



Head with Horns, Paul Gauguin

Head with Horns

Paul Gauguin

French, Tahiti, 1895–1897

Wood with traces of polychromy

8 11/16 x 9 x 4 3/4 in.

2002.18

Questions for Teaching

What is the first thing you notice when looking at this sculpture?

Beyond the fact that this sculpted head has horns, what other features do you notice that are peculiar to this head? (The ears are animal-like and pointy, and there are cracks in the surface.)

Display the image of the back of this sculpture, available in the lesson plan *Writing about Art: Objective vs. Subjective*. Have students describe what they see there.

While primarily known as a painter, Gauguin made sculptures in stone, clay, and wood throughout his career. After he traveled to Tahiti in 1891 and to the Marquesas Islands in 1895, he began to make sculptures in wood that were often modeled after native spirits or gods that were part of the religion and mythology of Pacific Island cultures. How might the impact of this sculpture be different if it was made of stone or clay?

The sculpture is thought to include the features of the artist. Why do you think the artist might have represented himself with horns?

What do you think Gauguin wanted to communicate in this sculpture?

Describe the components that make up this sculpture and its base. (There is the carved head, which is attached to a base made of a different wood. The socle, or pedestal for the sculpture, resembles an architectural detail, like the base of a column or post.)



Background Information

Paul Gauguin may have carved this almost life-sized head as a symbolic self-portrait. He made the sculpture while living in Tahiti, where he studied the indigenous culture and, to a great

Head with Horns, Paul Gauguin

extent, identified with the local people. Despite his pampered upbringing in Europe, Gauguin saw himself as a "savage," untamed by the civilizing force of French society.

In this mysterious sculpture, Gauguin's own features are suggested and combined with Polynesian attributes, such as a broad nose. The hypnotic eyes and the smooth, warm surface of the finely finished wood are captivating. To Western viewers, the sinister horns suggest evil; however, it is possible that this attribute resembles a Tahitian style of hair—bunched in knots at either side of the head—worn by young men as an expression of power.

This intriguing and complex sculpture was probably displayed in Gauguin's home in Tahiti, but it was lost sometime in the 1890s. Until its rediscovery in the 1990s, *Head with Horns* was known only from two photographs that Gauguin pasted into *Noa Noa*, a manuscript meant to explain Tahitian culture and his paintings to his European contemporaries.

About the Artist

Paul Gauguin (French, 1848–1903)

"May the day come soon when I'll be myself in the woods of an ocean island! To live there in ecstasy, calmness, and art.... There in Tahiti I shall be able to listen to the sweet murmuring music of my heart's beating in the silence of the beautiful tropical nights."

—Paul Gauguin

Writing to his wife in 1887, Paul Gauguin expressed his desire to seek an earthly paradise in the South Seas. He arrived in Tahiti in 1891. While painting idealized visions of Polynesian culture, he relied on the Tahitians to provide him with food, models, and female companionship. Gauguin remained in Tahiti for two years, producing sculptures, woodcuts, and images of young women in Edenic landscapes. Gauguin first became enthusiastic about painting in the 1860s. By 1874 he was working with Camille Pissarro, who drew him into the Impressionist circle. Quickly abandoning Impressionism, Gauguin began using simplified lines and recurring shapes, covering the picture surface with large areas of flat color bounded by clearly marked lines. In the fall of 1888, Gauguin joined Vincent van Gogh in Arles, but the two quickly parted ways. Gauguin abandoned Europe permanently in 1895, having failed to sell many of the works from his first Tahitian excursion. He died in the Marquesas Islands in 1903.