

Islanders put Marquesas on map of art collectors

By Patricia Arrigoni
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MARQUESAS ISLANDS, French Polynesia

A growing interest in South Pacific art has recently become evident in the United States. In San Francisco, the newly constructed de Young Museum's permanent collection will have a major emphasis in the art of Africa, Oceania and the Americas.

In New York City, the Metropolitan Museum of Art will show a major collection of 80 objects of sculpture and decorative art that originated from the Marquesas Islands. The exhibit, titled "Adorning the World: Art of the Marquesas Islands," is scheduled to run from May 10 to Jan. 15, 2006. It features richly embellished articles, from sculptures to tapa cloth, and everyday household items originating from the 18th and 19th centuries.

I recently toured French Polynesia and spent several days in the Marquesas, situated about 1,000 miles north of Tahiti. These islands are world-famous for the colorful paintings of French artist Paul Gauguin, who lived in the Marquesas, on the island of Hiva Oa, for the last two years of his life. His grave is in a peaceful cemetery on a hill overlooking the sea.

Marquesean artists are especially well-known for their decorative wood carvings of sacred tiki gods and ancestors. Functional items such as bowls and platters are richly carved, as are their stunning hardwood war clubs. These works can be seen on display in fine hotels, shops and museums all through the Society Islands.

Tahitian tattoos also remain a popular art form. In the beginning, each clan had its own motif, which was painted on tapa cloth made from the bark of mulberry trees. Tattoos were then etched on human skin, and most Marquesas residents I saw wore permanent geometric tattoos on their bodies.

Another art form is the pareu cloth worn by women as wraparound skirts or dresses. Local designers have created brilliantly patterned cloths that are light and airy.

In the past, the Marquesans adorned themselves with ornaments made of ivory, mother-of-pearl, shells and feathers. Many of these superbly crafted items are on exhibit in the Metropolitan exhibit.

We drove 2 1/2 hours over rough, unpaved roads to see ancient tiki gods carved from stone near the village of Puamau. Discovered about 500 years ago, these famous statues are thought to be more than 1,000 years old.

It was here that I was able to meet Gauguin's 62-year-old grandson, Tehau Tipahaehae. His mother, Tahiatikao-



A tourist guide sits on the grave of Paul Gauguin. The peaceful cemetery in Hiva Oa is on a hill overlooking the sea.

Copley News Service photographs



Regional arts and crafts are on display and also for sale at the Gauguin Cultural Center in the Marquesas Islands.

mata, was born to Gauguin and Marie Rose Vaeoho on Sept. 14, 1902. Tipahaehae and his 8-year-old grandson, who was named after the famous painter, rode on a horse to a beach where I was scheduled to interview them. Young Paul Gauguin had also named his horse Paul Gauguin. Tipahaehae said he was a fisherman and farmer of noni, a health food, and dried coconut, called copra. He and his wife, Marieclaire Heita, raised 11 children on Hiva Oa and are happy with their life.

Basket weaving from coconut and pandanus leaves is another Marquesean art form I saw everywhere. Carved and decorated coconuts were also popular, and I viewed several in the gift pavilion of the new Paul Gauguin Cultural Center.

This center, officially called L'Espace Culturel Paul Gauguin, houses reproductions of Gauguin's paintings and information about his life. The center was built next to a replica of the painter's thatched-roof home. Gauguin called it his House of Pleasure, and it contained a living space upstairs, and a kitchen and studio where he painted on the first floor.

Gauguin's rock well, next to his House of Pleasure, not only provided water to drink, but a place to cool his beer and wine. He literally "fished" up his liquid refreshments to the second story of his house with a long bamboo fishing pole. While Gauguin's art will not be on display at the Metropolitan Art Museum exhibit, it will always be an important part of the artistic heritage of the Marquesas Islands.

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Air Tahiti Nui flies from Los Angeles to Papeete, and in July is scheduled to begin flying from New York to Papeete. For reservations and fares: visit www.airtahitiniui-usa.com. Air Tahiti flies twin-engine aircraft from Papeete to the Marquesas in a 42-passenger ATR plane, a three-hour flight. For information, visit www.airtahiti.aero; e-mail: reservation@airtahiti.pf.

Radisson Seven Seas Cruises' luxurious MS Paul Gauguin is based in Papeete and operates weeklong cruises that include Tahiti and the Society Islands and the Tuamotu Atolls.

The Paul Gauguin will makes trips to the Marquesas Islands. Departure dates from Papeete, Tahiti, to the Marquesas are June 21, July 12, Nov. 19 and Dec. 17. Call 800/285-1835 or visit www.rssc.com.

The Hiva Oa Pearl Lodge has bungalows with high A-frame ceilings and wooden roofs. The view of the ocean and mountains is stunningly beautiful. Rates begin about \$188. Call 689-50-84-52; e-mail: hiva.oa.pearl@gmail.pf; or visit www.pearlresorts.com.