

MUSEUMS AUSTRALIA CONFERENCE

ICOM AUSTRALIA PANEL

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Towards a new profile for Pacific collections in Australian museums

I thank Ian Galloway and the conference organizers for their invitation to participate in this panel and welcome the opportunity to report on some recent projects and new developments linking academic researchers, museums and communities. i

It is increasingly important to find ways collections may be used to generate new relationships with indigenous custodians and communities and between people of different generations and backgrounds. Research interests in collections may bring together interdisciplinary groups of scholars from diverse institutions and theoretical viewpoints to discuss and present their views. Reviewing Pacific collections and collectors in a post-colonial framework of Pacific-Australian relationships may give rise to new theoretical formulations, present new possibilities or partnerships and embark on voyages of greater appreciation and mutual understanding. Through a sequence of conferences and workshops in 2006-2007, as well as in continuing liaison with museums and communities, it has become apparent that there is a significant opportunity for Australian scholars to conduct research projects in collaboration with museums, art galleries and libraries on the rich but often under-utilised collections of material culture, photographs and documents that tell the story of Australia in the Pacific – the Pacific in Australia.

One impetus to make new projects happen was the unexpectedly high response from both scholars and museum professionals to the call for papers for the 'Hunting the Collectors' sessions at the inaugural conference of the Australian Association for the Advancement of Pacific Studies (AAAPS), held at the Queensland University of Technology in January, 2006. The sessions took up two full days and in the discussion that followed it emerged that the AAAPS

Conference had provided a rare opportunity for academics with an interest in Pacific collections in Australian museums, as well as museum professionals responsible for them, to share their knowledge and expertise in the hope of raising the profile of the abundant wealth of cultural heritage represented in Australia's collections, too often under-researched and rarely displayed. Nineteen of the conference papers now appear in a volume edited by myself and Max Quanchi, *Hunting the Collectors: Pacific Collections in Australia's Museums, Art Galleries and Archives*.

While the Pacific collections have not been a priority area for some time, as was frankly admitted in a number of presentations at the conference, many of the National and State public museums, art galleries and libraries throughout Australia are re-appraising the state and status of their collections, for example the review of Pacific collections held by the NMA being undertaken by David Kaus and Anna Edmunston at NMA. ii Several collections of material culture from Papua New Guinea, which are now held by the National Museum of Australia, including the 'Official Papuan Collection' formed by Lieutenant Governor Sir Hubert Murray (1908-40) and the 'Rabaul' Collectionⁱⁱⁱ were moved between institutions for fifty years, drifting ever further away from public attention.^{iv} Following an investigation of similar problems in American museums, Anne-Marie Cantwell and Nan Rothschild wrote that, "[t]hese very collections, these neglected offspring of so many past anthropological expeditions, can . . . be studied in ways unimagined at the time of their acquisition". They compiled the reasons for museums neglect of anthropological collections and indicated ways that interest in and access to them may be revived, including that there had been a noticeable lack of interest in working with material culture and consequently with collections of it. As well, there were problems inherent in the use of museum collections, mostly due to insufficient provenance, early collecting strategies (poor documentation, collectors with little methodology), and the dispersion of collections to other institutions. Further, museum collections were not often used as a teaching resource and even students had little exposure to collections during their training, even for careers in museum professions. Students and

researchers often felt discouraged because many museums were faced with inadequate funding for research facilities, conservation and exhibition development. v

The role of Museums, galleries, libraries and archives changed as the twentieth century drew to a close. As Dawn Casey, the founding Director of the National Museum of Australia, noted in 2001, “Museums can no longer be seen as storehouses for objects and as venues for passive exhibitions”.vi She added that museums around the world were “rethinking their role and purpose in society”.vii They were no longer sites of visitation for learning-by-looking, where the “national self was defined through the encounter with the other, especially the non-European other”.viii What this will mean for objects, art and archives collected from the Pacific over the last two hundred years is as yet uncertain.

But they will not just remain in storerooms and static exhibitions but will become, in Anita Herle’s visionary projection, essential to cross cultural encounters and productive exchanges between museums and source communities as they connect and develop multiple interpretive exhibition frameworks and museum research projects.ix

There is a new tendency world-wide expressed in the theme of ‘Pacific Art in World View: exhibition, research and relationships’, the 9th International Symposium of the Pacific Arts Association, which will be held at Musee Quai Branly in July 2007. I quote from the conference website

At a time when a large number of museums and cultural centres around the world are being built or extended or having their collections redisplayed, it seems appropriate to reflect on past and present philosophies and approaches to the display of historical and contemporary Pacific collections. The intention is to understand the practices of the past and inform those who are currently engaged in work in the Pacific and beyond.

