In New York City, the Metropolitan Museum of Art is showing 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, which are situated around 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. One can find his grave in a peaceful cemetery on a hill overlooking the sea.

Marquesan 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 two and a half hours over rough, unpaved roads to see some ancient tiki gods carved from stone near the village of Puea mau. Discovered some 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, Tahiatikaomata, was born to Gauguin and Marie Rose Vaeoho on Sept. 14, 1902. Tipahaehae and his 8-year-old grandson, who had been named after the famous painter, rode on a horse to a beach where I was scheduled to interview them. Young Paul had also named his horse Paul Gauguin.

Tipahaehae explained that he was not an artist but 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 Marquesan 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.

IF YOU GO

Transportation: I flew Air Tahiti Nui from Los Angeles to Papeete in an Airbus A340 aircraft, which took around seven hours. The service was excellent. For reservations and fares: (877) 824-4846; www.flyatn.com. From Papeete I flew Air Tahiti on a twin-engine aircraft to the Marquesas in a 42-passenger ATR plane, a three-hour flight. For information: 011-689-86-42-42; Fax: 011-689-86-40-69; www.airtahiti.aero; e-mail: reservation@airtahiti.pf.

Transportation by ship: In 2005 and 2006, the luxurious MS Paul Gauguin, which tours the Society Islands and the Tuamotu Atolies, will also be making trips to the Marquesas Islands. Departure dates from Papeete, Tahiti, to the Marquesas in 2005 are: June 21, July 12, Nov. 19 and Dec. 17. Call (800) 285-1835; www.rssc.com.

Lodging: I stayed at the Hiva Oa Pearl Lodge in a bungalow with a high A-frame ceiling and a wooden roof. The view of the ocean and mountains was stunningly beautiful. Amenities included a mini-bar, deck with two wooden chairs, white cotton robe, hair dryer and a supply of bug spray. Rates begin at around $188. Call 011-689-50-84-52; e-mail: hiva.oa.pearl@mail.pf; www.pearlresorts.com.

Patricia Arrigoni is a freelance travel writer.

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