Tahitian Beauties Lucien Gauthier, *photographer* Serge Kakou

A PRÉSERVER DE LA LUMIÈRE ET DE L'HUMIDITÉ
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Tahitian Beauties
1904 to 1921

Lucien Gauthier, *Photographer*

Serge Kakou

Translated by Lisa Barnett

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For nearly thirty years I have been single-mindedly collecting and researching early travel photography: first tracking down original prints, then the historical documentation to render them meaningful. I continue to be fascinated by the medium's most vertiginous aptitude, which allows us to voyage back in time.

In the fall of 1995, while visiting a flea market, I was told that a house in Neuilly, outside of Paris, had been emptied and that among the books and papers sold were numerous photos of Tahiti taken by a certain Gauthier. The name was familiar to me, as I had come across it many times on historical photographs of Polynesia, as well as on vividly colored postcards depicting vahines (Tahitian women) in languid, dreamy poses. My informant strongly recommended that I contact the family, who still held a considerable collection of glass-plate negatives. I made an appointment and met Odette, the photographer's daughter. There, in the corner of a bedroom, still in the original wooden boxes brought back from the islands, lay the collection of Lucien Gauthier's negatives. I offered to buy it and promised to protect it and keep it intact. One year later, I became guardian of the sole remaining professional archive from this period in Tahiti's history.[1]

After inventory and classification, the corpus required serious study. Although Gauthier left no notes, the collection presented a rare opportunity to examine a body of work in its entirety, and provided the exhilarating experience of seeing through the photographer's eyes, understanding his motivations and constraints, following in his footsteps in order to draw nearer to him. I have used as resources the narrative of his Mount Aorai ascent, published in the *Journal officiel* in 1917, the few pages of memories that served as introduction to his book *Tahiti*, published by Calavas in 1933, as well as a 1968 article devoted to him by Father O'Reilly.

For this book, I chose to use the captions that Gauthier engraved on his negatives or had printed on his postcards. I wanted to leave the images open to interpretation, preferring to evoke the context in which the photographer's art flourished. To this end, I describe the Polynesia that he discovered at the dawn of the 20th century, as well as the inevitable exotic imagination in which the voyager was immersed. It seemed equally important to cite his predecessors, pioneers of this new art, and to review the steps of the photographic conquest of the planet.

Serge Kakou, Paris 2008

Conquest of a Dream, a Dream of Conquest

In the year 1839, the announcement of Daguerre's invention to the French Academy of Sciences created a sensation. Just as writing had fixed man's words and thoughts, the photographic image would henceforth preserve light's memory, and its reflections on the world. Ever since, photography has exercised a prodigious influence on the collective imagination and unconscious. The knowledge of the planet provided by photography is among the most admirable of its revelations. The wealth of harvested images brought back to Western societies projected a more precise vision of the world's diversity and of the peoples who constitute humanity.

The photographic process spread rapidly. Public demonstrations multiplied around the globe, and if technical rigors sometimes dampened this zeal, they never extinguished the flame. The photographic conquest of the planet had begun. Most often, it would accompany colonial expansion. The democratization of travel facilitated its diffusion, as converts boarded ships bound for the most distant ports of call. Egypt, Palestine, Greece, Italy and Spain were privileged early destinations. The photographers, nurtured on Romanticism, paid their first tributes to countries saturated with history, whose ruins evoked the glory of preceding civilizations. Throughout the 19th century, Europe, in full industrial and economic expansion, besieged the planet with its superiority and its certitudes. In this frenzy to seize, fix and classify all things, photography became the ultimate scientific tool. The lens turned its copper-rimmed eye toward the stars and the microcosmos. Anthropologists used the *camera obscura* to classify and compare. The Occident extended its domination to new territories in Africa, the Far East and the outer reaches of the planet. Photography was the privileged witness as treaties were signed and lands were possessed, annexed and colonized. Photographic appropriation frequently went hand in hand with military conquest and could be considered a colonial trophy. Among the many motivations for photographic canvassing, the commercial one was predominant. However, a large number of photographers were touched by the beauty of the lands they traversed and would, like Lucien Gauthier, express in images their respect and admiration.

Beyond time and the scars of history, photographic archives form a mine of information, emotion and beauty *within eyes' reach*. Long neglected, this now carefully protected heritage can recreate, through its multiple facets, an infinite number of vanished worlds. Like the light from a dead star, still visible today, photographs, through a complex game of mirrors, travel across generations to surrender their secrets.

Exotic Tensions

Man, driven by an irrepressible curiosity, has always dreamt of departing for a better *elsewhere*, following the sparkle of distant stars, sailing across seas to reach unknown shores. Fleeing in order to define himself and find his place in the larger scheme, at the risk of self-destruction. Even if for some the journey's end holds only disillusionment, the quest is fundamental for humanity.