This outlook is a starting point for a reflection on a new profile for Pacific collections in Australian museums. But first, here’s another example from

overseas, the Melanesia Project at the British Museum. Three expatriate Australians, Nicholas Thomas), Lissant Bolton and Liz Bonshek x are engaged in the 5-year Melanesia Project, a joint initiative of Goldsmiths College, University College London and the British Museum, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council. One of their quests, as expressed by Thomas, asks “Is there a way of presenting Pacific arts that neither reproduces classic ahistorical constructions of tribal culture and art, nor the art history of primitivism?”^{xi} To this end part of their project is the Melanesia Project’s Artist-in-Residence program,^{xii} which “seeks to reconnect indigenous artists to the collections as well as record new narratives for the museum”.

One positive move forward is forming partnerships between researchers and industry partners under the ARC Linkage Grants scheme. For example, Barry Craig of the South Australian Museum sent this information on their nearly completed project, which I have renamed ‘Barry with Arrows’. I précis his project description below and am sure he will provide his detailed version it to those who are interested in his Herculean task

The Upper Sepik-Central New Guinea Project

This three year project, funded by an ARC-Linkage grant, the South Australian Museum and Ok Tedi Mining Ltd., commenced in August 2004. It is designed to explore relationships between material culture on the one hand and language, geographical propinquity, population size and density, subsistence systems and environmental characteristics on the other, in two adjacent regions - the upper Sepik basin and the highlands area of central New Guinea. The role of trade, inter-marriage, migration, ritual and warfare in affecting relationships among the variables will be assessed.

The study is based on comprehensive ethnographic collections held in museums and private hands around the world, assembled mainly during the 1960s-1970s. A PhD student at the University of Adelaide, Andrew Fyfe, is engaged on the project, which is being managed and supervised by Dr

Barry Craig, Curator of Foreign Ethnology at South Australian Museum. Around 40% of the 9000 objects being analysed by this study were collected by Craig; his detailed field notes and intimate knowledge of the region have been essential in the planning and execution of this project.

I will have to skip the methodology section for want of time... A website (<http://uscngp.sai.net.au>) has been designed on which reports are posted, the objectives are to include a sample of artifact types and produce the dataset on DVD with copies distributed to the PNG National Museum and high schools in the study region, for cultural heritage and educational use. Fyfe has completed the identification of sixteen different types of binding on arrows and coded some 3000 arrows according to the presence of these characteristics; a similar process has identified ten different characteristics of string bag techniques and some 400 bags have been coded accordingly. A craft specialist in weaving and binding has voluntarily assisted in identifying these characteristics and reproducing them for validation purposes. Currently, the coding of the structure of the designs carved on arrows is being done according to the system developed by Washburn & Crowe (*Symmetries of Culture* 1988, p.83). ...

Fyfe has chosen these two object classes (arrows and string bags) as the subject of his thesis because one relies on transmission of skills primarily from father to son and the other on transmission from mother to daughter. ...

It is hoped that other agencies are able to acquire the funding to continue with this approach to New Guinea material culture research until the whole island is incorporated and a true ethnographic atlas of New Guinea can be developed, on a par with the language atlases developed by Pacific linguists. Such an outcome will be of inestimable value for cultural heritage in Papua New Guinea and [West] Papua/Indonesia.

Such an approach to research of museum ethnographic collections can shift museums away from the perception that they are old age homes for dying

cultures, or worse (as one South Australian state government cabinet minister was overheard to say), 'that place where they keep pickled rats'.^{xiii}

Other ARC Linkage projects are underway, for example PARADISEC, is well known for its work on sourcing and digitizing 'endangered' images and music from the Pacific region. For the NLA's magnificent South Seas website, now up and running, Paul Turnbull of Griffith University developed highly specialized IT tools and resources.

