



**Paul Gauguin**  
(1848-1903)

**Nude Breton Boy**  
(Petit Breton nu)

1889

*signed and dated bottom right:  
"89 P Gauguin"*

*Oil on canvas*

*h 93.0 cm x b 74.2 cm*

*WRM 3114*





## Brief Report

For this motif of a Breton boy, painted in 1889, Paul Gauguin chose a canvas of the standard F30 format, measuring 92,0 x 73,0 cm. In this particular year he used this size for 26 out of a total of 70 pictures he painted [see Wildenstein 1964]. The canvas is thick, with an irregular weave, and he probably primed it himself. This observation corresponds with what we know of Gauguin's working methods [Christensen 1993]. The thin, dilute white ground was evidently applied direct to the unsized canvas. Gauguin then sketched the main forms in black charcoal (fig. 8). Using a brush and blue paint, he then went on to fix and correct the position of all the forms he actually wanted to paint. This working method of Gauguin's has also already been documented in print [Jirat-Wasiutynski/Newton 2000, p. 71]. Infra-red reflectogram and microscopic inspection make it clear that some of these early lines deviate from the painting we now see (figs 5, 9). At the same time, it is not clear what was originally planned. It is uncertain for example what the outlines in the top left-hand corner of the picture are meant to represent: possibly the rejected depiction of an animal, a motif that Gauguin often incorporated into his paintings at this time. We can see very great similarities for example with the illustration of a dog, such as we see in the painting *Women on the Seashore (Motherhood)*, which however only dates from 1899, i.e. ten years later [Wildenstein 1964, no. 581]. In the case of the two vertical lines in the top right and centre of the picture, too, it is uncertain whether Gauguin may perhaps have planned to include tree-trunks, as for example in the picture *The Blue Trees*, 1888, [Wildenstein 1964, no. 311].

Possibly he even intended a totally different composition at first, which he rejected during the painting process, or else he used for the painting of the boy a canvas which had already been partly painted on. Gauguin's use of the dual method of a drawn sketch followed by a coloured outline is reflected particularly well in the unfinished study of *The Tahitians* (1891), now in the Tate collection in London (fig. 14). Here too we see a careful charcoal drawing, followed in a second phase by an outline in blue brushstrokes, before the areas were finally filled out with paint. For the further painterly execution of the *Nude Breton Boy*, Gauguin evidently used very thin paints with a low oil-content, applied in part with very fine brushes in numerous layers. However he attached no importance to clear brushwork, preferring to integrate the structure of the canvas (fig. 10). Gauguin allowed himself pentimenti at this stage too, for example in the shape of the hip or the right arm (figs 6, 12). The picture was lined at a later date, increasing its size by about 1 cm all round. On the basis of historical illustrations, dimensions recorded in catalogues and inscriptions verso, we can probably date this lining measure, in the course of which the surface structure underwent serious flattening, to between 1913 and 1928 (fig. 13).



## Picture support canvas

Standard format	close to F30 (92.0 x 73.0 cm), vertical
Weave	tabby weave
Canvas characteristics	vertical 17 and horizontal app. 15 threads per cm; medium-thick close weave with very uneven yarn thickness ranging from 0.2-0.8 mm (vertical), and 0.2-1.0 mm (horizontal); the vertical yarns being emphasized by the lining; Z-twist
Stretching	not authentic; original tacking now runs along the edge of the picture, as the dimensions of the canvas were increased by app. 1 cm all round in the course of a lining measure probably undertaken between 1913 and 1928 (fig. 13); verso there is an undatable sticker indicating the original stretcher size of 91.0 x 73.0 cm; stretchmarks are apparent on all the edges along the original stretcher line
Stretcher/strainer	the presumably authentic stretcher was later increased in size, by someone other than the artist, through the addition of laths app. 1 cm broad along each side
Stretcher/strainer depth	2.0 cm
Traces left by manufacture/processing	unusual original construction: the corner joints are mitred recto, but take the form of rectangular lap-joints verso; there are cheeks for a two-wedge stretching system, the fixing of the top wedge in each corner being made possible by covering the joint with a small (6.5 cm x 10.0 cm) wooden board of identical material; the possibility that these were added later can be excluded, as in the bottom left-hand corner the grain of the wood of the stretcher precisely matches that of the rectangular board (figs 2, 6)
Manufacturer's/dealer's marks	undetermined, as the lining makes it impossible to see the rear of the canvas (fig. 2); however, the other technological findings make it unlikely that there are any



