

No Number - October 1, 1933

THE SPIRIT OF THE DEAD WATCHING (Manao tupapaou)

Painted in Tahiti, 1892.

Paul GAUGUIN

Born, Paris 1848; died  
French Oceania, 1903.

Private Collection.

Note: In "Noa Noa" Gauguin gives an elaborate analysis of this picture, part of which is reprinted here. It has been pointed out that the artful ingenuousness of this passage was probably suggested by Poe's analysis of his poem, "The Raven", with which Gauguin was familiar. Under the heading "Genesis of a Picture" Gauguin writes:

"A young Tahitian girl is lying on her stomach showing part of her frightened face. She is lying on a bed covered with a blue "pareo" and a light chrome yellow sheet. The background is purplish violet, splashed with flowers like electric sparks; at the foot of the bed stands a weird figure.

". . . . I have made the sheet yellow because that colour suggests to the spectator the unexpected and saves me the trouble of suggesting a lamplight effect. I need a rather awesome background so violet is naturally indicated. And that is the musical part of my picture..

"The Tupapaou (Spirit of the Dead) at once suggests itself. It is the constant dread of the Tahitian. At night they keep a lamp burning . . . .

"What can be the Tahitian's notion of a ghost? She knows nothing of the stage, of novels, so, when she thinks of the dead she naturally thinks of some one she has already seen. Therefore, my ghost, my spirit, must be sort of an old woman.

"My decorative sense leads to my strewing flowers on the background. The flowers are Tupapaou's Flowers, phosphorescent, and are a sign that the spirit has you in mind - a Tahitian belief.

"The title, "Manao Tupapaou", has a double meaning: either the girl is thinking of it, or the spirit is thinking of her.

"I recapitulate. The musical part: undulating horizontal lines, harmonies of orange and blue woven together by yellows and violets, their complementary colours, and lightened by greenish sparkles. The literary part: the Spirit of a Living Girl united with the Spirit of the Dead. Night and Day.

"This explanation of the genesis of my picture is written for the benefit of those who always insist on knowing the why and wherefore of everything.

"Otherwise it is simply no more than a study of the nude in Oceania."

From the Museum's first publication Cézanne, Gauguin, Seurat, van Gogh.