



Pacific Art **IN DETAIL**

Jenny Newell

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Preface

The arts of the Pacific are magnificently diverse. This book provides a detailed view into some of this diversity. It is presented like a walk through an exhibition, showcasing treasures from the extraordinary Oceania collection at the British Museum – all organized into themes, with explanatory labels and a curator beside you pointing out aspects of each artefact's significance.

The Oceania collection at the British Museum is one of the world's most significant collections from the Pacific, encompassing around 37,000 items and stretching from 8,000-year-old archaeological finds to contemporary paintings and sculpture. In the Oceania department of the Museum's storehouse are works in wood, stone, bone, textiles, ceramics, feathers, dog fur, shell, coconut shell, plastic, metal and more. These works were made and collected across the breadth of Oceania, a region comprising the Pacific Islands, including Aotearoa (New Zealand) and Australia and the Torres Strait. Some of the collection is on display in the Museum itself, and researchers, artists and members of source communities visit the artefacts in the storeroom. They are also made

more widely accessible through publications and online resources.

More can be discovered about the objects of art in this book through the British Museum's Collection Database on the Museum's website. This database (a work-in-progress, regularly updated) can be searched using a relevant search term or the object's registration number. These numbers are listed at the back of the book. Here you will also find a guide to further reading, a list of references for the sources quoted in the text, more information about the British Museum's collection, and a glossary. More information on Oceanic cultures and the Museum's collection can be found at the Centre for Anthropology at the British Museum's north entrance.

This book is for everyone interested in finding out more about the arts of the Pacific, not just about the examples in the British Museum. The specific objects presented here are representative of the types either still being made by Pacific Islanders or found in historic collections in private and public institutions around the world. A list of institutions with major Pacific collections is included at the end.

In recent decades Pacific Islanders have been increasingly engaged with museum objects, historic photographic collections, and archives as documents of the art forms and techniques of their ancestors. This is part of a broader process within the post-colonial Pacific of rediscovering traditional methods and reinvigorating early art practices. As the artist and scholar Rosanna Raymond has said, museums could become 'arenas for cultural exchange, going outside the boundary of the space into everyday life'.

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What is Pacific Art?

‘We reveal the richness and beauty of our cultures by coming together and sharing them.’

Mary Ama, textile and fibre artist,
Cook Islands and Aotearoa (New Zealand), 2001



The arts of the Pacific Ocean’s many cultures are dazzling in their richness. Some of these arts are easily recognized: from the majestic stone ancestor figures of Rapa Nui (Easter Island), to the spectacular feather headdresses of Papua New Guinea. Closer and more detailed examination, allows us deeper understanding of these arts.

The people of the Pacific Ocean have always created powerful things. Carvings, textiles and architecture, as well as dance, oratory and other performing arts, are all visually potent and have often been about managing the flow of power through people and the land. Many of these works have acted to provide a connection to gods, spirits and ancestors – and attempt to manage their power. The visual effect of an object – its stunning intricacy, its beautifully formed simplicity or its aggressive potency – is central to the object’s power.

As you will see in these pages, Pacific Islander artists today often intersect their work with traditional forms. Some are inspired by the intricately carved canoes and meeting houses, the spectacular ceremonial masks and dance costumes, kites, feather cloaks, and weapons of earlier eras, and either re-create or work from a basis of these forms. Many artists of the contemporary Pacific are also creating new art forms that comment on today’s world,

from sculptural installations combining found objects and photography to performance pieces for a digital environment.

This book presents on an intimate scale a view into the creativity of this dynamic region: its people, places and productions.

The Pacific is the world’s most culturally diverse region. The Pacific Ocean covers one-third of the globe and contains more than 25,000 islands. Depending on where one draws the boundaries, the number of inhabited islands can be said to be about 10,000. Each island group has its distinctive arts, as well as distinctive topographies, cosmologies, societies, politics and economies. Nevertheless, within this diversity, the Pacific is still a region bound together by its connecting ocean and connected histories, with ongoing cultural links between the islands. While there are many smaller regional identities, most Islanders of the Pacific Ocean recognize a degree of shared heritage and shared identity.

There are approaches to life that can be seen embodied in the arts across the great breadth of the Pacific. There are common approaches to the world that have a long history, but still retain validity: the deep-running, potent connections to land, to sea and to family, ancestors and sacred beings. These connections find expression in the

things that Pacific Islanders make. The chapters in this book reflect these important streams within Pacific Island life.

Art has generally been defined by Pacific Islanders over time as something that is carried out with skill – something well made or well performed. One of the skills valued has been ‘indirectness’, the ability to conceal effectively the meanings of things in layers, which are sometimes gradually, but not always, revealed. Gender has always been a key line of division in Pacific cultures. Historically, most activities were assigned to either men or women: men were carvers, tattooists and canoe builders. Women were the makers of barkcloth (*tapa*), potters, plaiters of mats and canoe sails. While many of these divisions in art practice have dissolved, they do continue in some Pacific cultures.