Exoticism is a state of mind. The Romantics brought the concept into fashion, and the word appeared in a dictionary for the first time in 1845.[2] The exotic universe of Romantic thought is situated somewhere

between the Middle Ages and the realm of fantasy, and its preferred geographical territory is the Old World and the Mediterranean basin. During the course of the 19th century, however, this Romantic exoticism, personified by Chateaubriand, imperceptibly gave way to a less exalted and more populist exoticism that could be called colonial. It originated in travel narratives, was nourished by new lands and flourished in certain latitudes, on the heels of the explorers, adventurers, missionaries, sailors and soldiers who were defining new frontiers. Occidental colonial expansion spread to China, Japan, Siam, Cochin China, Sudan, Nigeria and myriad other countries, including the South Sea Islands. With a penchant for all that was shimmering and picturesque, the Occidental visitor would retain the most striking aspects of words, names and places. Artists, attracted to the diversity of natural light and peoples, added to the repertory of clichés that Lucien Gauthier would in turn make use of. In its vision of Oceania, the exotic imagination developed a vocabulary all its own: odalisques reemerged as vahines, and moonlight gave way to sunsets.

In France, the taste for colonial exoticism was advanced by books and especially illustrated newspapers. The widely circulated *Tour du Monde* and *L'Illustration* brought to life for their subscribers all the globetrotters' exploits. From the comfort of his armchair, the reader participated in the brilliant military feats of the colonial army that, victorious overseas, bolstered national pride. These stories inspired the novels of Jules Verne, in which he imagined the adventures of modern-day man who, aided by technical progress, overcomes adversity and tames hostile Nature. Many writers, in turn, promoted exoticism by spicing up their texts with the alluring nostalgia of faraway lands. Tales of South Seas adventures often took place in mythic Tahiti, the Oceanian *ne plus ultra* of exoticism, traceable to Louis Antoine de Bougainville. In his account of arriving in Tahiti in 1768, the navigator described the discovery of a veritable sensual paradise, quickly baptized New Cythera. The warm and generous welcome offered to the sailors kindled imaginations. Tahitian society, seen as an ideal community, reinforced the philosophy of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in which natural man, uncorrupted by civilization, is fundamentally good. Bougainville's tale became the basis for a powerful myth that would exercise its seductive influence throughout the 19th century.

Admittedly, the sheer beauty of Oceania's islands, evoked merely by their names, could stir desire. But it was above all the myth that created a space for the imagination in which each was free to construct his own personal fantasy. The South Seas would thereafter leave a lasting impression on all who entered her waters. If most travelers simply reveled in the flamboyant surroundings, those harboring a private mission would, upon entering the "fifth world"[3], experience the vertigo provoked by the contact with *Elsewhere*. These men, by immesion in their new environment and through a true encounter with the *Other*, gained access to an authentic interiority that would indelibly mark their work.

One such example was the young Herman Melville. Wanting to escape the banality of his existence, in 1840 he boarded a whaling ship, hoping to probe his soul and find meaning in his life. His novels–*Typee*, *Omoo* and *Moby Dick*–are illuminated by the warm sunlight of the South Seas. Pierre Loti, another sailor, would discover Tahiti in 1872. This iconic novelist of exoticism had dreamt of

Oceania since his childhood, when his older brother left for a voyage from which he would not return. Donning the same navy uniform, he sought to follow the vanishing traces of his brother's footsteps, calling out to him through writing. From this desperate quest sprang a deeply nostalgic work in which eroticism, blending with the exotic decor, soothes the soul and alleviates existential angst. Robert Louis Stevenson, in his turn, set sail on the *Casco* and threaded his way through the lagoons of the South Seas. The writer described the emotion that overcame him when, upon first arriving at the Marquesas Islands in 1888, the anchor dropped: "It made little noise but was a great event, as my soul descended with the moorings to such depths that no capstan could ever bring it out." Stevenson, already ill, came seeking inspiration. He would come to feel the disillusionment of the traveler who approaches the coveted land, crosses to the other side of the looking glass and sees the negative side of the projected image, with death closing in...

At the beginning of the 20th century, a ship from Brest, France, delivered Victor Segalen. His transposition to this new setting was a powerful revelation to his senses. He immediately started work on a novel, *Les Immémoriaux*, groundbreaking in its ethnological approach, in which he tried to think as a Polynesian. In order to enter into the point of view of the *Other*, he learned the Maohi language. The sense of exoticism gave rise to a process of reflection that would influence all of his subsequent literary research and become the main axis of his work. Segalen spent his life exploring the multiple dimensions of the concept. In his notes, which were published after his death under the title *Essai sur l'exotisme*, he examined his own sensations in an effort to savor each fleeting impression. Analyzing the tension of exoticism, he compared it to a mechanism fed by the constant friction of thought moving from the *Self* to the *Other*. It would become the driving force of his artistic creation. He restored the notion of exoticism, devalued by his contemporaries, to its full complexity.

The other discovery central to his voyage was his encounter with the work of another advocate of Polynesian tradition, Paul Gauguin. "I can't say that I had seen anything of the land or its Maoris until I laid eyes upon and almost lived Gauguin's sketches," Victor Segalen said in August 1903 upon visiting the painter's *fare* (hut) in Atuona three months after his death. He found in Gauguin's radical approach the perfect example of a true exot[4]: he who had gone so far in his encounter with the *Other*, *Elsewhere* as to merge with it at the risk of his own annihilation. The painter, fiercely determined to go "live among savages", exiled himself to the other side of the earth, distancing himself from civilization in order to perceive a divergent vision of the world. By embracing another *point of view*, he achieved a pictorial clairvoyance that, at the height of his art, allowed him to capture in an unprecedented manner both the features and a certain reflection of the soul of the Polynesian people.