## Ground

Sizing	none present (fibres of the canvas are embedded in the ground)
Colour	white
Application	presumably single layer applied after cutting-to-size and stretching
Binding medium	presumably glue
Texture	very thin layer, does not fill all the pores

## Composition planning/Underpainting/Underdrawing

Medium/technique	in two stages: 1. charcoal(?), 2. brush underdrawing in thin blue paint (figs 8, 9)
Extent/character	infrared reflectogram and microscopic inspection show that the whole composition was first laid-in in the form of a drawing and that in the course of a subsequent stage the forms were fixed or else corrected by a brush-drawing in semi-transparent blue paint
Pentimenti	clear deviation above all in the top left-hand corner, where there are recognizable outlines of a shape that cannot be precisely defined; this had already reached the brush-and-blue-paint stage (see above); it may be an animal; in the top and centre-right areas of the picture there are numerous vertical lines which again are clearly not matched by anything in the visible composition, see above (fig. 5)



## Paint layer

### Paint application/technique and artist's own revision

very thin application in layers of paints with a low oil-content, in some cases semi-transparent, which cover the ground almost completely; brushstrokes often dashed, in a vertical direction; evidently deliberate use of contrasting colours in not entirely opaque successive layers (fig. 10); in spite of the extensive multi-stage planning, numerous pentimenti at the painting stage: thus for example Gauguin corrected the coloration behind the right hip, the attitude of the right arm (fig. 12) and also of the little finger of the left hand, as is shown clearly in the X-ray (fig. 6)

### Painting tools

various brushes of differing breadth; the use of pointed brushes can clearly be inferred in particular cases (signature, blue outlines, light-green brushstrokes in the bottom right-hand corner)

### Surface structure

very smooth; Gauguin evidently avoided impasto applications, instead the texture of the canvas is emphasized by the concentration of the thin paint for preference on the elevations of the fabric structure (figs 10, 11); in addition the structure has been flattened further by the early lining

### Palette

visual microscopic inspection reveals: white, bright yellow, orange, ochre, pale red, medium red lake, medium blue, dark blue, dark green, medium green  
VIS spectrometry: chrome yellow(?), cadmium yellow(?), iron-oxide yellow, rose madder, cobalt blue, Prussian blue, ultramarine(?), zinc green(?)

### Binding mediums

presumably oil



## Surface finish

Authenticity/Condition	varnished, not authentic
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## Signature/Mark

When?	signature and date bottom right, in diluted blue paint applied with a pointed brush after the underlying layers had dried
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Autograph signature	accords with known autograph signatures of Gauguin dating from the same period
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Serial	–
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## Frame

Authenticity	not authentic; the format was adjusted to the increased size of the picture after it was lined; it is however an old frame, whose condition and method of manufacture suggest that it has been associated with the picture from a very early date
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## State of preservation

Early lining, presumably carried out between 1913 and 1928, with extension of the picture surface by app. 1 cm all round through additions to the stretcher and retouching of the edges; lining with starch-based paste(?) on a manually primed canvas (fig. 13), unidentifiable newsprint remnants can be seen on the right-hand turnover edge, remains of opaque brownish binder (deriving from a facing during the lining?) are still present on the surface of the picture; the surface-layer has been subject to severe flattening; extensive semi-transparent retouching measures along the edges of the picture, in some places also in the interior, can be dated on the basis of early illustrations to the time of the above-mentioned lining; two holes in the fabric (boy's left knee and thigh) have been repaired by being bridged over with threads recto (fig. 6).



### Additional remarks

It is now known that the painting was put in store in the depository of the art-dealers Boussod, Valadon et Cie on the Boulevard Montmartre in Paris in 1889, the year it was painted, although it is not known why. In any case Theo van Gogh, who worked there, was behind this measure, evidently wishing to support his brother's friend [Stolwijk/Thomson 1999, p. 212]. Evidently there was no purchaser, as in the extensive provenance of the painting, Gauguin's wife Mette is said to have been the next owner [Pont-Aven 1966, p. 52].

