

# **Gauguin Maker of Myth**

**MKSA visit on Saturday 8<sup>th</sup> January 2011**

**By Denise White**

A pleasant journey by coach, destination; London, to attend the Tate Modern's exhibition Gauguin Maker of Myth, was MKSA's first event of 2011. On Saturday, January 8<sup>th</sup>, 25 members experienced a wonderful artistic day out thanks to our programme secretary, Alf Walker.

The exhibition filled 11 rooms, each room highlighting a specific theme that defined the nature of Paul Gauguin 1848-1903. The rooms displayed the range of his interests and showed how they influenced his highly imaginative works. Throughout his life he utilised a variety of media, whether trying to define his own persona in his self-portraits, or conjuring up scenes of his travels to Brittany, Martinique, Tahiti, and The Marquesas. These themes enabled him to go beyond the Impressionists with whom he fiercely debated. He believed that an artist should feel free to elaborate on his observations considering the poetry and the complexity of ideas within his subject but without the superfluous detail in the actual work. He turned to Symbolist artists and writers for inspiration as Catholicism, Christianity, and the Bible. His fascination for the sacred extended to world religions through the ages, as well as the culture and folklore of ancient and present day civilisations. This fascination enabled him to visually include both the sacred and the profane within his idealised scenarios of the remote island nations in the Caribbean and the South Seas.

Gauguin faced much of the same uncertainties in his time as we do in our society today; job insecurities, economic crashes, a family to support. We know that his response was to get away from it all after losing his job as an investment banker and failing at other attempts at fulltime employment. He was intent on enjoying the idylls of the remote French colonies steeped in primitive traditions, legends, and deities. He had read the less than reliable chronicles of Moerenhout written in 1837, who interviewed a few Tahitian elderly. There were also the tales of an island paradise where the need for clothing was practically nil that also fuelled his expectations for a pleasurable life in a lush tropical landscape. But did he find this unspoilt idyll? -NO! Christian missionaries eradicated what they thought was primitive and hedonistic. By the time Gauguin arrived in Tahiti in 1891, women were clothed in modest Western attire and the ancient customs, superstitions, and deities were all but swept away.

Though Gauguin was disappointed, this exhibition emphasised that he wasn't going to let that disappointment put a damper on his interpretations of Exotic Island life. Through his imagination and ingenuity he simply re-incarnated the pagan and exotic elements of Tahiti in his drawings paintings, ceramics, wood block prints, and carved wooden "artefacts". At times, he inscribed these creations with titles, phrases, or questions in his native tongue or that of whatever island he was living on at the time. Gauguin also wrote stories and satirical journals. In addition he portrayed himself as a wild beast and loved conjuring up grotesque images of iconic females from folklore such as those who appear in his ceramic totems.

This exhibition illustrates how Gauguin's artistic hobby became a way of life. From the beginning of his part-time artistic endeavours he demonstrated a flair for making his familiar bourgeois domestic scenes seem strange and mysterious. He journeyed to the remote corners of the world in pursuit of the strange and the mysterious, and although arriving too late to witness the unspoilt exoticism for himself, he created his own myth and luxuriance in his works.