

The Cult of the South Pacific: From Cook to Gauguin (Also available as a study day)

This lecture will look at the enduring Western obsession with, and invention of the so called 'exotic' or 'noble savage' starting with the first discovery of the Island of Tahiti in 1767 and charting the impact, through painted images of the island and their people, of the English and European influence in this part of the world through the eyes of not only Captain Cook and those who came before him, but also through the eyes of the artists that accompanied these pioneering voyages and into the 19th and early 20th century with the images of Gauguin. And to this end the lecture will look at how romanticised depictions of the island and its peoples by artists such as: William Hodges (1744-1797), Benjamin West (1738-1820), John Webber (1751-1793), and John Cleveley (c.1712-1777), and indeed those of Paul Gauguin (1848 – 1903), not only bolstered these notions in the minds of Europeans, but helped to perpetuate and invent the Western notion of the exotic and the myth of paradise.

This background of England's exploration abroad also sees the involvement of Royal academicians such as its first director Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723 – 1792), Johann Zoffany (1733 – 1810) and the botanist Joseph Banks (1743 – 1820). This lecture eventually comes into the modern period and looks at what happened to these notions of the exotic in the 19th century explored through the Impressionist and Post-Impressionist work of this period's most notable visitor to the island of Tahiti also looking for the exotic and paradise - Paul Gauguin (1848 – 1903). His experiences, vibrant evocations of paradise through his paintings, and his discoveries and eventual death in the South Pacific bring this exploration of the exotic to its conclusion.

Short Reading list:

Holmes, Richard, ***The Age of Wonder: How the Romantic Generation Discovered the Beauty and Terror of Science***, (Harper Press, 2008)

House, John, ***Impressionism for England: Samuel Courtauld as Patron and Collector***, (Yale University Press, 1994)

Kaepler, Adrienne L., Head Curator, ***James Cook and the Exploration of the Pacific***, (Thames and Hudson, 2010)

Rendle-Short, Francesca, (Ed), ***Cook & Omai: The Cult of the South Seas***, (National Library of Australia, 2001)

Thomson, Belinda, (Ed) Garb, Tamar, (Consultant Ed), ***Gauguin: Maker of Myth*** (Tate Enterprises, 2010)