### Literature

- Andree 1964: Rolf Andree, Katalog der Gemälde des 19. Jahrhunderts im Wallraf-Richartz-Museum, Cologne 1964, p. 43, with ill.
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- Paul Gauguin, 1848-1903, exhib. cat., Kunsthalle Basel, July - August 1928, cat. no. 46, p. 17
- Christensen 1993: Carol Christensen, The Painting Materials and Techniques of Paul Gauguin, in: Conservation Research, Monograph Series II, Studies in the History of Art, 41, 1993, 63-103
- Jirat-Wasiutynski/Newton 2000: Wojtech Jirat-Wasiutynski, H. Travers Newton, Technique and Meaning in the Paintings of Paul Gauguin, Cambridge/New York 2000
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- Stevenson 2005: Lesley Stevenson, Gauguin's Vision: A Discussion of Materials and Technique, in: Belinda Thomson (ed.), Gauguin's Vision, exhib. cat., National Galleries of Scotland, 6 July - 2 October 2005, Edinburgh 2005, 111-119
- Stolwijk/Thomson 1999: Chris Stolwijk, Richard Thomson: Theo van Gogh 1857 - 1891, Art dealer, collector and brother of Vincent, exhib. cat. Van Gogh Museum Amsterdam, 24 June - 5 September 1999, Réunion des Musées Nationaux/Musée d'Orsay, Paris, 27 September 1999 - 9 January 2000, Amsterdam 1999, p. 212
- Wildenstein 1964: Georges Wildenstein, Gauguin, Catalogue I, Paris 1964, cat. no. 339, p. 130, with ill.

### Source of illustrations

Fig. 12: London, Tate 2007

All further illustrations and figures: Wallraf-Richartz-Museum & Fondation Corboud





### Examination methods used

- ✓ Incident light
- ✓ Raking light
- Reflected light
- ✓ Transmitted light
- ✓ Ultraviolet fluorescence
- ✓ Infrared reflectography
- False-colour infrared reflectography
- ✓ X-ray
- ✓ Stereomicroscopy
- ✓ VIS spectrometry
- Wood identification
- FTIR (Fourier transform spectroscopy)
- EDX (Energy Dispersive X-ray analysis)
- Microchemical analysis

Author of examination: Katja Lewerentz  
Author of brief report: Katja Lewerentz

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Date: 10/2008





Fig. 1  
Recto



Fig. 2  
Verso, lined



Fig. 3  
Raking light

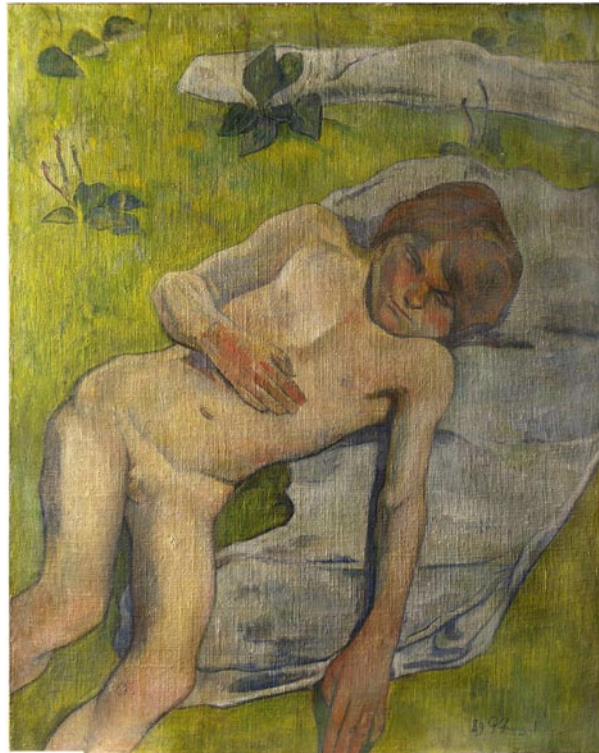


Fig. 4  
UV fluorescence

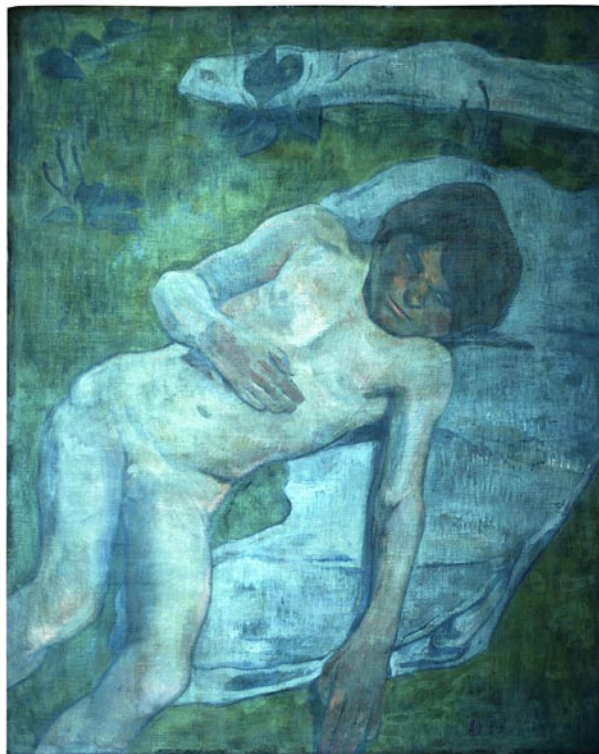






Fig. 5  
IR reflectogram shows  
lines, in some cases  
unexplained, and clearly  
deviating from the  
visible painting, e.g. in  
the top left-hand corner,  
or the verticals in the  
right-hand half of the  
picture

