The Treasures in the Storeroom: Society Islands collections in World Museums

Jenny Newell
National Museum of Australia, Centre for Historical Research, GPO Box 1901, 2601 Canberra, Australia
j.newell@nma.gov.au

ABSTRACT
This paper is an overview of how one culture has been collected and represented by the West. The absences and presentations of cultures in museum cases have political implications. Most museums with Tahitian collections have left them largely unexhibited, unpublished and unexplored. These objects, over 11,000 of them, range from the sacred to the everyday, from archaeological finds to contemporary art. They are treasures in their own right as well as being exceptional documents of Tahiti’s past, holding ongoing insights and potential for Tahitians now. They attest to Maohi ways of living in the world, living with their ocean, and, through the trajectories the objects have traced from island to museum, they uncover histories of exchanges that stretch from the eighteenth century to the present day.

When a museum does place some of these cultural treasures of display, typically no context is provided, no sense of the people who created the objects, or the changes they have made, or the world that they live in now. It is common to present Tahitians and other Pacific Islanders as if they are perpetually stuck in the 18th Century. Not surprisingly, Tahitians today are inclined to see objects in museums as being out of reach. The Many of the world’s museums are starting to actively open up their collections, providing ways for communities to connect to their heritage. With access becoming easier, these objects could be informing, inspiring and contributing more vibrantly to the current renaissance of cultural practice in the Society Islands. Museum objects are not the sole preserve of curators.

In this paper, I survey Tahitian collections in major institutions around the world. I explore examples of the ways objects from Tahiti (as well as more broadly from the Society Islands) have been presented and put to work in exhibitions, publications, artworks and projects of reconstruction and re-enactment. I also suggest potential ways forward for future deployments of these extraordinary collections.

KEYWORDS
Museums, Society Islands material culture and collections, history and uses of museum collections, cultural identity, access to cultural heritage, institutional responsibilities, public access to museums.

One of the surprising features of working in a large museum is the sheer quantity of objects from around the world in the institution’s possession. When I first walked into the Pacific collection storeroom at the British Museum (on starting there as a curator in 2001) I was deeply impressed – but also struck with unease – by: expanse shelves in rows, packed with boxes of other people’s cultural heritage. This kind of largess can of course be seen as a great resource, a reflection and celebration of the diversity and creative strength of each of the cultures represented.

But when the boxes of objects are from a place that has seen: effects of missionaries & colonial powers, the people encouraged or forced to make a break with past ways of life, the rich abundance of those things in international museums becomes uncomfortable at best. People involved in projects of cultural revival in the islands could be making the most of the information and inspiration embodied in these collections. But
most of the objects overseas, gathered primarily in the late 18th and 19th centuries, have been sitting, largely unexhibited, most of them never studied, or published, or visited by islanders, their existence unrecognised, ever since. Ranginui Walker, a Maori anthropologist, has said: ‘If taonga (treasures) are not to be reduced to mere “museum pieces” then ways and means must be devised of relating them to the living’[1].

There are at least 11,270 objects from the Society Islands in at least 100 institutions around the world. There are no doubt more: my research into these collections is still in progress. The objects, primarily from Tahiti, along with some from Mo’orea, Ra’iatea, Huahine, Borabora, Maupiti, can be uncovered in museums, art galleries and libraries from St Petersburg to St Louis, Cape Town to Cherbourg, Otago to Osaka. Their presence around the world throws into sharp relief the histories of exchange, colonialism, trade, and tourism that brought people and objects together.

When I started to carry out my survey of Society Islands collections in world museums I expected to find a great largess in France and Britain. I didn’t expect to find the largest number in Tahiti itself. The Musée de Tahiti et des Îles has some 7,000 items, compared to the next largest collection, of a little over 1,500 in Britain. In many Pacific nations, without a long-held, institutionalized desire to collect, keep and display the everyday and ceremonial things around them, the majority of their historic objects are overseas.

In Tahiti, the academics who set up the Musée de Papeete in 1917 set in train a practice of collecting indigenous (Maohi) material culture that has continued.

This paper is an attempt to trace the ways Society Island material culture has reached these museums, and how the islands have been represented in the west over time. The last part of the paper examines the barriers to accessing these collections and suggests positive ways forward.

Museums are sites of significance for many. As anthropologist and curator Amiria Salmond has said, museums are places that have grown from ‘people’s desire to mark out a place for themselves (and others) in the infinite sweep of space and time.’ They gather together artefacts made by distant peoples as a way to ‘reach beyond their own experience and grasp some wider sense of what it might be to be human’ [2].

