

FRAGMENTS OF WHAT? THOUGHTS ON THE 'PIECES OF PARADISE'
EXHIBITION AT THE AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM

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After reading the exhibition catalogue (text by Jim Specht)¹ and visiting the exhibition itself I felt defeated: I knew it must be about something but I never did discover precisely what while I was in there. There were hints, rich veins of meaning to be mined if one had the time, but the impression was of missed connections. Individual parts of the exhibition made sense, but the whole thing didn't hang together.

As you walk in, an unobtrusive sign below a map of the Pacific tells you: 'Many outsiders see the Pacific Islands as a romantic, carefree paradise. They do not understand the problems of living on small islands ...'. Quite so, but why then the ridiculous title 'Pieces of Paradise'? You have already passed by two guardian figures at the entrance. So far so good, but then you glance around lost. Captain Cook and Hawaiian feathers to the right, modern art to the far right and enormous Solomon Islands inlaid wooden food bowls to the fore. There are several potential directions in which to move but no obvious progression from exhibit to exhibit. At the sides you tend to fall out into empty space: the exhibition area is not well bounded and the bare walls of the old outside of the building confront you if you miss a turn. Many visitors will probably miss entirely the exhibits facing outwards towards these walls,

particularly a small display on children's games and part of an exhibit on *When Two Worlds Meet*.

Well, What is it about? Near the entrance a sign explains (?): 'The way we interpret an object can depend on where, when or how we see it. Each of us may see the object differently. The exhibition introduces some of the many ways we can look at artefacts from the Pacific Islands'. But does it?

I should say at this point that many of the pieces chosen are of course quite stunning and this makes up for any lack of direction (literal and figurative) in the exhibition.

A possible spatial division is into four rows of exhibits as you move through the hall (see figure one). The first includes *Gifts for a God, When Two Worlds Meet, Beasts and Beings, Puzzles in Stone*, and the understated introduction *Pacific Arts Through Many Eyes*. *Gifts for a God* recounts the Captain Cook-mistaken-as-the-Hawaiian-God-Lono story and notes that what Hawaiians gave to him supposedly as offerings became in a European context merely curios. No fault of this exhibition at all but the more I hear the Cook/Lono story repeated, the more unconvincing it sounds as an explanation of what actually happened. Perhaps Friedman's (1985) critique of Sahlins (1981) is getting to me? *When Two Worlds Meet* treats more generally of European contact and indigenous artistic response: tobacco pipes, inflation in shell valuables, trade beads, tourist art of convenient sizes, and new media used by contemporary PNG artists in painting, print and metal sculpture. It would have been nice to have some representation in the modern art section from outside PNG, but the content of much of the Australian Museum's collections has understandably focused on its neighbour to the north. *Beasts and Beings* is dominated by enormous wooden food bowls from Makira and other Solomon Islands. It is sobering to think that all that would survive archaeologically of such major art works would be an uninterpretable jumble of conus shell inlay fragments.

Puzzles in Stone had great potential to give us some idea of a time depth and change through time for Pacific art, a dynamic beyond the simple Pre- and Post- European contact dichotomy. Instead, the exhibit creates somewhat more of a mystery than perhaps exists. The 'puzzles' in question are the stone figures and mortars and pestles found in various parts of New Guinea and neighbouring islands. Also included are small petroglyph stones from Boianai in Goodenough Bay. An accompanying map shows only the find spots of displayed artifacts. More informative might have been an updated version of Pretty's (1965) mortar and pestle distribution map, giving an idea of the distribution of the entire complex. A bit more detailed information could have dispelled some of the puzzles concerning dating and context. The Boianai stones seemed out of place here as their designs have clear affinities with other items elsewhere in the exhibition such as the engraved shells from nearby Collingwood Bay and with the dominant Island Melanesian rock art style. These links were not mentioned. The Boianai pieces were not well-placed or lighted, making it difficult to see their designs clearly.