Painted pottery bowl.
Wosera, East Sepik province, Papua New Guinea.
Clay. H. 24cm.

Pacific-wide, artists have historically worked with the stuff of sacredness. The things they made channelled the flow of a sacred power – *mana*. This power flows from the most sacred of founding gods or ancestors down through descendants, and must be managed carefully. A strong, successful leader or a great war canoe has substantial *mana*; contact with both of these must be managed carefully, to avoid damage. Things and activities that are sacred and restricted are *tapu* (a word that, brought back to England by explorer and navigator Captain James Cook, has become ‘taboo’). Carving and tattooing, in many parts of the Pacific, have traditionally been considered *tapu* activities.

On many of the Pacific’s islands, the continuity of cultural traditions was eroded or broken during the 1800s and early 1900s through the actions of missionaries, traders and colonial authorities. Europeans had started travelling through the Pacific from the 1500s, and visiting, trading and settling in the Pacific in significant numbers from the 1770s. After a few decades European nations began forcibly taking land. Bans on traditional practices and the arrival of new materials and techniques had a profound impact.

A mainstay of creative practice in the Pacific, however, has been the ability of

artists to adapt and explore change while maintaining a hold on traditions. Islanders have a long history of innovations inspired by new things and new ideas from beyond their borders. When Europeans and Islanders started encountering each other in a sustained way, they were often captivated by each other’s material creations. Their exchanges – giving gifts, trading, taking – were mutually enthusiastic.

In Europe, insights into new societies, augmented by the evidence in objects brought back by voyagers, stimulated debates about the nature of human society. There was a keen audience for the material culture of the Pacific in museums, private collections and the engraved illustrations in travel accounts, inspiring theatre productions, garden design and a keen market for publications. Enthusiasm waned later in the 1800s, particularly as the romantic appeal of Pacific Island cultures was seen to have dimmed, changed by the introductions from the Europeans’ own societies: the Church, colonial rule and manufactured goods. France, Britain, Spain, Germany, the United States, Japan and Australia all established colonies in the region. Tourism to the region from the late 1800s recast the Pacific as a leisure paradise. This has been a persistent vision.

Pacific arts at the British Museum

The British Museum’s relationship with Oceania began when a staff member, Daniel Solander, accompanied Captain Cook on his first voyage to the Pacific Ocean. The material from these voyages was displayed in the Museum’s South Seas Room from about 1778. It proved to be one of most popular rooms in the Museum.

Thereafter Oceanic material was shown in ethnographic galleries. The mourners’ costume from Tahiti (p. 000) was on display in the Museum from the end of the 1700s for well over 100 years. In recent decades the Museum has presented exhibitions such as *M ori* (1998), *Power and Taboo: Sacred Objects from the Pacific* (2006–07), and the 2009 show *Dazzling the Enemy: Shields from the Pacific*. Staff at the Museum collaborate with Pacific communities on joint projects and from time to time are able to liaise with an artist to acquire an artwork. Unlike many of the historic collections, these contemporary

works are thoroughly documented – and well placed to enhance our understanding of the complexities of modern life in the Pacific.



Kaipel Ka, signwriter, with the Wahgi warrior’s ‘South Pacific Lager’ shield he painted. The shield was purchased by the British Museum in 1990 (Oc1990,09.4). Photograph: © Michael O’Hanlon.

Many global influences can be seen across the Pacific Islands – in Papua New Guinea the game of rugby has encouraged clan warriors to formulate their battles as two opposing sides, each with distinctive, unifying symbols. During a 1989 war, Kaipel Ka (a signwriter of the Highlands) painted shields for his mother’s clan. He included the logo for South Pacific Lager, a reference to the drunken accident that sparked the war.

While the British Museum holds a rich Australian collection, this book focuses on the Pacific, rather than the broader reach of Oceania. Arts of indigenous Australia are not included here. They trace a separate cultural