COLLECTING CULTURES
Since Europeans started visiting Tahiti in 1767, the mutual collecting of each others’ material culture has been enthusiastic. From the outset, the Maohi of the Society Islands wanted to acquire: metal tools/glass beads/woven cloth, other attractive & useful goods Europeans offered. They were usually willing to trade away their own goods (and their fresh food and the company of women) to secure these exotic commodities [3]. While the Maohi used some of these commodities, they obtained others for the purpose of keeping them for their own sake (as a collection). They asked carpenters to make them chests to keep European books, hats and other treasured items.

Visiting Europeans were equally captivated by the material culture of the people they were meeting. Sailors and traders: traded for tools, tapa, shells and musical instruments to sell or give as gifts back in Europe. Captains and officers: managed to secure gifts from chiefs, and traded for ceremonial items as souvenirs and evidence of Society Islands life.

Back in Britain and France, Tahiti caught the public imagination. Voyage accounts, and visitors from the island helped to fuel the fascination, fanned philosophical debates, and a lively market in artefacts. Tahiti became, and has long remained in the western imagination, the quintessential exotic Pacific island.


From the late 1770s objects bought back were swapped between gentlemen collectors and scientists around Europe. There were enthusiastic audiences for objects brought back by Captain Cook at the British Museum and Leverian Museum in London. Extraordinary, completely unfamiliar objects were exhibited without any explanation of what they were; just a label proclaiming their connection to Cook or Joseph Banks. Two centuries later, curators would return to using Society Island material in displays memorializing the achievements of European voyagers in the bicentenary years of the 1960s and 70s.

Museum collections reveal the economies of early trade in the islands with British/French & Spanish voyagers. Most museums, no matter how small the collection, will have adzes, fish hooks, and food pounders. These were relatively easy for the islanders to give or trade away. Islanders were rapidly replacing their stone adzes (to’i) with metal blades shipped out from Britain or made on the beach by a ship’s blacksmith using a portable forge.

Domestic implements (like food pounders, fish hooks) could not necessarily be remade quickly, but they were more available to the manahune (the commonality) than the more ceremonially and spiritually-endowed objects that chiefs and priests were able to alienate. For instance, Honolulu’s Bishop Museum has 544 items from the Society Islands, which includes 181 adze blades, 84 pounders, 31 fishing tools, and only 4 to’o (figures for containing a god).

Items that formed part of gift exchanges also feature strongly in collections: great quantities of tapa (bark cloth), plain and decorated, were presented to early visitors in rolls or as part of the ceremonial wrapping or presentation of other gifts. There are also many exceptional, one-off objects in international collections: the probably unique canoe sail at the British Museum and the ‘umete from Taputapu’atea, Raiatea, is in Museo nacional de Anthropologia in Madrid are just two examples.

PRESENTING PROGRESS

New phases of collecting and exhibiting Society Islands material followed from the early 19th century. First of all, there was the missionary phase, which began in 1815 after London Protestant missionaries finally (after 18 years of being ignored and ridiculed), secured Pomare II’s politically-savvy conversion. He soon sent a set of previously highly sacred to’o, through which he had communicated with his gods, to London. These: shown in Missionary Museum, with discarded or confiscated ‘idols’ from other islands, as trophies of success (and to shock visitors into donating funds to support the missions).

Then, from the 1850s, a new method of presenting the Pacific was offered through: grand ‘colonial exhibitions’ showcasing the industry and progress of each nation and their expanding colonies. The 1851 Great Exhibition in the Crystal Palace in London included a range of textiles sent by ‘Her Majesty Queen Pomare’. In keeping with the exhibition’s main message, the ‘progress’ being made in Tahiti was underlined (with samples of coffee and cotton – produced by a French colonist), and the handbook stated that despite the historic containers on display, islanders now used ‘our’ European ceramic and glass.

A similar emphasis on progress in expositions in France from 1867 concentrated on plantation commodities. The Exposition of 1889, inspired by the pseudo-anthropological


shows of indigenous peoples being toured around Europe, installed mocked-up villages, including a Tahitian village, with islanders going about their supposed everyday life, using household implements and other things brought over from the island, for the education and entertainment of visitors [9]. Villages were soon included in the American World Fairs (Chicago’s Field Museum has a Tahitian fish hook and a shell lei from the South Seas villages at the fair in Chicago, 1893) [10].