The second row of exhibits includes *Rejecting the Past* and *A World of Water* to either side of a central set of exhibits around the theatrette consisting of *What is Traditional?*, *What is Good Art?*, *the Small Nambas* and *Mother of Us All*. *Rejecting the Past* discussed the Elema people's destruction of their ritual objects in the 1920s and 1930s, apparently not directly under missionary tutelage. The suggestion is that this occurred because the traditional meaning and significance of the objects was being lost as a result of nascent capitalist wage labour opportunities for the younger men drawing them away to the outside world. *World of Water* is about the art of the Murik Lakes people of the Sepik, and seems strangely separated from the main Sepik exhibit in the next row. The theatrette shows a film of Goilala squatters' art in Port Moresby. The art is produced for a culturally integrating ceremony and then destroyed. Interesting, but at 13 minutes too long and even-paced for many people to sit through. I

would have preferred a more general video to be shown to give a bit more context to the whole exhibition, and a few more clues as to what it was about.

With *What is Traditional?* we reach really interesting ground and a possible unifying theme, but we are already half way round the exhibition. This should have come at the entrance. The theme is how a lot of Pacific Island art can be seen as a development out of ancestral art forms associated with the Lapita culture some 3000 years ago. The signs are worth quoting at length:

Pacific Island cultures have been developing and changing over several thousand years. They are not static and unchanging. Their artefacts have changed, yet they keep a link with the artefacts of the past in their forms, decoration and sometimes their materials and their uses.

Today, many of the designs on wooden artefacts and painted bark cloth as well as in body tattoos, can be traced back to designs on pottery found in the Western Pacific and dated to about 3000 years ago. Yet while some designs have survived, others have died out and new ones have taken their place. ... Although the designs have survived for several thousand years, we do not know whether their original meaning has also survived.

An illustration of a selection of Polynesian design motifs directly descended from Lapita pottery designs underlines the point being made. A map of Lapita site distribution accompanies the text. It is very current, including the as yet unpublished sites located during the *Lapita Homeland Project* and even the new Buka finds, but strangely misses out published finds from Wallis and Futuna (see Frimigacci and Vienne 1987 for bibliographic details) and Maré in the Loyalty Islands (Frimigacci 1981). Find spots in New Caledonia and Fiji are a bit sparse too. Nearby in the exhibit are engraved shells from Raimu village in Collingwood Bay of unknown age. The caption reads: 'some of their designs are like those on recent woodcarvings from the Trobriand Islands and other nearby islands'. True, but what of the links to the Boianai stone carvings and other Pacific rock art? This missed connection in the exhibition is made in the catalogue, however:

Similar designs also occur in rock-engravings, both in southeastern Papua and elsewhere in the western Pacific. These rock engravings are also undated but the similarity of design between the shells, wood-carvings, and rock-engravings suggests that there may once have been a common art style, or closely related group of art styles throughout the western Pacific.

Whether or not this style was related to that of the Lapita pottery remains to be seen. We may discover that there is a relationship, in form at least. What this relationship means is another question.

That last sentence sums up the real 'puzzle in stone' (or pots, or shell) around which a large part of the exhibition could have been unified but wasn't.

Two beautiful examples of barkcloth continue the partially hidden theme, as the sign points out: 'The designs and their arrangement on West Polynesian barkcloth recall the Lapita pottery decoration. Designs on bark cloth from Erromango Island, seem to have had a different origin'. Perhaps, but the Erromango barkcloth design seems very close to rock art motifs², which are in turn similar to

The next exhibit is on *What is Good Art?* in relation to Trobriand canoe prowboards. This involves a highly imaginative and inspired idea: ask an indigenous expert, Chief Narubitau of the Trobriands, for his judgement. He ranked the pieces as poor, good but not perfect, or superb, and his explanations give a real insight into Trobriand aesthetics. Full marks for whoever thought up this section.

The exhibits on the other side of the theatre display art of two of the more traditional Oceanic societies: the Small Nambas of Malakula in Vanuatu and the Mountain Ok of New Guinea. The Small Nambas have to a large extent rejected inclusion in modern 'civilization' and hold fast to their customs and the customary meaning of their art, the opposite case to the Elema. The Ok exhibit shows that something as simple and seemingly self-evident in function to outsiders as a string bag, has untold resonances and layers of meaning within

its full cultural context. Current archaeological attempts to extract meaning through contextual analysis seem terminally simplistic after reading the accompanying texts to this part of the exhibition.

Row four of the exhibition is *Us and Them* (New Ireland), *Myths and Memories* (Sepik) and *Chiefly Carvings* (New Caledonia). *Us and Them* features the justly celebrated *Malagan* carvings of New Ireland, which along with the Solomon Islands outside wooden bowls are the most visually stunning pieces in the exhibition. This of course is why they are being displayed, and the accompanying text is mercifully brief and uninformative. The 'Us and Them' refers to the fact that particular people have rights to produce particular artefacts or designs which cannot be copied by others.