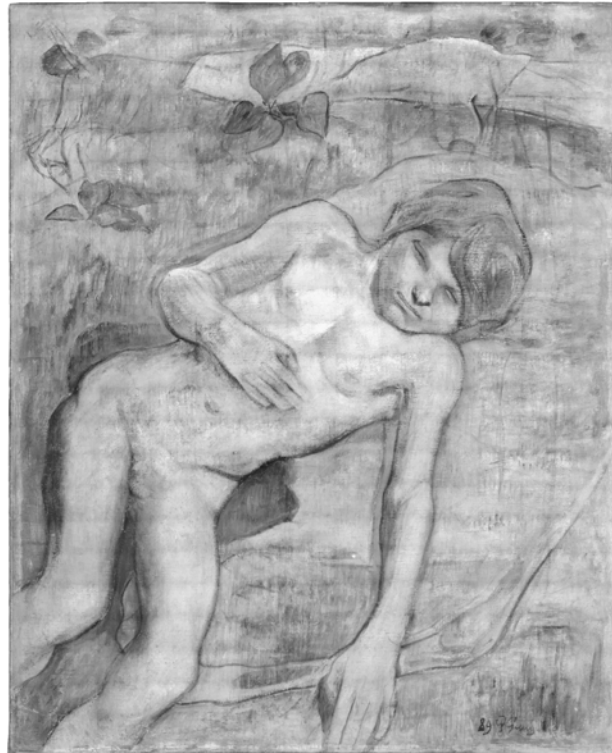


Fig. 6  
X-ray



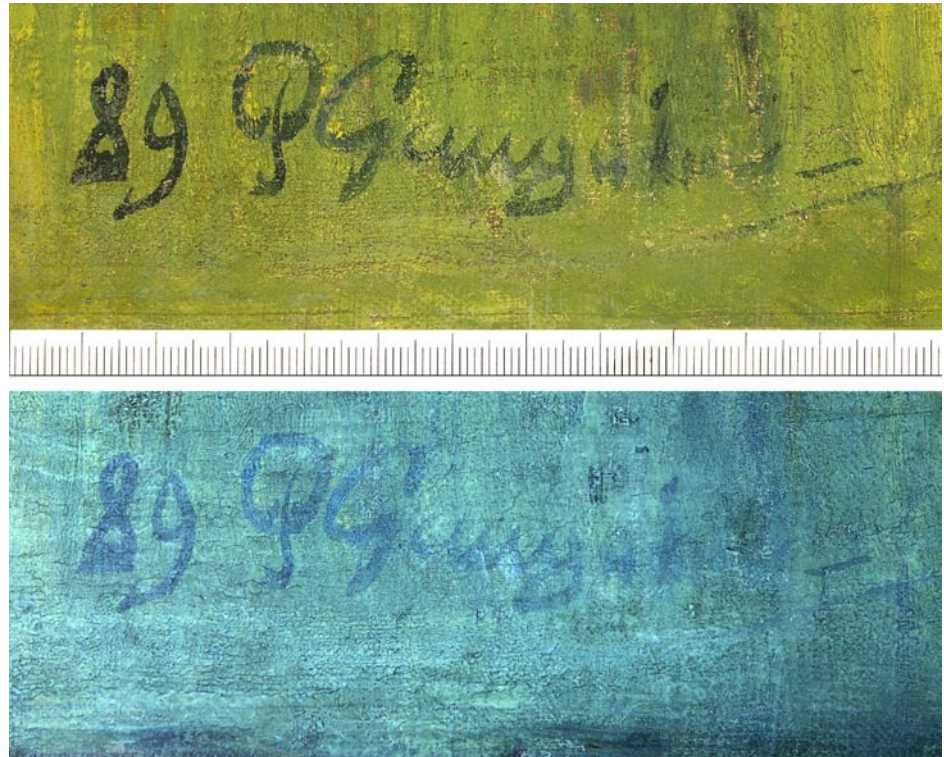


Fig. 7  
Details, signature under  
incident light (top) and  
under UV

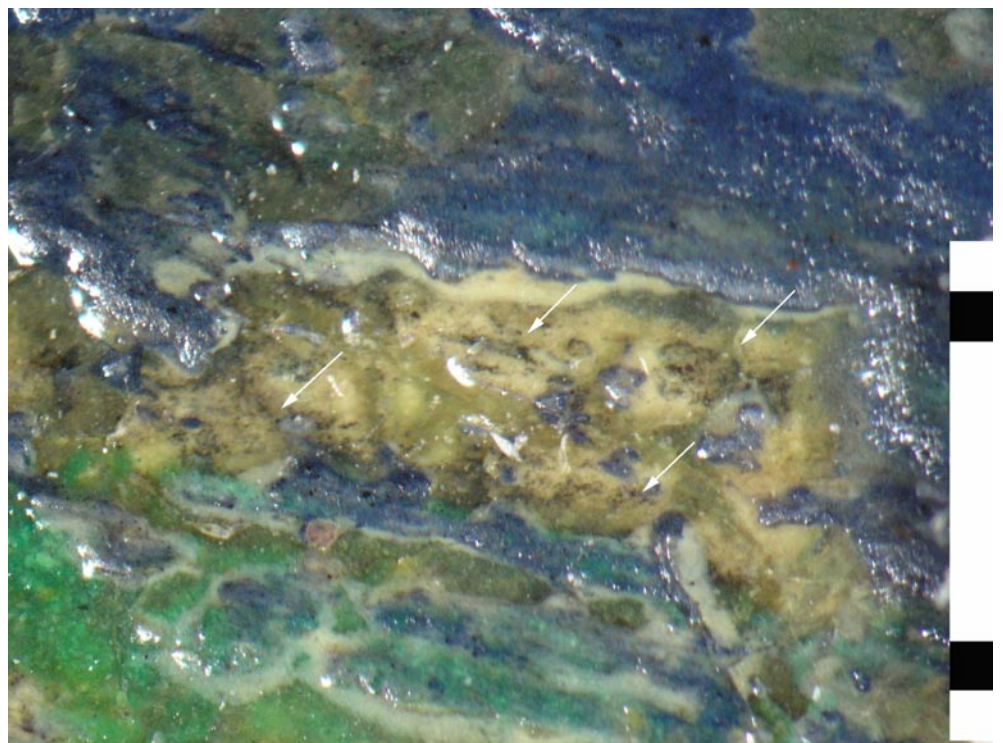


Fig. 8  
Charcoal particles from  
the first underdrawing  
are visible (arrows),  
microscopic photograph  