A major advance in strengthening relationships between Australian museums and Pacific nation's museums and cultural centres is ICOM Australia's Pacific Partners program (IMAPP). This project stands for the kind of synergy, knowledge sharing and capacity building that is useful, productive and beneficial to all who participate in it, as Meredith has explained in her paper. IMAPP's principal objective is capacity building in under-resourced Pacific Islands nation's museums with hands-on projects – this is indicative of what a consensus of museum policy-makers can achieve. While IMAPP assists capacity building in Pacific museums, another goal of PIMA is to implement indigenous people's rights and interests in overseas collections of their cultural heritage. Over the past two decades of introducing Indigenous cultural policies, Australian museums and other public institutions are acting more insightfully according to tenets of shared custodianship and stewardship of cultural heritage - as a result they have become hosts to expanding knowledge, enriched collections and innovative exhibitions. xiv

PIMA's concerns regarding the implementation of cultural protocols and ethical procedures is matched by the concerns of Pacific communities resident in Australia, a high percentage of who live in Queensland, including some 30,000 Australian South Sea Islanders, the oldest Pacific-Australian community. A team of Queensland-based researchers aims to work with Australian and Pacific museums and communities to raise the profile of the extensive Pacific collections in Australian museums art galleries and archives, which they see as tangible

evidence of the times and places where Australian and Pacific history, societies and cultures interconnect and interact.

AAAPS

The establishment of the Australian Association for the Advancement of Pacific Studies (AAAPS) in January 2006 brought together members from different disciplines and perspectives and formed a focal point for Australia's resident Pacific expertise. AAAPS launched several initiatives to encourage informed dialogue between Pacific scholars, teachers, museum professionals, community groups and policy makers.

The objectives of AAAPS stress the importance of linking scholarly research with Pacific communities in Australia, the region and internationally. Participants in AAAPS conferences, seminars and workshops are interested in developing linkages – for example between universities and museums – and intensifying cross-disciplinary networks.

In 2006 AAAPS received small grants from the International Centre for Excellence in Asia-Pacific Studies and the ARC Pacific Futures Network for workshops designed to bring together diverse and knowledgeable groups to consider synergies between scholars and government cultural institutions in Australia and the Pacific, establish linkages and interactions with Australian South Sea Islander and other Pacific Islander communities resident in Australia, and identify priorities for major collaborative projects locally and internationally. The Australian South Sea Islander Community Workshop, held at the Queensland Museum in June, 2006, generated a comprehensive report and an ASSI Bibliography, copies of which are available on request.

The Queensland-based team of scholars, Clive Moore, Amareswar Galla, Kevin Clements, Susan Cochrane, Max Quanchi, envisages a comprehensive project that would need to be undertaken as a three-year ARC Linkage Grant. The proposed mapping project and resulting National Inventory foreshadows a new direction in collaborative research and partnership. Seed funding has enabled pilot projects to investigate priorities with museum and community partners and define the major project.

Stage 1, to establish an Australia-wide and Australia-Pacific Regional Dialogue, is already underway. It has been made possible by funding for workshops awarded to AAAPS from ICEAPS and APFRN and Cochrane's NMA Fellowship. The ASSI Workshop and Pacific Islander Community consultations took place in 2006. In November, 2007, a Museum Studies Masterclass and consecutive workshops at the NMA will draw together museum professionals, researchers and community representatives from Australia and the Pacific. On the agenda for these meetings are: the recognition of indigenous expertise; expanding the role of source communities, Pacific museums and other stakeholders vis a vis collections in Australian institutions; differences in methods of production and attitudes to display used in Pacific communities and museums that might be usefully adopted; expansion of the role of artists and other specialists in relation to displays of historical and contemporary material; further potential developments in the Pacific Partnership program where mutual benefits arise from exchange and skill-sharing and the implementation of cultural protocols and policies, such as PIMA's Code of Ethics.

The longer-term objective of the Linkage project is the mapping of Pacific collections in Australia. Its aim is to create a unified and clear package – a National Inventory of Pacific Collections - that promotes Australia's Pacific resources in a culturally appropriate manner to enhance Pacific scholarship in Australia and cultural reconciliation on a broad scale with our Pacific neighbours. Its final form is envisaged as a digitised national information service revealing the wealth of Pacific collections in Australian cultural institutions.

The last (and only) inventory of Pacific collections in Australian museums was undertaken under a UNESCO program in 1980 (Bolton 1980), but was limited to material culture objects in Australia's natural history/ethnographic museums. No complete national inventory has ever been undertaken for Pacific collections, including those in art galleries, archives and libraries in Australia. Because of proximity, Australian cultural institutions have some of the best Pacific collections in the world. Yet we have no complete national inventory of our collections, which is a necessary first base from which to build cultural

reconciliation and utilization. Cataloguing the collections would provide a substantial research tool for Australian scholars across many disciplines and expand the resources for Pacific studies. This National Inventory would, in the first instance, be in the form of a digital resource that could, if demand was sufficient, become a published catalogue. It would be beneficial to all cultural organisations in the Pacific region, improve knowledge of and access to collections of objects, images and documents, identify gaps in collections and disclose opportunities for research and collaborative ventures.^{xv}