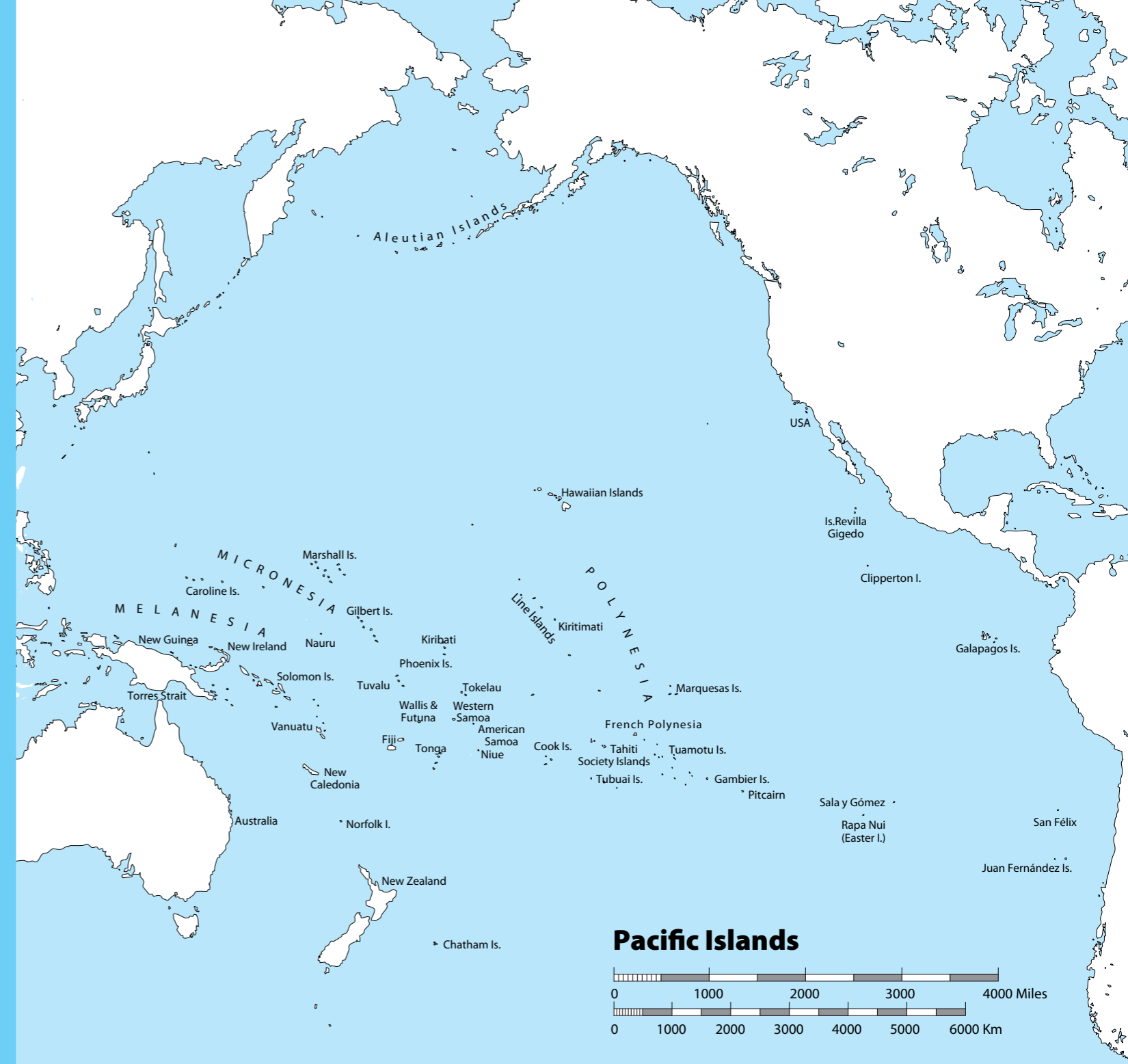
lineage to those of Pacific peoples. The book includes two works from the Torres Strait Islands because, although these islands are politically part of Australia, they are culturally more aligned to Melanesia.



Caption copy to come.



Victor Jupurrula Ross, Yarla Jukurrpa ('Bush Potato Dreaming').
Yuendumu, Western Desert, Northern Territory, Australia, 1980s.
Acrylic on canvas. L. 159 cm.



What are Polynesia, Melanesia and Micronesia?

Since the 1830s the Pacific Ocean has been divided up within European discussions into three cultural-geographical regions. These are Polynesia ('many islands'), Melanesia ('black islands') and Micronesia ('small islands'). Each developed from the main branches of migration across the Pacific from Southeast Asia and Papua. Within these regions societies tend to share an ancient language base. They also share characteristics of social, ritual and economic life, structures of government, and



approaches to arts. Polynesia covers much of the eastern Pacific, forming a triangle from Rapa Nui (Easter Island), up to Hawaii and down to Aotearoa (New Zealand) (see the glossary for a fuller listing of the islands). Melanesia lies in the western Pacific, including the major island groups of Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and New Caledonia.

Micronesia is made up of more than 2,000 islands and atolls in the northwest Pacific, including the archipelagos of the Caroline Islands, Marshall Islands, Northern Marianas and Palau.

Pacific Islanders often use these terms, but as with any classification – especially one devised by outsiders – Polynesia, Melanesia and Micronesia are useful for some purposes, but are also politically problematic and often fail to reflect realities on the ground. There is a growing preference for the term 'Oceania' to speak of the entire Pacific Ocean, to highlight the unified strength of the region, and to find more meaningful classifications. Simple

Chief's shell-money (bakiha) pendant.
New Georgia or Isobel, Solomon Islands
(Melanesia), before 1914.

Turtle shell, dolphin's teeth, tridacna shell,
glass beads, fibre. Diam. 21cm.

geographic divisions – eastern, western and northwestern – are good alternatives and the divisions that I primarily use in this book.

I hope that you enjoy this journey into the arts of the Pacific Ocean.



Mask of a deified ancestor.
Mortlock Island, Caroline Islands
(Micronesia).

Breadfruit wood, coir. H. 67 cm.

This mask was danced in ceremonies to
encourage good breadfruit harvests.