By the early 1900s, western interest in islanders and their creative endeavours was waning. The islands’ exotic, romantic caché receded as missionaries continued to work with local people to supplant the traditional practices of their previous, pagan lives. Carvers no longer made ceremonial objects or the fine stools, bowls and flywhisks for their chiefs, tattoo specialists stopped making and using their tools. Also, once the French colonial government finally quelled the rebellions in the late 1840s, they sought to control the population through bans – such as on inter-island travel. The making of large canoes and other practices came to an end.11

Museum collections dating from the early 1900s feature carvings and models that Maohi were making for the new type of visitor to the islands: western tourists. One aspect of the islands’ history that is not reflected in museums is that of the non-Maohi inhabitants; such as the large Chinese community, resident since 1865. Collections appear to have been made persistently of Maohi culture, and do not chart the islands’ diversity.

RACE AND CULTURE


From the mid-19th century European curators increasingly adopted the developing ethnography of race. By the 1940s a few exhibitions – in Paris, Melbourne and San Francisco – showed Polynesian culture as an overt example of ‘primitive’ art [12].

Concepts of primitivism eventually started to give way after mid-century. By the 1970s the technique of staging temporary exhibitions on single, high-impact themes was also gaining momentum. Under the influence of cultural anthropology, museums started to exhibit their Pacific collections more often, showing them as windows into cultures, in addition to being objects of art. But still, with few images or descriptions of the islands’ people or places, to help visitors understand the world of Pacific islanders.

In many museums, both then and now, ethnographic galleries tend to have cases of the same old, timeless objects, as if made by a people caught forever in the eighteenth century. Art galleries also have a tendency to do this. This stasis is not actually borne out by these institutions’ collections [13]. The Society Islands’ vibrant history and creative adaptations are reflected in countless things: in the European-style dresses made of tapa in Museums in Bern; in the 19th century, beautifully-plaited pandanus covers for bibles in Geneva; the contemporary tītiāfai quilts in Brisbane, London, Washington on-going examples of the local efflorescence of a technique originally taught by missionary women.

The Society Islands has recently been represented in exhibitions that were primarily concerned with Cook and Gauguin, but also in Steven Hooper’s ‘Polynesian Encounters’ (Norwich & Paris) and the British Museum’s ‘Power and Taboo’. Both presented primarily historic material but brought their subject to life through imagery, vibrant programs of performances, ceremonies, conferences, workshops and artist’s talks, provided by local Polynesian communities.


The most effective exhibitions, I would argue, are those that provide plenty of context for a wide range of objects and convey something of the current challenges in the islands, and the ongoing creativity of the region. This can be best achieved through collaborations with Pacific islanders, through providing photographs, audio or text by islanders, or demonstrations and installations by islander practitioners and artists-in-residence. Hiring indigenous staff is another useful way forward. To return to Ranginui Walker’s words, we need to find ways to relate cultural treasures to the living.

The ‘Pasifika Styles’ program at the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (2006 to 2008) convened by Amiria Salmond and Rosanna Raymond, was an outstanding example of allowing artists to connect to a western audience. The curators gave artists (mostly from Auckland) substantial control from the beginning and allowed their voices to be heard - literally (through headsets in the gallery), and through a website, book, workshops, art market and theatre productions. Surveys of the Cambridge community showed: astute conceptions of the contemporary Pacific had taken root, where there had been only the slightest understanding before.

The Field Museum in Chicago is another conspicuous example. They have reconstructed Pape'ete’s market in their Pacific gallery. Based on detailed research, one side of the marché building has been recreated, full-size, with the road around it, lined with its multi-cultural food shops, with videos of discussions with Pape'ete inhabitants. It allows the visitor, for once, to gather a comprehensive sense of life in Tahiti as it is lived now. The mélange of cultures, the urban face of things, the global commodities, the continuation of old ways of preparing food, weaving pandanus - these things are all apparent simply by walking through the reconstruction.

Dioramas and reconstructions are of course very resource-intensive, and highly mediated interpretations. But, for an audience who conceives of Tahiti as a place of coconut palms and sandy beaches, with perhaps a vague association with Captain Cook, Bligh and Gauguin, it will usually take more than a bland presentation of a poi pounder on a pedestal to make a difference.

The nations holding the greatest number of objects are, not surprisingly, those who have had the longest association with the islands, combined with a culture of collecting. As ever, collections delineate histories. They particularly delineate colonial histories (good example: at my own institution, the very new National Museum of Australia in Canberra, there are 5000 objects from the nation’s former colony, PNG, and a single Tahitian tapa beater).

Outside Tahiti, the greatest number of Society Island objects is in Britain. Britons were consummate collectors throughout the Enlightenment era and into the 19th century. There are 35 institutions across Britain with Society Islands collections, although they have mostly small holdings: 750 of the 1,550 total are in the British Museum.