(M = 1 mm)





Fig. 9  
Blue brush-drawing;  
here the outline was  
subsequently revised  
in green, microscopic  
photograph (M = 1 mm)

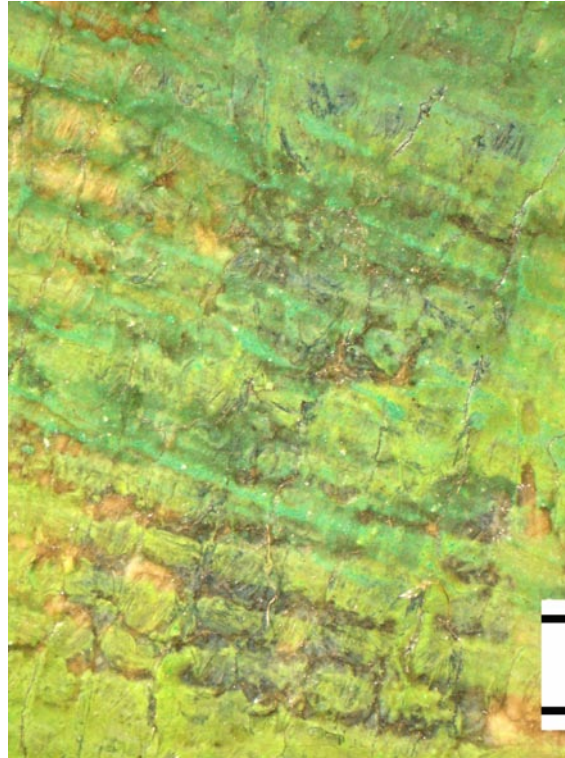


Fig. 10  
Detail, flesh-tones,  
painterly structure is  
particularly discernible  
under the microscope,  
microscopic photograph  
(bottom) (M = 1 mm)