One year later, Lucien Gauthier in turn arrived in this land of dreams and light; he, too, would fall under the spell of its phosphorescence.

The Photographic Discovery of Tahiti
Photographic Gleaning

The camera, satisfying a powerful desire for appropriation, offered the ideal possibility for capturing

traces of *Elsewhere* and the *Other*. In front of the camera, the islander/Kanak/native remained an outsider, a mere player on the set. The invention, use and collection of photography were essentially Western concepts. European cultural development, in which centuries of accumulated wealth had encouraged both artistic creation and technical advancement, ensured that the mastery of photography rested for many years exclusively in European hands. If, in the historical movement that accompanied colonization, the photographer's gaze proved prying, the appropriation remained symbolic, seizing only a reflection of the photographer's ethnocentric vision. By the unique power inherent to the process, photography renders today all that it captured. It fixed, as if by a spell, the world's populations in their natural environments, on the eve of the upheavals that would accompany the twentieth century.

Every new rotation of the planet inexorably distances us from these instants fixed by photosensitive chemicals. This distance accentuates the contrast, and thus the legibility, of each image gleaned over time. But as we study these faces, still questioning us from the past, may they not help us discover, and perhaps draw nearer to, the *Other*?

In the South Seas

The first photographic experiment took place in the context of a French navy mission during which the Marquesas Islands were annexed. Before leaving for the Pacific naval station that he was to command, the Rear-Admiral Dupetit-Thouars took up the daguerreotype process. He requested the purchase of a full set of equipment, and a *camera obscura* constructed by the optician Buron was boarded onto the *Reine Blanche*. Although the voyage lasted almost 4 years, no report mentions use of the device.[5] Most likely the Admiral obtained no satisfying result, his hasty initiation not permitting him to put into practice in the tropics what he had learned in Paris. Ironically, it was in the capital that the first daguerreotypes concerning Oceania would be made, in 1842. The photographs, taken in the Bisson studio[6], depicted skulls brought back by Dumont Durville[7] from the Marquesas and Gambier Islands. In 1847, J. W. Newland, English daguerreotypist, stopped in Tahiti while crossing the Pacific from east to west in the direction of Australia. During his voyage, he would create an extraordinary collection of almost two hundred plates, the largest ever from this part of the globe. Exhibited in Sydney in March 1848,[8] it included several images from his Tahitian sojourn. A powerful aura surrounded photographers at the time. Newland's presence was sure to arouse curiosity. He was even granted an audience with Queen Pomare, who willingly agreed to pose for him. It is very likely that on this occasion the artist showed his gratitude to his illustrious model by offering her one of his precious plates. He made other portraits of the royal family, chiefs and natives. A few years later, in 1851, Commander Lavaud, governor of the French Settlements in Oceania, entrusted the painter Giraud with a daguerreotype of Pomare so that he could create the sovereign's official portrait. This painting, conserved at the Museum of Tahiti and Her Islands, seems to be the only remaining evidence of Newland's mysterious body of work. To this day, not one daguerreotype from his voyage has been found.

During the 1850s, new photographic processes appeared. Photographers gradually abandoned the

silver daguerreotype plate for systems using a negative and thereby enabling the reproduction of images. They could use either a paper negative called a calotype or a glass plate coated with collodion. These two techniques had the advantage of allowing limitless positive prints. Certain travelers, most of whom were French naval officers, would fit themselves out with the necessary equipment and begin to replace the sketches in their scrapbooks with photographs. Their names were Eugène Bourdais, Léon Armand and Gustave Viaud.

The Age of Sailor-Photographers

Since Tahiti became a French protectorate in 1842, the French navy has continually maintained a small garrison there. A station ship defended the harbor where the fort and administrative buildings were being constructed. It was not rare to find officers aboard the ships who were also artists; they filled their free hours sketching souvenirs of their travels. Léon Armand was in all likelihood the first photographer after Newland. He arrived in Oceania in 1855 and split his time between Port-de-France in New Caledonia and Tahiti, which were linked under the administrative designation of French Settlements in Oceania. Three years later, Eugène Bourdais, private secretary to Commander-Governor du Bouzet, succeeded in printing some images from paper and glass negatives. They were offered, in a bound album, to the minister of the navy. "A View of Papeete" was sent to the periodical *L'Illustration*, in which it was reproduced as wood engravings in 1859. The same year, Gustave Viaud, navy doctor and Pierre Loti's older brother, produced remarkable images from paper negatives. In 1864, *L'Illustration* published four more views of Papeete, based on photographs by Agenor Fournier, lieutenant aboard *La Pallas*. Between 1868 and 1870, during the *Astree's* campaign in the South Seas, Commander Paul-Émile Miot and his assistant, Félix-Auguste Leclerc, took pictures of Tahiti and the Marquesas Islands that are among the most beautiful photographs of Oceania produced in the 19th century.

The First Tahitian Studios

Commercial photography first appeared during the 1850s with the arrival of itinerant photographers. These practitioners sailed the islands searching for new customers. Some of them never stopped moving, but others were based in the most frequented of the Pacific ports, such as San Francisco, Valparaiso or Sydney. The typical scenario was to place an advertisement in the local gazette, find lodging suitable for receiving clients and, hopefully, start filling orders. The newspaper *Moniteur de Tahiti* indicates the successive passage of daguerreotypist Helsby from Valparaiso and Samuel P. Howes from San Francisco. After a few weeks, or sometimes several months, the lack of clientele would force them to move on.