Myths and Memories (along with the *What is Traditional?* section) is the most satisfying part of the exhibition as it really tells us something new about Pacific art. The innovative links being forged between studies of geomorphological change, oral history, archaeology and current art styles in the Sepik Basin are clearly brought out. We are presented with a coherent, easy to understand picture of up to the minute research, initiated and led by the National Museum of PNG. In a nut shell, the Sepik Ramu basin was by about 6000 BP a very large bay which has progressively filled in to form its present landscape in a time span within the oral traditions of some cultural groups. Groups that were once coastal are now many kilometres inland, and groups perhaps once in contact by coastal travel or proximity are now separated by dense jungles. Their art styles, however, demonstrate these former links. The captions put this across simply:

Headrests and certain kinds of drums are made today in the same parts of the Sepik Ramu basin that were formerly covered by the sea. These items are more typical of the present coastal people who may have lived on the shores of the former sea bay.

People in widely separated parts of the Sepik Ramu basin share many artefact designs. They might reflect the time when they lived closer together before the sea bay silted up and they spread across the newly formed plains.

This exhibit showed extremely well the links between ancestral tradition and modern manifestation in a changing world. If brought out more emphatically elsewhere in the exhibition this theme would have formed the perfect complementary example to the Island Pacific traditions derived from Lapita.

New Caledonian art, the *Chiefly Carvings* exhibit, illustrates a radical transformation of presumably Lapita-derived artistic tradition in an isolated island group. This is in a way stated in the accompanying sign but so coyly that the word 'Lapita' isn't even used. Roger Green's most dubious concept of a contemporary but distinct 'Podtanean' culture has, it appears, clouded the issue (see Green and Mitchell 1983):

New Caledonia was settled around 2000 BC by people related to the early occupants of Vanuatu and Fiji. Over nearly 4000 years of comparative isolation the Kanaks of New Caledonia developed distinct languages, social forms and artefacts.

Surely, however, there was enough space to have added something along the lines of 'but the same rock art style is present as found over much of Island Melanesia including Boianai, and on other media such as barkcloth (Erromango) and shells (Collingwood Bay)'. Another missed connection. The New Caledonian exhibit includes some beautifully carved pieces and emphasizes the use of art to advertise chiefly status.

The fifth and last row of the exhibition is *Gogodala - Then and Now*. Conversion to Christianity in the 1930s by a particularly dour bunch of missionaries led to the destruction of the dramatic carvings and other Gogodala art forms. In the lead up to Independence and in the teeth of missionary opposition a cultural revival developed in the 1970s and art forms were re-created, although this time used for pecuniary rather than spiritual gain. Examples of similar pieces from both pre-mission and post-revival periods show continuity of form in a changed context. Some good points are made using this juxtaposition.

In drawing up the plan of the exhibition (Figure 1), as none was included in the catalogue, a partial pattern became clear which wasn't apparent when walking through the exhibition. As you stand at the entrance looking in, nearly all the 'non-traditional' or European-contact-affected material is to your far right - *When Two Worlds Meet*, *Rejecting the Past*, *Us and Them* (if a point is being made about efflorescence after the introduction of metal tools) and *Gogodala - Now*. Finally, I thought, I had cracked the exhibition's code. No way, however, of walking through can be worked out which makes any sense of the centre and left of the exhibition. The floor plan's meaning still defeats me.