ⁱ I wish to acknowledge the assistance of colleagues in putting this paper together: Max Quanchi, my co-editor of *Hunting the Collectors: Pacific Collections in Australian Museums, Art Galleries and Archives*, and Clive Moore, President of the Australian Association for the Advancement of Pacific Studies (AAAPS)

ⁱⁱ as explained by David Kaus for the NMA, Susan Woodburn for the NLA, Susan Cochrane for the NGA, Ewan Maidment and Tatania Antsoupova

ⁱⁱⁱ formed under the German occupation of New Guinea and taken into possession by Australian authorities following the defeat of Germany in 1918

^{iv} Liz Bonshek traces the movements of Pacific collections entrusted to the Commonwealth government. 'Ownership of a Peripatetic Collection: Raymond Firth's Collection from Tikopia, Solomon Islands'. *Records of the Australian Museum*. Supplement 29 (2004), pp37-46.

^v Anne-Marie Cantwell and Nan A Rothschild, "The Future of the Past". Cantwell, James Griffin and Rothschild (eds), 1981 *The Research Potential of Anthropological Museum Collections*. NY/NY :Annals of the NY Academy of Sciences, Vol 376. p.581

^{vi} Dawn Casey, "Foreword" in Darryl McIntyre and Kirsten Wehner, eds, *National museums; negotiating history; conference proceedings*, Canberra: National Museum of Australia, 2001, iii.

^{vii} Dawn Casey, "The National Museum of Australia: exploring the past, illuminating the present and imagining the future", *Ibid.*, 3.

^{viii} Graeme Davison, "National museums in a global age; observations abroad and reflections at home", *Ibid.*, 12.

^{ix} Robert Welsch, "Introduction" in Anita Herle, Nick Stanley, Karen Stevenson and Robert Welsch, eds, *Pacific Art: persistence, change and meaning*, Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2002, 10. See also, Anita Herle, "Objects, agency and museums; continuing dialogues between the Torres Strait and Cambridge", *Ibid.*, 231-49.

^x *After leaving his position as Director of the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research at the ANU, Nicholas Thomas took up an appointment at Goldsmith's College, he is now Director of the Cambridge Museum of*

Anthropology. Lissant Bolton and Elizabeth (Liz) Bonshek) both anthropologists, formerly worked at the Australian Museum.

^{xi} ‘Oceania: exhibiting cultural exchange’. Paper presented at the PAA (Europe) Meeting, Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, May 2006.

^{xii} British artist, Rebecca Jewell’ focuses on the narrative of the object since its removal from its source community. Samuel Laguna, a painter from the Trobriand Islands, worked with objects from his home islands dating back to 1895. Ralph Regenvanu, artist and then Director of the Vanuatu Cultural Centre was the third artist in the project. Lissant Bolton, with Bonshek, Jewell, Regenvanu, presentation at the PAA (Europe) Meeting, Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, May 2006.

^{xiii} Information provided by Barry Craig, 2 May 2007.

^{xiv} When the United Nations declared 1993 ‘The Year of the World’s Indigenous Peoples’, it spearheaded a decade of strengthening perceptions of indigenous rights and implementing policies and practices of indigenous representation. This was taken seriously by Australian museums and indigenous people welcomed the breakthrough. New policies were implemented, and the profile of Australian museums’ engagement with Indigenous Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people increased exponentially in all areas: administration, advisory councils, employment, programs and activities. People from other cultures in the Pacific region are theoretically included under the revised scope of indigenous policies and practices in Australian museums, but in reality collections representing them remain backstage and the level of engagement with Pacific stakeholders is played in minor key.

^{xv} The International Centre for Excellence in Asia-Pacific Studies supported a University of Queensland–Queensland Museum Workshop in June 2006 into ways of assisting the Australian South Sea Islanders community (the descendants of 19th century labour trade immigrants). One recommendation of this workshop was:

Recommendation 8: Mapping of Pacific Cultural Properties in Australia

The Workshop endorsed the better utilisation and display of cultural properties relating to Australian South Sea Islanders held in Australian cultural institutions and recommended that a survey be made of all Pacific Islander cultural property held in Australian museum collections, archives, and libraries. The International Council of Museums partnership program and the Australian Association for the Advancement of Pacific Studies should be approached for assistance.