The first landscape views offered for sale were taken by Eugénio Courret, who visited the island in 1863. His "Views of Papeete and Tahitian Types" were sold in his Valparaiso studio, and he left prints on commission in Papeete.

Studios, such as those of Canadian Eugène Durand in 1863 or American Andrews Garret, starting in 1865, remained ephemeral. It was not until 1868, when ships started to call in with sufficient regularity, that a photographer was able to live from his art in Papeete.

This man was an English citizen named Charles Burton Hoare. The routine was much the same around the world: print portraits while assembling as quickly as possible a collection of views, including landscapes and representative *types* of the local populations. The proofs were presented in various formats in sample albums, which the client would consult in choosing his purchases. The photos could later be mounted onto pages and bound into albums. At the end of the 1870s, the name Charles Burton disappeared and was replaced by that of Mrs. Hoare, whose studio was particularly active until the end of the century. In 1885, the Alsatian Charles Spitz set up shop as a jeweler-photographer and, four years later, received an award at the Universal Exposition of Paris.[9] After his death in 1894, his widow married Franck Homes and, with him, continued both professional activities. The Hoare and Spitz studios produced most of the photographs to be found in the albums of the century's last twenty years. While the inventory of the planet continued in the farthest reaches of the globe, the photographic discovery of Oceania seemed to be over. However, new photographers would arrive, with their own sensibilities, to expand on the myth and the reality.

Amateurs

In 1880, photography started to become more accessible, as the process of democratization made both the equipment and the chemical manipulations more practical. Collodion plates were replaced by industrially manufactured gelatin-silver plates. Freed from financial constraints, many amateurs equipped themselves with the necessary material. A distinction must be made between amateurs living on the island and those passing through. Among the second category, the most talented was Colonel Stuart Wortley, who visited Tahiti in 1880. He was famous for his sky studies presented at London expositions; Tahiti offered him the opportunity to exploit his prowess by rendering magnificent sunsets. These were the first triumphs in a genre that would become widespread only much later. He also captured some wonderful scenes of daily life.[10] A few dozen amateurs were active in Tahiti in the last twenty years of the 19th century. Notable among them were Jules Agostini, civil engineer, and particularly Henri Lemasson, postal administrator. Lemasson had the privilege of meeting Gauguin, who asked him to photograph his canvas "Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?" and who transposed one of Lamsson's vahines to a painting.[11]

The wealth of photographs by various amateurs remains to be inventoried. Intended for private viewing and printed in small quantities, these witnesses, often unique, complete and enrich our iconographic heritage.

Tahiti at the Dawn of the 20th Century

In 1899, the Samoa Islands were divided up between the United States and Germany. The Americans raised the Stars and Stripes over Tonga. The last sovereigns of Oceania abdicated under force and placed their powers in the hands of foreign administrations. These two new Occidental powers played a game of planetary chess, arriving in historically colonized countries to contest their world-shares. The French government, jealously

guarding its sphere of influence, sought not only to preserve its conquests but also to consolidate its empire. Tahiti, a French protectorate since 1843, was annexed in 1880. In 1894, under the pretext of a revolt, the entire archipelago of the Society Islands was incorporated into the colonial empire and, in August of 1900, the French flag was flying over the islands of Rurutu and Rimatara. At the dawn of the 20th century, all of Oceania had been divvied up.

From Paris, the Ministry of the Navy and Colonies controlled all these distant territories by the intermediary of governors who administrated and legislated in the name of France. During all of the 19th century, immigration was minimal. The mountains, which contained no precious metals, prohibited any ambitious farming project. The first to arrive were Protestant missionaries, soon follow-ed by their Catholic counterparts, coming to counter their influence. Sailors would sometimes decide to drop anchor definitively in the light of the tropics. By the end of the 1800s, the European population, in addition to an Asian community of Chinese origin, consisted mostly of merchants and civil servants.[12] The rare settlers dispersed among Tahiti and the Polynesian archipelagos lived on the slim resources procured from fishing or harvesting mother-of-pearl and copra, from coconuts. Every year brought a handful of new immigrants. In 1901 the steamship Mariposa made its first monthly crossing between San Francisco and Papeete in less than two weeks. Time was measured by the arrival of the European mail. Soon steamers would replace sailing ships, gradually dispelling the mysterious poetry of the islands' distance.

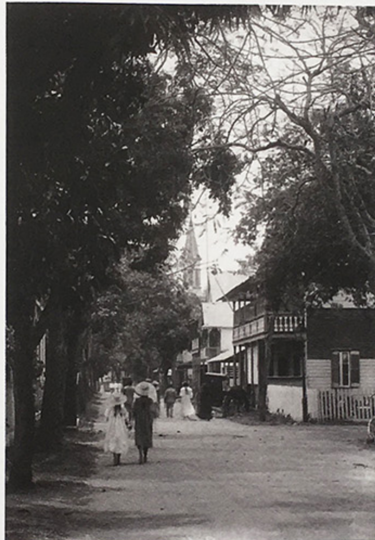
Lucien Gauthier arrived in Papeete in 1904. The town, which Gauguin and Segalen had recently left, resembled a small provincial burg transposed to the banks of a lagoon, with its town hall, school, shops, bandstand, church and temple, and gossip and rivalry. Streets stretched out imperceptibly under lush vegetation. It was an idyllic setting whose languor was periodically shaken by electoral fevers or hurricanes.[13] In 1905, the colony faced a serious financial crisis due to bad weather, a slump in the mother-of-pearl and vanilla markets, and a surplus of civil servants. Commerce was sluggish and imported products were traded for Chilean piasters. Modernization arrived in the form of the first automobiles, a sewage system, the telephone and then electricity. Torn between ministerial directives and local reality, one governor succeeded another. Each night at sunset, the *hymenes* (traditional Tahitian songs) were carried by the winds to leave their indelible imprint on nearby travelers.

