

Learning Resource - Paul Gauguin and Printmaking

This resource is intended to be used by parents and teachers with primary aged children. It gives an introduction to Paul Gauguin's woodblock print *Te Po*, and includes a series of activities for writing, drawing and experimental print making.

Paul Gauguin (1848-1903) was a French Post-Impressionist artist who spent ten years living on the Pacific island of Tahiti. Gauguin was fascinated by Tahitian mythology and a way of life that was very different to life in Europe at the time. While he was there he created a series of ten

woodblock prints, *Noa Noa* (1893-94), which depict the real people he met in Tahiti within the stories of Tahiti's version of the creation myth. Gauguin was very experimental in his approach, and made his woodblocks using the tools and objects he had to hand.



Paul Gauguin, *Te Po* (1893-94), © The Samuel Courtauld Trust, The Courtauld Gallery, London

Activity 1 - looking

Take a really close look at *Te Po* (The Long Night).

The scene is of a woman stretched out and sleeping. Behind are her ancestral spirits watching over her, and in front there is an oil lamp, burning through the night to protect her from the spirits. The sun is rising from behind a mountain.

What else can you see in the image. How many different adjectives can you use to describe the scene?

Activity 2 - symbolism

We know that there is a lot of symbolism in Gauguin's prints. Symbols can be used in art to show ideas, or parts of a story that the artist wants to tell.

Can you see the oil lamp, a sea monster, the sun, and the spirits in the background? What do you think each of these symbols might represent? Why has Gauguin included them in his work?

Can you draw each of the symbols that you find?

Activity 3 – story telling

To accompany the set of ten woodblock prints, Gauguin wrote a journal which included lots of drawings and prints, also called *Noa Noa*. The purpose of the journal was to describe life in Tahiti, as seen through Gauguin's eyes, to the people in Europe who might be buying his artworks.

At the time it was very unusual for most people to travel to different parts of the world, and the lifestyle and beliefs of people in the Pacific were very different to how people lived in Europe. Just like a myth, Gauguin's writings were a combination of fact and fiction. He wrote in a similar way to how he made his art works.

Can you write a short story about the scene depicted in *Te Po*?



Things to think about:

- What is the beginning, middle and end of the story?
- Who is the main character in the story?
- How do the symbols (the oil lamp, the spirits, the sea monster and the sun) feature in the story with the main character?
- What are the things that happen in the story that aren't shown in *Te Po*?
- Are the characters good? Is there a problem that is solved?
- Is there a moral or a message to the story?
- Can you use some of the adjectives you thought of in Activity 1 to describe the characters, the landscape, and the weather, for example?

Useful words and phrases:

people, whisper, sleep, peaceful, night, day, light, dark, lamp, calm, quiet, bright, before, during, after, next, sun, warm

All of a sudden... Before Long... In the blink of an eye... Almost unbelievably... From behind the mountains... Below the sea... Courageously... Suddenly... Mysteriously... In the distance... Meanwhile... After a long time...

Activity 4 – mark making

Gauguin used all kinds of tools to carve the marks of his drawings in the woodblock. He used many different marks to show the figures and objects in the image, and to show the texture of the surfaces. He also used light and shade to create different points for the viewer to look at, and all of this helps to show the emotion of the scene

How many different marks can you see in the image? Look really closely at the marks on the print of *Te Po* on page 1. Using pencil and paper, can you draw the different marks that you find?



Activity 5 - printmaking

Gauguin was very experimental with his printmaking techniques, and tried out many different methods and tools to create the marks in his woodblocks.

Can you create a print to go with your story?

You will need: A pencil, poster paint, an old sponge, plan or coloured paper, a flat plastic container, cardboard

Tip: look for cardboard in your recycling. The round card under supermarket pizzas is perfect, big cardboard boxes will not work so well.



Step 1: Using one of your drawings from Activity 2 as a guide, draw a picture onto the thick cardboard



Step 2: Go over your drawing pressing down hard enough to pierce the surface of the cardboard



Step 3: If you want to, you could use some of the marks you drew in Activity 4 to fill the space and create more effects around your image.



Step 4: Sponge with paint over the surface of the cardboard. If any paint goes into the pressed lines of the drawing just scratch them out with the pencil.



Step 4: Whilst paint is still wet lay your paper over the card and with an open palm press down over all over the paper.



Step 6: Slowly peel off the paper Tip: If the drawing does not show up well, try making the scratched lines a little deeper and try again.



Step 7: Try making a number of different prints using different colours of paint and coloured paper, if you have it.



Next steps: Try using the same technique with different materials and surfaces. Pressing very hard onto card from a cereal box can work really well.

Experimenting with colour

Gauguin experimented with colour a lot in his printmaking, and often painted washes of colour onto the paper after he had made the prints.

Once your prints are dry, try using paint or felt tips to add more colour to your works.



Paul Gauguin, *Te Po* (1893-94), The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York