix Fénéon, 'Vitrines des marchands de tableaux', *La Revue indépendante*, 15 January 1888; Félix Fénéon, 'Aux vitrines dans la rue', *La Revue indépendante*, May 1888.
- 39 Vincent van Gogh, letter to Emile Bernard, c. 22 May 1888 [↗ \[612\]](#): 'Ah tu fais rudement bien de penser à Gauguin - c'est de la haute poésie ses négresses - et tout ce que fait sa main a un caractère doux navré étonnant.'
- 40 Emile Bernard, 'Concernant Paul Gauguin', *Nouvelle Revue d'Egypte* 1, January 1904, in Anne Rivière (ed.), *Émile Bernard: propos sur l'art*, 2 vols., Paris 1994, vol. 1, p. 77: 'It was at Vincent's that I saw the first exotic Gauguins. One of them was like this: In a meadow that was green, a blue sea and sky, and surrounded by rich foliage, some negresses harvest, carry and eat mangoes' ('C'est chez Vincent que je vis les premiers Gauguin exotiques. Un de ceux-ci était tel: Dans une prairie qui fuit vers une mer et un ciel bleus, et qu'entourent de riches frondaisons, des négresses cueillent, portent et mangent des mangos'). Theo van Gogh, letter to Willemien van Gogh, 6 December 1888, Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam (Vincent van Gogh Foundation), inv. no. b0916V1962: 'Do you remember the painting by Gauguin, with the negresses, which hung above the sofa?' ('Herinner je je nog het schilderij van Gauguin, met de negerinnen wat boven de canapé hangt?').
- 41 Bernard, 1904, in Rivière 1994, vol. 1, p. 77: 'This work, thanks to its qualities of style and colour, thanks to its characteristic drawing, may be the best that Gauguin painted at this time' ('Cette œuvre par ces qualités de style et de couleur, par son dessin caractéristique, est la meilleure que Gauguin ait peinte à cette époque').
- 42 Vincent van Gogh, letter to Willemien van Gogh, 31 July 1888 [↗ \[653\]](#): 'Theo once bought from him a large painting of negerinnen dressed in pink, blue, orange, yellow cotton under the tamarind, coconut and banana trees, with the sea in the distance. Like *Le mariage de Loti*, that description of Otaheite [Tahiti]. He's been in Martinique, you see, and he's worked in that tropical scenery' ('Theo heeft van hem in der tijd gekocht een groot schilderij dat voorstelt negresses in rose, blaauw, oranje, geel katoen gekleed onder de tamarinde, kokos- en banaan boomen, met de zee in 't verschieet. Als *le mariage de Loti*, die beschrijving van Otaheite. Hij is n.l. in Martinique geweest en hij heeft in die tropische natuur gewerkt').
- 43 Leo Jansen, Hans Luijten and Nienke Bakker (eds.), *Vincent van Gogh - The Letters: The Complete Illustrated and Annotated Edition*, 6 vols., Amsterdam, The Hague & Brussels 2009, vol. 4: *Arles, 1888-1889*, no. [↗ \[613\]](#), n. 11.
- 44 Vincent van Gogh, letter to Willemien van Gogh, c. 30 March 1888 [↗ \[590\]](#): 'For example I can imagine that a painter of today might make something like one finds described in the book by Pierre Loti, *Le mariage de Loti*, where nature in Otaheite is described' ('Bij voorbeeld kan ik me voorstellen dat een schilder van heden iets make als 't geen men vindt beschreven in 't boek van Pierre Loti, *le mariage de Loti*, waar de natuur van Otaheite wordt beschreven').

- 45 Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin, letter to Emile Bernard, 1 or 2 November 1888 [71](#) [\[716\]](#). 'Now I [...] [w]ho believe that this new art will have the tropics for its homeland' ('Or moi [...] [q]ui crois que cet art nouveau aura les tropiques pour patrie').
- 46 See the catalogues of these two exhibitions: Brussels, Musée Royal de Peinture, *VI^{me} exposition des XX*, 2 February–3 March 1889 (see also Robert-L. Delevoy, *Catalogues des dix expositions annuelles Bruxelles*, Paris 1981), and Paris, Café Volpini, *L'Exposition de peintures du groupe impressionniste et synthétiste faite dans le local de M. Volpini au Champ-de-Mars*, summer 1889 (see also Heather Lemonedes, Belinda Thomson and Agnieszka Juszczak, *Paul Gauguin: The Breakthrough into Modernity*, exh. cat., Amsterdam (Van Gogh Museum) / Cleveland (Cleveland Museum of Art), Ostfildern 2009, p. 216).
- 47 Elise Eckermann, 'Gauguin's critical reception in Belgium in 1889 and 1891', in Chris Stolwijk et al. (eds.), *Van Gogh Studies 3, Visions: Gauguin and His Time*, Amsterdam & Zwolle 2010, p. 69.
- 48 On the motif of the mango in Gauguin's oeuvre, see the entry for [Study of a Martinican Woman](#).
- 49 *Aux Mangos* means 'by the (wild) mango trees'. The word *manguier*, which is used more often, actually refers to a cultivated mango tree.
- 50 Eckermann 2010, pp. 69–70.
- 51 See *ibid.*, p. 71.
- 52 Jules Antoine, 'Impressionnistes et synthétistes', *Art et critique* 24 (9 November 1889), pp. 369–71: 'Among those exhibiting [...] there is one, M. Gauguin, who already enjoys a certain reputation, which I find deserved, with mild reservations. It is certain that *Dancing a Round in the Hay* [...] *The Mangoes - Martinique*, etc. are the works of a painter' ('Parmi ceux des exposants [...] il en est un, M. Gauguin, qui possède déjà une certaine réputation, que je trouve méritée, sauf de légères réserves. Il est certain que: *La ronde dans les foins* [...] *Les Mangos - Martinique*, etc. sont des œuvres de peintre').
- 53 Félix Fénéon, 'Autre groupe impressionniste', *Le Cravache*, 6 July 1889: 'La réalité ne lui fut qu'un prétexte à créations lointaines; il réordonne les matériaux qu'elle lui fournit'.
- 54 Paul Gauguin, letter to Jo van Gogh-Bonger, 4 May 1894, in Cooper 1983, no. 45: 'The large painting you have by me of Martinique has been returned to you at the request of your brother, but it was not sold to Theo, other than just for a short time as collateral for the 300 francs advanced to me' ('Le grand tableaux que vous avez de moi de la Martinique vous a été remis sur la demande de votre frère mais il n'était pas vendu à Théo sinon que pour un moment contre restitution de 300f à moi avancés par lui'). Gauguin made it seem as though the work had served as collateral for a loan Theo had given him of 300 francs. He possibly tried to do the same by falsely dating (to before Theo's death on 25 January 1891) an inventory, in which he listed: 'The large landscape with Martinican figures is for sale for 1,500 francs, but one has to deduct the 300 francs that [Theo] Van Gogh advanced to me, for his personal account' ('Le grand paysage avec figures de la Martinique est à vendre 1,500 frs, mais il y a à déduire 300 frs que [Theo] Van Gogh m'a avancés pour son *compte personnel*'). See Rewald 1973, pp. 48–50, 64 n. 106 and n. 109, 82, 88 n. 168 and n. 169.