The opening of the Panama Canal in 1914 announced a new era, full of promise for the developing territory. By a twist of fate, this event preceded by only a few months the start of World War I, whose ravages would be felt the world over. On September 22, 1914, German ships bombarded Papeete. A certain idea of paradise disappeared in the flames that leveled the town center. The end of the war would be further marked by a horrifying epidemic of Spanish flu[14] that devastated the population. In spite of the hardships, hope rose from the ashes, wounds healed... but nothing would ever be the same again.

Island Breezes
The Studio on rue des Remparts, 1904-1906

Man's fate rests in seemingly unimportant circumstances and fortuitous encounters. In 1902, at 27 years

of age, Lucien Gauthier left France for California after an uneventful youth, with a stenographer's degree in hand. He found a job at the French American Bank of San Francisco, where he worked for two years. A business agent friend informed him that one of the only photo studios in Papeete had just closed and could be taken over. Without hesitating, Gauthier gave his resignation, packed his suitcases and, two months later, set sail for Tahiti. At first sight of the island, he was struck with an awe that would resonate the rest of his life: "It was about four in the morning when the *Mariposa* passed Venus point. Dawn was breaking. The stars threw off their last sparks in the quiet night fading away over Moorea, whose jagged peaks stood out against the deep blue of the western sky. We passed the coral reef channel. Not a single breeze troubled the emerald lagoon as our steamer glided silently across. Papeete was still dozing in its nest of greenery... An exquisite moment, unforgettable and never forgotten."[15] Descending onto the quay surrounded by red flamboyant trees, he found the small town to be peaceful and its population welcoming.



He lost no time in renting a modest wooden house on the rue des Remparts, and quickly learned the métier of photographer. "I started from scratch. There was not even a license for photographers in Tahiti. I bought one for vendors and then, little by little, on site, I acquired a taste for it." Armed with a simple camera purchased in San Francisco and plenty of self-confidence, he proposed his services to the local clientele. His only advertisement was a small display case on the side of the road where he tacked up his first prints. Word of mouth would do the rest. Alone or in couples, in groups or with families, sailors, shopkeepers and civil servants came to take their turn posing in front of his lens. His everyday routine was enlivened by the arrival of a few local beauties who would occasionally model for him. Certain proofs indicate that he possessed a lens with the distinctive feature of producing eight portraits of the same person from different angles. This number set a rhythm for the poses in these particularly successful series. A great admirer of the beauty of Polynesian women, Gauthier created a remarkable suite of portraits that, seen together, evoke a floral composition.

From this period there remains an unpretentious but nevertheless precious personal album, containing about a hundred images. It allows us to follow the photographer's technical improvement and to study his early results. His proofs, ranging in size from 4 x 5 cm to 10.5 x 16.5 cm, were printed exclusively on gelatin-silver paper. The subjects are mostly portraits of young women, as well as groups of Gauthier's friends. Among them appear Prince Hinoï, Mayor Cardella, Father Alain and other notables of Papeete with whom Gauthier was acquainted. The income from his activity was likely modest, but so were his needs. Much later, he would remember this period, describing his house:[16] "Open to all comers, without a single window. I set up my camp bed, my only piece of furniture... Returning home from walking around the island, I would sometimes find a few natives who had settled in during my absence. I wouldn't make a fuss... My neighbors were an old Tahitian couple, our houses separated only by a half-demolished fence. We rapidly became close friends. Every morning, dear Teura would bring to my bedside a large bowl of tea with coconut milk. Whenever time allowed, her *tane* [man], old Taie, would accompany me on my excursions around the island."

The exuberant Tahitian greenery that descended from

the mountains all the way into the town was irresistibly alluring to Gauthier. He set out to discover it, immediately immersing himself in his new environment. His first outings lead him to the magnificent valley of Fautaua, a site near the town that would become his favorite. Following a path along the winding river, one would, after a long walk, reach a spectacular waterfall where the river was propelled into an abyss of more than 300 meters. Accompanied by his guide, Gauthier continued exploring the island and its natural curiosities. The stunning water-flooded Maraa caves were the source of a strong memory: "One evening, we arrived in front of the Maraa caves, situated on the border of the Paea and Papara districts. The mass of foliage that separated the road from the vertical cliff where the water had carved the famous grotto was so dense that it was impossible to suspect its presence. We had to hack through with knives to clear a path. If a few local natives had not helped us, we would have had to put off until the next day the photo that I wanted to take..."