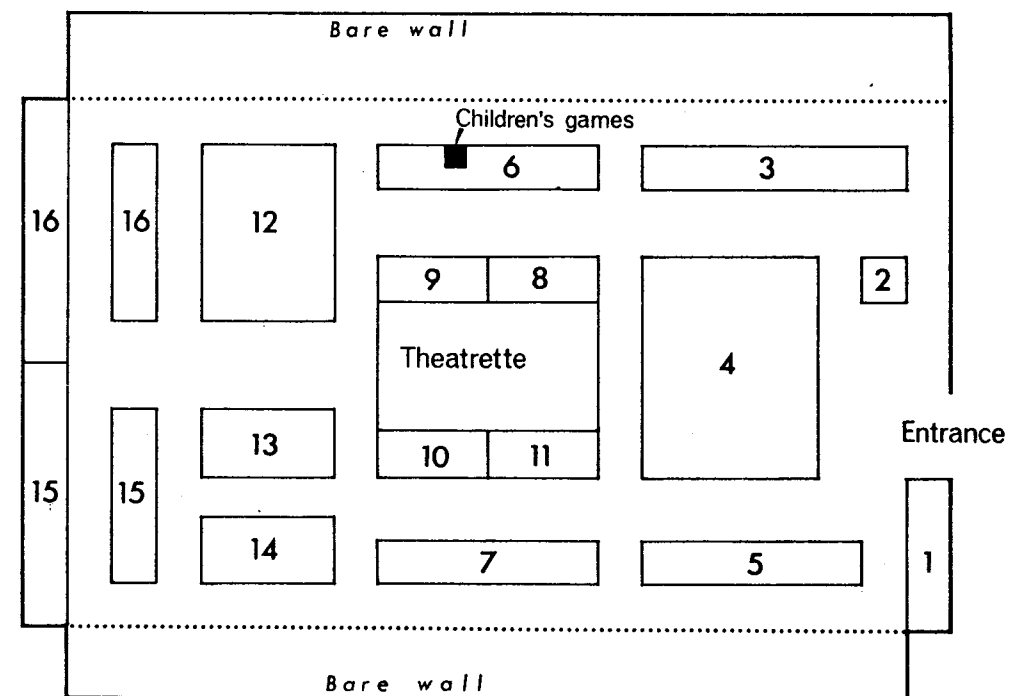


Figure One: SCHEMATIC PLAN OF THE EXHIBITION

1. Pacific Arts Through Many Eyes; 2. Gifts for a God; 3. When Two Worlds Meet; 4. Beasts and Beings; 5. Puzzles in Stone; 6. Rejecting the Past; 7. A World of Water; 8. What is Traditional? 9. What is Good Art? 10. Small Nambas; 11. Mother of Us All; 12. Us and Them; 13. Myths and Memories; 14. Chiefly Carvings; 15. Gogodala - Then; 16. Gogodala - Now.

The exhibition is about the different functions and meanings of art in different societies, how these might change over long time-spans (Lapita to now, Sepik Bay to Sepik Plain) and how they have reacted to European contact. But neither the exhibition captions nor the catalogue actually spell this out. I've spent many hours teasing this message out of it all and even now am not 100% certain that that is what it is all about. At one level it is just a display of 'Masterpieces of Pacific Art' and a very good one if that is all it is. It could have been made much more than this, however. If the developmental theme had been sustained and explained as a more central part of the message and not obfuscated by *Puzzles in Stone*, the exhibition would have been much more successful.

I have talked almost exclusively of the exhibition itself and not of the beautifully illustrated and reasonably priced catalogue. The latter also displays missed connections as its layout only tangentially relates to the layout of the exhibition itself. I suppose that the purpose of a catalogue is to provide illustration of the more memorable pieces in an exhibition and a more detailed exegesis of current ideas about the objects, their context and so on. This catalogue is successful in the former task but only partially so in the latter, in fact adding little (and in some cases less) to the exhibit captions.

So should you go and see it? Yes, of course, and perhaps forewarned and forearmed by reading this you will find it less confusing in content than I did and consequently enjoy it more while you are there. But be also prepared for a \$4 admission charge and very obtrusive noise pollution from the larger but free exhibition upstairs. The entrance fee is clearly a mistake. While I was there, very few visitors in an otherwise packed Museum paid the fee and came in. The other special exhibitions were more jazzy, sound-and-lightish, interactive and open without charge. If this exhibition were free and the catalogue aggressively hawked, then surely the Museum would recoup far more money than by charging \$4 entrance, getting no visitors, and consequently selling no catalogues. Where's Paul Keating when you need him?

FOOTNOTES

- 1 *Pieces of Paradise*, text by Jim Specht, Australian Natural History Supplement No. 1, 1988. Published by the Australian Museum Trust, Sydney. ISBN 0 7305 4598 9 (paperback). \$6.95.
- 2 The Erromango barkcloth main motif is remarkably similar to a New Caledonian rock art motif illustrated by Frimigacci and Monnin (1980), Figure 36 motif 23, and Photo 1.

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