

Imaginary Places

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IPlaces0.pdf	Introduction
IPlaces1.pdf	Buleria Madrugada
IPlaces2.pdf	Belau Belau
IPlaces3.pdf	Fortress of the Dead
IPlaces4.pdf	Abbe at Urban
IPlaces5.pdf	Plaza of the Patriots
IPlaces6.pdf	Bedou
IPlaces7.pdf	Spawning Ground
IPlaces8.pdf	Space Station M
IPlaces9.pdf	Maoam

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IMAGINARY PLACES II **Belau Belau**

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Belau Belau

Father Lumino Guzman, a Jesuit, records in his private **journal** that a person using the name Gauguin visited Belau for a brief period during his tenure as missionary in those parts. The person described by the priest was *someone who appeared to be unhappy and in need of a shave*. We do not know if this was in fact the famous French painter on his way to Tahiti, but it seems at least possible. A painting with all the stylistic earmarks of a Gauguin was reported to the Cultural Affairs Department in 1952. It is said to be held inside a shed with no doors or windows that was built by persons unknown in the northern village of Ngalrod.

The rubak (the chiefs of Ngalrod) meet every Thursday to discuss the contents of the painting, which has not been seen in the full light of day since being entombed sometime during the opening phase of World War II. A few people have viewed portions of the painting through a space between the boards that make the south wall of the shed. Their reports vary as to the nature of the subject, or subjects, depicted, but in general it is agreed

that the theme is wholly Belauan, and intended to be celebratory.

A **watercolor** purported to be a second proof of the passage of Gauguin turned up in 1975 in the village of Chrup on the southern island of Paliu Makku. It appeared rather suddenly, and out of nowhere, during a feast at which many persons had eaten the intestines of a sea turtle and had drunk a fair amount of the liquid called *lieuki*.

The mysterious appearance of a second work of art—in this instance an oil painting that resembles the work of Cuban artist **Wilfredo Lam**—suggests Gauguin, if he visited Belau Belau, was not the only western artist to do so.

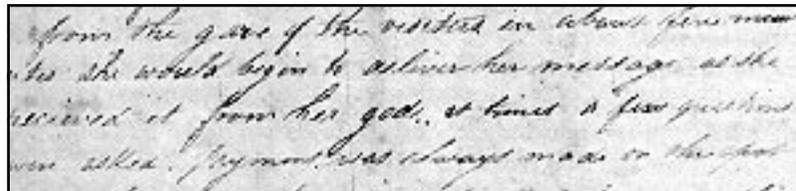
Such are the pressing issues that occupy the minds and hearts of the natives of this happy land. To date no one has suggested that the shed in Ngalrod be opened, though pressure to do that is being brought by foreign historians who have papers in progress, papers upon which their reputations and salaries depend.



Father Lumino Guzman

Sepia ink drawing (originally 9x14 inches, but since trimmed to eliminate rough edges).

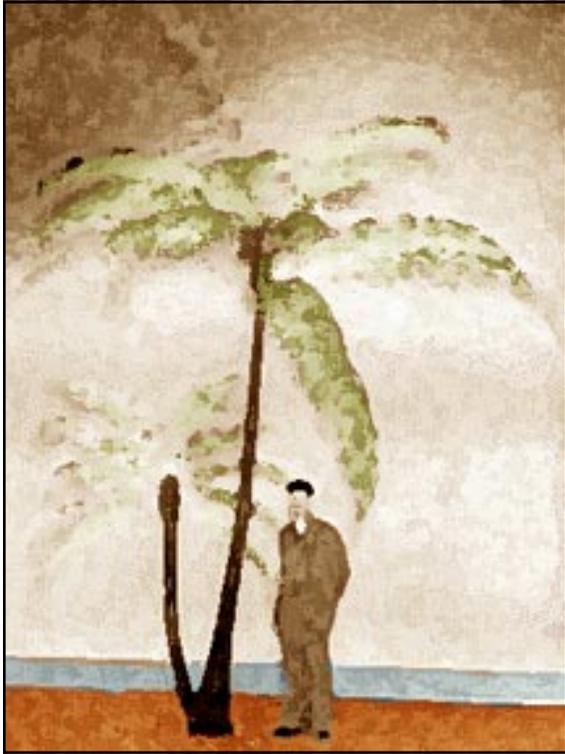
This remarkable sketch, though unsigned, is probably the work of G. H. Randolph, ship's steward, HMS *Howard*. The *Howard* visited Belau Belau on June 9, 1958, and remained in port for approximately six weeks. Guzman would have been 90 years old in 1958. He was reportedly very frail at that time, and, indeed, he died in the summer of the following year. The Christ-like image at left appeared—some say miraculously—in 1978, causing the drawing to be of some interest to the Holy Office in Rome.



Writing Specimen

From the Diary of Father Lumino Guzman.

Analysis of the specimen reveals a man accustomed to telling the truth. Though born in Santiago, Chile, he seems to have favored the use of English insofar as his diary is concerned. He was fluent in at least six languages, but writing in English was known to be his favorite recreation.



Untitled Watercolor

Reputed to be the work of Gauguin.

Since its discovery in 1975, several experts have examined the work. Though they are unable to make a definitive determination of its authenticity, most agree that it is a striking work that has all the earmarks of a Gauguin. Dr. Suzan Frohm, University of Fresno, has been attempting to wrest the watercolor from the governor of the island (a collector of Belauan minutia) for the purposes of scientific testing in the United States, but so far the governor has been unwilling to let it pass from his care. The governor is himself a talented painter. His imitations of the masters have earned him favorable notice throughout the western Pacific.



Untitled Oil

There is not a shred of evidence to suggest that the artist Wilfredo Lam ever visited Belau Belau. Moreover there is no evidence that anyone—the inadequacy of customs records notwithstanding—ever brought a painting by the Cuban master into the country. Still, there it is. This untitled (and, unfortunately, unsigned) work has the uncanny look of a Lam. Thematically it employs the same *wild mythical totemism* for which the work of Lam is famous. And, clearly, there is just a hint of the same *deranged sense of reality* that is common to painters in the Americas, north and south.

A certain fishiness is suggested in the forms depicted in the painting, but we are unable to decide if the author is Cuban or Belauan; an island is an island, of course, whether in the Caribbean or the western Pacific. If we could identify the fish we might be able to say more precisely where the form originated. But, alas, there is no characteristic to help in that regard.

The governor, who says the painting was delivered to his doorstep in the dead of night by unknown persons, has taken steps to have it authenticated by a team of experts currently working under contract in the Tourism Section of the Chamber of Commerce. Pending payment of the examination fee, a report will be forthcoming.