If the coastline belied the rare trace of civilization, the interior still guarded all of its mystery. Gauthier exalted in the discovery of this untouched natural universe. Certain excursions took several days. The enchanting Lake Vahiria was one of the most difficult to reach. Gauthier recalled: "Few natives knew about it. It required more than a full day of difficult walking through virgin jungle. Taie made sure to find us a good guide and we set off. We followed the Vahiria River, which we had to cross at least a hundred times, often in water halfway up our thighs, looking out for the stones carried along in the current... At night, completely exhausted, with no light, we rushed to build a shelter covered with 'hape' leaves, which look like giant rhubarb. But no sooner were we asleep than a storm broke out, followed by torrential rain. Our roof held up, but the water ran under our bed of leaves and I felt it seeping insidiously into my pockets. I feared for my photo equipment in spite of the oilcloth protecting it.

We woke up in the morning soaked to the bone, but decided nevertheless to continue our expedition. Our guide cut a path, Taie widened it, and I followed as best I could. The vegetation was so dense that sometimes we could not even see the sky, but later that morning we finally reached the base of the volcano... That was the most difficult part. We climbed, up to our knees in sodden earth, using the vines like ropes. Once at the top of this cursed slope... there was more long and laborious hacking to clear a platform from where we could view the entire crater... I spent over two hours contemplating the mysterious lake, and used up the last of my plates in hopes of fixing a memory of it." The opportunity to sleep under the stars is rare in a land of such legendary hospitality. Naturally friendly, Gauthier had no problem fitting in. His sincere desire to communicate is witnessed by the words he added to the pocket dictionary he carried with him.[17] Many years later, remembering this period, he would write: "If you wish to savor all of Tahiti's charms, you must be young, travel leisurely and embrace the pleasant nonchalance of the climate and the natives." This reflection perfectly illustrates the state of mind in which he created his body of work.

Chance would have it that the craze for picture postcards was in full swing. A decisive opportunity, it would influence all of Gauthier's future commercial activity. In addition to portraiture, he began to document local life and news events. The universal infatuation with the new

medium, only recently authorized by the mail service, was incredible. This inexpensive and revolutionary concept caused an explosion in correspondence, and, above all, created a new use for photography. Photographers were sought after to provide illustrations; a good number of images owe their existence today to that particular demand. Gauthier was no exception. A smart businessman, he seized this extraordinary opportunity, which had the two-fold advantage of boosting sales while providing terrific advertising. Idyllic landscapes and vahines would from then on be his favorite themes. Several dozen shots were printed each year, prominently displayed in shop windows all over town. His images, multiplied in the form of illustrated postcards, spread out across the oceans and around the world.

Business was booming and the future looked promising. Nonetheless, Gauthier would soon be forced to leave by an official letter reminding him of his unfinished military duty.[18] On his way back to France, in July 1906, he passed through San Francisco. An earthquake had just leveled the city, leaving him to sleep under the night sky. During the voyage, Gauthier put his business acumen to use by selling some of his Tahitian photos to local newspapers. He was thus able, to his great satisfaction, to finance his trip across the United States. His stay in France turned out to be particularly advantageous: he published a collection of his photographs[19] and, above all, met Edmée Angel, fell in love with her, and married her in 1908. Once married, he had only one thought in mind: to return to Oceania as quickly as possible to share with his wife, who had never seen the sea, the enchantment of island life. Out of their shared happiness was born their first daughter, Lucie.

The Studio on rue de l'est, 1909-1921

In January 1909, Gauthier came back to Tahiti, with the new responsibilities of husband and father. He had a larger house built, which served as home, studio and store. Business started up again, customers returned, and he had to fill out his collection with new views.[20] The tireless hiker retraced the steps of his first expeditions to perfect the work that he had already sketched out. He saw the surrounding nature in a new way, more sensitive than ever to the solemn grandeur and beauty of the scenery. Seeking the perfect angle, he stopped to capture each instance in which Nature opened up a perspective, allowing the eye to penetrate the dense vegetation. "Sometimes I would cover the same terrain ten times, climbing peaks, tumbling down slopes, always looking for the most favorable spot to take a beautiful photo. When I found it, Taie would show the same enthusiasm clearing the ground." His quest for perfection sometimes led him to take risks: "One day I thought I could do better, so I started scaling a vertical bluff. Being in the category of lightweights, at first I pulled myself up fairly easily by grabbing hold of vines and the trunks of ferns, but, once twenty or twenty-five meters up, I suddenly caught sight of a huge boulder just overhead and I had the very clear impression that the slightest jolt would set it loose. No way to go around it. I then realized, much to my horror, that it wasn't any easier to descend than to keep mounting. Not knowing what to do, I stayed suspended in the air, feeling the fern trunk that was supporting me slowly give way. It finally broke loose and I tumbled down, along with the rocks and plants that I tried vainly to hang on to. Fortunately, this

little avalanche arrived before I did and I landed on top of it."

