**ARTS & LETTERS**

Soames Forsyte, Connoisseur

"The Soames Forsyte Collection: A Study in Fictional Taste" by Leonee Ormond, in *The Burlington Magazine* (Nov. 1977), Elm House, 10-16 Elm St., London WC1, England.

Although long regarded as a gold mine for the social historian, John Galsworthy's fictional series, *The Forsyte Saga*, has never been recognized as a harbinger of changing English taste in art. Businessman Soames Forsyte, the *Saga*'s central character, is a collector of paintings; by the time the novels have spanned the years 1886–1926, Soames has acquired works by Matisse and Picasso—well before his real-life English contemporaries had realized their value. In fact, writes Ormond, a professor of English at King's College, London, Soames becomes "the most enterprising and intelligent collector in the whole range of the English novel."

Though not a collector himself, Galsworthy (1867–1933) frequented art galleries and private collections. After World War I, his interest in art grew, and he transmitted the same interest to Soames. In the early novels, Soames's taste for French paintings is "hardly exceptional," reflecting the average rich Englishman's preference for the more traditional artists of the 1880s and 1890s. By 1910, however, he has already acquired a Monet ("stripey, streaky creations") and works by other Impressionists and post-Impressionists (Matisse and Gauguin, in particular). Despite "aesthetic reservations," Soames purchases these paintings with his eye "firmly fixed on the market."

Galsworthy created Soames as the epitome of "that instinct to possession" which is the focus of the *Saga*. But Soames the collector, Ormond contends, has a weakness for beauty that conflicts with his "cautious flair for moneymaking." And in *Swan Song* (1928), the final Forsyte novel, Soames risks his life to rescue his collection from a fire in his gallery—and saves his favorite Gauguin: "a South Sea girl with nothing on."
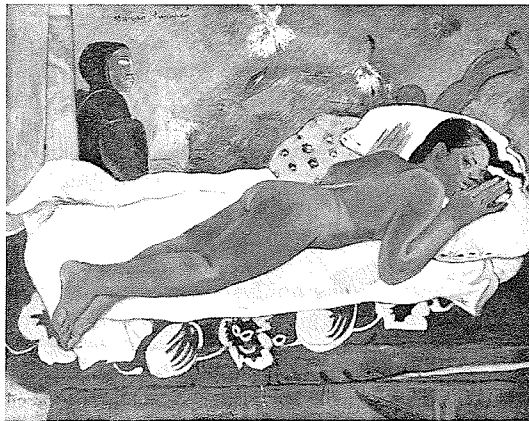
Paul Gauguin painted Manoa Tupapau *in 1892. Was this the painting that graced the gallery of the fictional Soames Forsyte?*

Courtesy of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, N.Y.