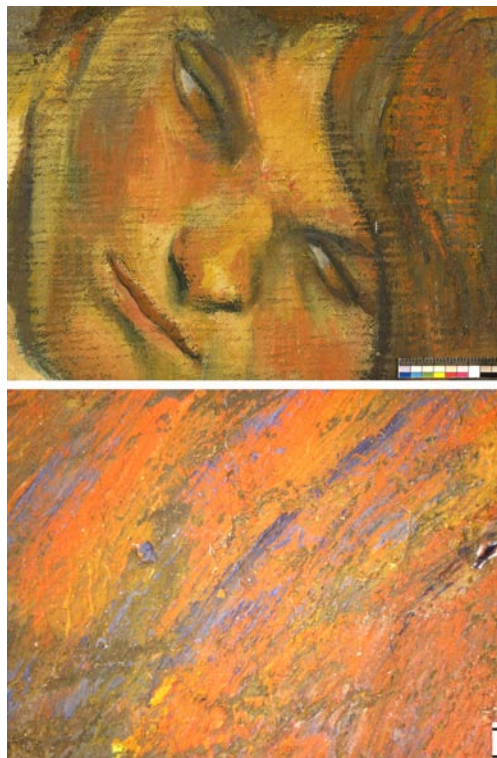






Fig. 11  
Detail of the hand under  
raking light, thin paint  
application

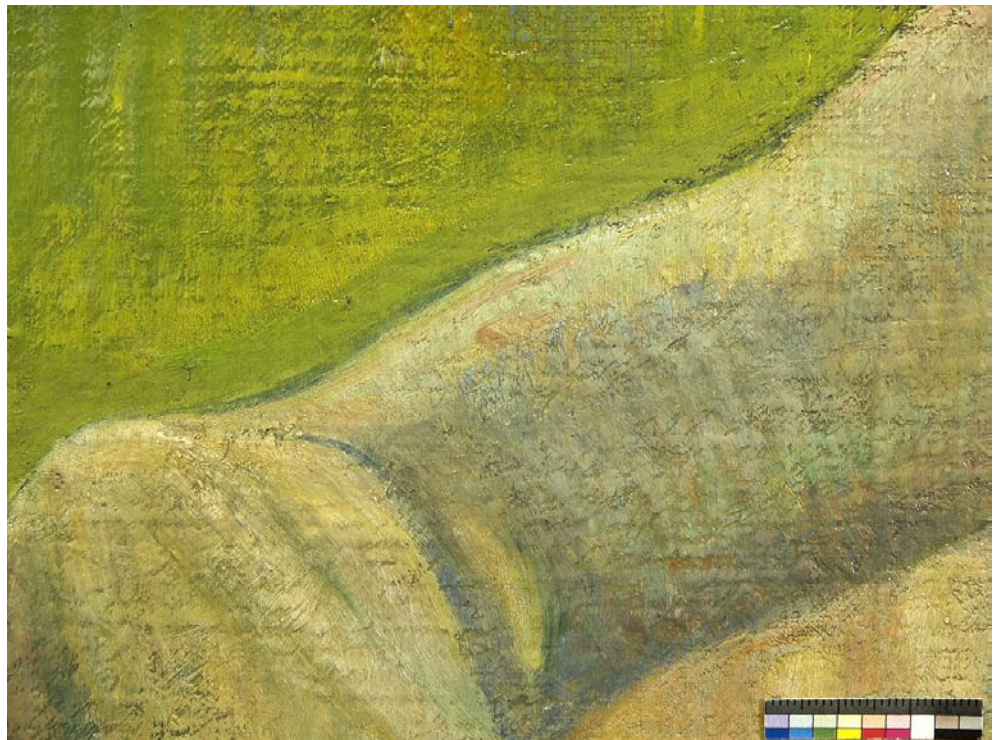


Fig. 12  
Detail, revision of the  
contour of the right arm





Fig. 13

Change in size by someone other than the artist: the original dimensions of the picture (white frame) were changed on all sides in the course of a lining and re-stretching procedure at an early date, as an historic 1913 b/w photograph of the picture, shows when compared to the dimensions of the picture today. The adjacent details of the turnover edge show the original tacking holes along the present edge of the picture (right, arrows) and the use of a primed lining canvas (far right)



Fig. 14

Paul Gauguin, *The Tahitians*, c. 1891, oil over chalk/charcoal on paper, 85.4 cm x 101.9 cm, Tate, London