He went off in search of his predecessors' cherished myth, of a peaceable and timeless Eden populated with lascivious unclothed women. It was a legend that he readily acknowledged as such: "The island's eastern coast was by far the most rugged. Often, after the high tides of the equinox, sections of the road following the cliffs were cut off and the Hitia district would be isolated for long months. It was in that district that I once caught sight, between the trees, of a beautiful native girl with nothing but her long hair covering her. She ran away when I approached... I have never since encountered another." This fortuitous encounter may have inspired the series of nudes by a waterfall for which the beautiful Tamo posed. As everywhere in Polynesia, the legendary hospitality was much in evidence. Gauthier was warmly received and the inhabitants willingly posed for him. His photographs of returning fishermen, a meal by the lagoon, divers seeking mother-of-pearl or Tahitians carrying pandanus leaves document their daily life. There was nothing ethnographic in his approach; he sought rather to illustrate and enrich the exotic imagination.[21] The models that he encountered were integrated into their natural environment to enhance the composition. He also sailed the lagoons in small boats. Following the shoreline, he meticulously explored the bays, stopping by huts and villages in which suspended fishnets sometimes embellished the composition. He was a master of atmospheric effects, catching the subtle light under the tree canopy and reflected off of the water, and privileging, above all, sunset and sunrise. His framing created a harmonious balance among the natural elements. This mastery was never more evident than in his sumptuous sunsets, a subject that would be excessively reiterated by subsequent photographers.

Whenever the opportunity presented itself, he set sail to explore the Polynesian archipelago. He returned to the Society Islands–Moorea, Raiatea, Bora-Bora and Maupiti–discovered the Tuamotus and Makatea, and journeyed as far as the Marquesas. He was in Makatea in 1909. The island had recently become famous due to the nascent exploitation of phosphates.[22] He photographed the mining facilities, including the improbable railway that crossed the coral island, disturbing its flora. Farther away, in the Tuamotus, which rise barely above sea level, he captured the flat line of scenery punctuated by *fares* (huts) and coconut trees, the only elements rendering the windswept beach perceptible.

However, the most memorable voyage was yet to come. In 1911, a voyage of the French navy station ship *Zélée* allowed him to head for the Marquesas, more than ten days out. As he drew near the island, he experienced the thrill that Herman Melville had felt before him. The writer recalled, "The earth rose up on all sides in green slopes, dominated by imposing hills, and torrents of crystal water hurtled down to the sea in the hollows of blue ravines."[23] The plates that Gauthier exposed during his Marquesan sojourn were particularly successful. The brevity of the trip explains, in part, the intensity of his work. The island's preserved state inspired him, drawing him ever nearer to the myth. The stereotypical elements of nudity, tattoos, and warriors' costumes brought out the *voyeur* in him. Gauthier yielded to temptation and, seeking the sensational, set out to hunt down a

"cannibal". He obtained a dismal representation of one when an old man, supposedly the last of his breed, agreed to pose for him in exchange for a box of matches.[24] More trinkets would be swapped to persuade other islanders. A "former warrior" donned an antiquated wig of human hair, and a few limber, dark-skinned adolescents also accepted to pose. Among all these images, the most beautiful is a portrait entitled "The Old Tattooed Woman," in which the subject, seated on the trunk of a coconut tree, is transformed into a majestic island queen. With a few plates, he faithfully recreated the landscapes that had once astonished Melville: the mountains, motionless and unsettling sentinels, which emerge from the ocean and forbid approach; the profound valleys in which men hide under thick foliage; right down to the unexpected presence of a church and its missionary. Many of his photos are tinged with this unique enchantment that Gauguin's paintings had begun to distill in the European public.

In December of 1911, Gauthier's second daughter, Odette, was born. The family spent 1913 in Paris. They came back to Tahiti wealthier than before due to a recent inheritance, which allowed for the acquisition of a handsome automobile. While in Paris, Gauthier had contacted a mother-of-pearl engraver, thereby adding more temptations for the travelers passing through his boutique. The display cases held various trinkets, as well as ethnic objects collected during his island voyages.[25] However, of all the trophies proposed to collectors, photographs remained the easiest to transport. Always anxious to diversify the selection, he would soon add new studies to the portraits of beautiful Tahitian women taken during his first stay. Father O'Reilly, secretary general of the Society for Oceanists, who met Gauthier many times, reported:[26] "Gauthier has even ventured into 'art' photography. Pressed by tourists clamoring for vahines, Gauthier drew in some modest but willing native women who laughingly let themselves be photographed, counting on the discretion of the photographer and thinking that the images would disappear into albums of distant *popaa* [whites], without ever imagining that they would end up half-naked in the display case on the rue de l'Est. It's scandalous!"

Drawing from the miscellaneous clichés of colonial exoticism, the photographer would, in his turn, celebrate the cult of the Polynesian beauty. Though the studio poses were often more conventional than those taken out of doors, he crystallized the elegance and charm inherent in their simplicity. Their eyes reflect the respect that Gauthier showed his models. With their freely proffered smiles, his vahines evoke desire without vulgarity or provocation. Their languid postures and melancholy air seem to be visual transcriptions of the literature of exoticism. If, during his first Tahitian sojourn, he specified the models' names—Tuu, Moo, Turai—they would all subsequently become simply *vahines*. Their identity ceded to the anonymity of the feminine stereotype as erotic offering. Photographic representation filled out the contours of the Oceanian myth, made it accessible and incarnate. Repeatedly figuring in his compositions, the vahine became a visual icon, forever linked to the photographer who first established her as such. Life passed in a pleasant manner. His wife assisted him, retouching negatives. The family finished each day at Arue beach. During this period, the war raged in Europe. It would soon spread all the way to the ends of

the earth to reach this quiet archipelago. One such heretofore unknown cataclysm was the fire that destroyed the center of Papeete. German destroyers that were refused entry into port for coal reprovisioning took revenge by bombing the town. Lucien Gauthier aided the rescue effort, taking pictures only once the blaze was under control. His photo documentary was published in *L'Illustration*; the newspaper would reward him with the title of local correspondent.