French voyagers and settlers were the also prolific of European collectors, with at least 16 institutions across the country holding more than 480 objects. Most are in the Quai Branly, but museums in a wide range of towns, often on the sea, received collections from returning travelers. Islands in Polynesia with settler communities have been particularly active collectors of material from the Societies. After Tahiti and Britain, the most substantial and star-studded Society Islands collections are in
New Zealand and Hawaii. There are around 620 objects in four NZ institutions and 544 in Honolulu’s Bishop Museum. Both have been exceptionally successful and innovative in exhibiting and being accessible to western and Pacific audiences.

At the Musée de Tahiti et des Îles/Te Fare Ia-mana-ha, curator Véronique Mu-Liepmann estimates their collection at around 7,000 archaeological, historic and modern items. Collecting began in 1917 with the Société des Études Océanienne [14], and has continued, with the support of the French government. Much is on display and the rest is stored in state-of-the-art conditions on easy-to-view shelves. They have been successful in securing the return of objects to the island through donations and purchases.

The musée is not only a tourist destination. All Tahitian school children come through the museum at least once. Students at Papeete’s Centre de Metiers d’art draw on carvings as models. There are good local attendances for exhibitions on canoes, plaiting, weaving, and so on. Tara Hiquily, manager of the Musée’s collections, has reported that for some locals, the Musée is seen to be a useful place to leave old, sacred objects, to keep them safely contained [15].

Few Society Islanders have visited international collections. It seems only collections in Honolulu, Wellington, London and Belfast have been visited. For those Society Island artists, craftspeople, scholars interested in collections, the presence of a good local collection, and the cost of travel reduces the likelihood of a trip being made. But also, the collections are so obscure that it is a real challenge to locate them. There are few published catalogues. Only the major museums have on-line databases. It is hard to track down the names and contact details of curators (my survey relied almost completely on the generosity of curators making time to investigate their holdings).

Museums are generally daunting places for those not part of the culture that created them. Most museums are implicitly authoritarian, a stance embodied in their very structure. It is hard to find Society Islands material on public display, and arranging a storeroom viewing is even harder.

On-line databases are the most effective way for a museum to increase access to their collections. Lists summarizing collections, placed on readily-accessible sites, may assist in opening up these fascinating collections.

In conclusion, ethnographic museums around the world are now generally trying to become more accessible to their local audiences. They also aim to become more accessible to the communities who originally produced the objects in their care. In addition to increasing collaborations, museums could usefully improve access through more stream-lined loans programs, to reduce the legal and economic barriers to objects touring to Pacific. Collections could be invigorated through more commissions and purchases from practitioners. Buying directly from the artist, the selection of material is guided by local values rather than just curator’s, with the artist explaining the object’s significance. This is an effective way for a curator to learn about the culture she’s trying to represent.

Museums around the world hold the legacy of their Enlightenment and colonial pasts, the material results of their engagements with islanders. They hold a great potential for providing ways for people around the world to recognise and connect to the islands, and for islanders to connect to their heritage in ways that are becoming increasingly important. Combined, electronic resources, collaborations and commissions provide opportunities for museums to open up these little-known resources and forge creative relationships between the institution and the people they aspire to represent.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
This paper relied on the kindness of curators around the world who took time out of their busy schedules to provide me with

---

information. My thanks to: Michaela Appel (Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde München), Nicholas Cauwe (Musée Royaux d'art et d'histoire, Brussels), Jerry Champion (Canterbury Museum), Sally-Anne Coupar (Hunterian, Glasgow), Winifred Glover (Ulster Museum), Mike Gunn (National Gallery of Australia), Jill Hasell (British Museum), Crispin Howarth (National Gallery of Australia), Karen Jacobs (Sainsbury Centre, Norwich), Chris Jones (Auckland Museum), Adrienne Kaeppler (Smithsonian), Eric Kjellgren (MET, New York), Chantal Knowles (National Museums Scotland); Makiko Kuwahara (Nagoya Womens’ University), Emma Martin (World Museum Liverpool), Marion Mech-Koch (GRASSI Museum für Völkerkunde zu Leipzig), Sean Mallon (Te Papa Tongarewa), Véronique Mu-Liepmann (Musée de Tahiti et des Îles), Fuli Pereira (Auckland Museum), Jude Philip (Macleay Museum, Sydney), Thomas Psota (Historiches Museum, Bern), Eva Raabe (Museum der Weltkulturen, Frankfurt), Aphrodite Rose (South Australian Museum), Amiria Salmond (MAA, Cambridge), Lynne Heidi Stumpe (World Museum Liverpool), John Terrell (Field Museum, Chicago), Ron Vanderwal (Melbourne Museum), David Van Duuren (Tropenmuseum), Melanie Van Olffen (Australian Museum), Wonu Veys (MAA, Cambridge).