Although he had never allotted much importance to technical innovations or his photo equipment, in 1915 he acquired an "Allvista" panoramic camera. The unusual format of the negatives[27] forced him to adapt to a new sense of space, but his style remained recognizable. He frequently photographed from boats, using the reflections and movement of the water to emphasize the unfolding shoreline. The camera's widened field of vision allowed him to photograph the different contingents of Tahitian soldiers that were setting off for The Great War.[28] The panoramic vision was a perfect match for Gauthier. The lens embraced the space, and could capture more of it. This "photographic traveling" gives the viewer the opportunity to voyage in and through the image.

After having covered almost all of Polynesia, Gauthier's last great challenge was to climb to the summit of Mount Aorai,[29] which rises 2,066 meters above the town of Papeete. It took him two expeditions to reach his goal. On the first attempt, he was forced to turn back at 1,100 meters due to impassable terrain. Disappointed, but enthusiastic and stunned by the beauty of the views, he declared, "The view is simply magical, far better than from other reputed sites." He requested aid from the authorities, explaining his mission in a letter addressed to the governor: "The mountain is an essential source of health and energy for all; it is up to us to tap it." He stressed "the interest, for public health, in creating a sanatorium at high altitude" and suggested the potential for tourism that access to the mountain could generate. The governor put a team of prisoners at his disposition to clear the undergrowth for a path. In a few weeks' time, the task had been accomplished. Equipped with his panoramic camera, Lucien Gauthier set out at two o'clock in the morning; along the route he would fill the flexible plastic film with views of the awe-inspiring mountain chain. He reached the summit at dusk, and spent the night there while the temperature dropped to just above freezing. His notes from the expedition were published along with a report in the *Journal officiel*, in which Gauthier proclaimed, "We don't have the right to keep such beauty to ourselves; we must give everyone the chance to contemplate it."

Lucien Gauthier's photographic career could have continued until the end of his life, but his children were growing, along with his nostalgia for France. A panorama of Papeete taken in 1921 from the cathedral steeple, printed on eight 16.5 x 20.5 cm plates, was his final homage to the island. After selecting the images from his collection[30] that he would take with him, he sold his business to a certain Langlois. The Polynesian adventure came to an end, as did his desire to take pictures. Returning to the family residence in Neuilly-Plaisance near Paris, he spent his time developing and selling prints, always anxious to make the island known.[31] In 1931, he exhibited his work in the Tahitian pavilion of the Colonial Exhibition

in Paris. A book published for the occasion reproduced in rotogravure a selection of his best Tahitian photos. Through the tourist office, which would recommend him to travelers wishing to visit the South Seas, he met, among others, Alain Gerbault and the Allegret brothers. Family tradition has it that one day a man came to see him, announcing, "I am Monsieur Matisse. I've seen your pictures and they are quite good. They have even given me the idea to go Tahiti."[32]

Between the two world wars the craze for picture postcards waned, but Gauthier's widely diffused work was still known to researchers and publishers. His negatives were used to illustrate several books and articles about French Oceania. In 1935 he left for Guadeloupe, where Governor Bouge had enlisted him to create a photo documentary for the occasion of the 300th anniversary of the French annexation of the *Antilles* (West Indies). Then demand gradually declined, and his images lay dormant in their boxes. Lucien Gauthier took up gardening and spent his days happily cultivating his little plot of land and his memories. He died in 1971 at the age of 96. His collection, meticulously conserved, passed through the 20th century intact.

Illustration of the Myth

Upon discovering Tahiti, Lucien Gauthier came face to face with the Oceanian myth and its most breathtaking symbol: Nature. His determined quest to depict and reconstitute its image defines his body of work and distinguishes him from his predecessors. His fascination fed his zeal to unveil its hidden splendor, sharing with novelist Pierre Loti the impression of "traveling in this happy land as one traveled during the golden age." Gauthier was gifted with the qualities dear to Fromentin, French painter: "patience and sincerity before nature."[33] His vision filtered reality so that only beauty remained, forever seeking perfect landscapes and the peace that accompanies their contemplation.

Looking at his photos today, it sometimes seems that distances collapse and islands merge to form a single entity, "island", a land forged by Gauthier's own vision of the ideal world. This exclusive land, a shimmering garden with springs and waterfalls running through its green mountains, seems to exist solely for its most beautiful attribute, the vahine. Although her masculine counterpart, the *tane*, is more discreet, they both appear in the composition, expressing their mutual, inherent bond with nature. Gauthier explored the island energetically, immersing himself repeatedly in the interior, traversing dense vegetation, scaling forbidding peaks, hugging the shores… like a painter enamored with his model's languid form. The photosensitive plate registers an ineffable yearning for the feminine. His approach represented a delicate balance between the expectations of his clients and the projection of his own desires.

By creating images of this fantastical universe, Lucien Gauthier succeeded in expressing the indescribable emotion that he had felt upon first seeing the island. The imaginary dimension of each image, paradoxically fixed, represents a virtual space in which our own projected thoughts can travel. From across time and by means of photosensitive emulsion, Gauthier invites us today to follow him to his ideal land, realm of azure seas and island breezes.

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