

# MUSEUMS IN THE PACIFIC:

## Reflections on an "Introduced Concept" in Transition

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*The museum is no longer, if ever it was, an institution innocently engaged in the processes of the collection, conservation, classification and display of objects. On the contrary, it is one among many components in a complex array of cultural and leisure industries, no longer certain of its role, no longer secure in its identity, no longer isolated from political and economic pressures or from the explosion of images and meanings which are, arguably, transforming our relationships in contemporary society to time, space and reality (1).*

Thus, Roger Silverstone has declared the modern Western museum a cognitive and representational space as socially important as the laboratory and the classroom. Today, we live in a museum age. There are over 7000 museums in North America, and 15,000 in Europe. In the UK, there are over 2200 major public and private museums and galleries, receiving about seventy million visits a year, representing 30 % of the adult population. In Germany, there are over 1500 museums; in France, over 6000 (2). Even in Australia, with a population of only seventeen million people, over 500 museums cater for an annual two million visitors. Museums have become important places of rational entertainment, as well as for the conservation of objects, and for the privileging of myths. Far from being institutional constants, however, museums are, in fact, in a constant state of change, in managerial motivation, and in what we may call their cognitive capacities to attract visitors, engage their attention, and mediate between what objects can "say" and what the vernacular expects to hear.

What is true of European museums is also true of museums in the Pacific – with certain important differences. European museums of art, of natural objects and man-made artifacts, have a history dating from antiquity. Their origins are classical, ecclesiastical, and plenipotentiary. By contrast, many Pacific island museums, with notable exceptions, trace their origins to colonial museums, which celebrated locality in terms defined by the metropolis. Since the Magellanic age of exploration and "discovery", the Pacific has played a central role in the manufacture of collections and the creation of the European museum discourse (3). Today, however, Pacific museums

are showing a keen interest in the present and the future, as well as the past, and a present that is charged with statements of cultural independence. Borrowing advanced models from the United States,

Australia and elsewhere, Pacific museums are combining to make the Pacific a small but rich environment for museum studies. At the same time, they offer the student of colonial science important object lessons in the history of cultural affirmation and national self-determination. Beginning – in the words of Makamina Makagiansar, a former assistant director of UNESCO for culture – as “innovative transplants from the elitist cultural milieu of nineteenth century Europe” (4), they have acquired a new political importance coeval with the place they now occupy in the island democracies. Indeed, we find ourselves at the beginning of a new museum movement in Melanesia, Polynesia and Micronesia, not to mention Australasia, in which museums are tracing a passage from colonial to national form and function (5).

Today, there are approximately forty museums in the Pacific, not counting many more in Australia and New Zealand, and the American institutions in Hawaii, Guam and American Samoa (6). In the British sphere of influence, the traditions of colonial and representative government conveyed the metropolitan ‘museum idea’ as a fulcrum of colonial administration. In the French tradition, on the contrary, objects and representations were usually shifted from the Pacific to Paris. Ironically, leaving aside the Bishop Museum in Honolulu, arguably the best collections from the Pacific region as a whole are held in Europe – including the Musée de l’Homme at Trocadero and at the Museum of Mankind in Piccadilly. Germany followed a similar policy, which helped to establish fine museums dedicated to the Pacific in Berlin and Stuttgart. Today, while the senior European museums retain their ascendancy, linked in many ways to the primacy of the object, the picture is changing on the periphery, where objects are treated in the context of their local importance. New Caledonia, which established its first museum in 1905, improved its facilities following the Melanesian cultural revival of the 1970s, and today occupies an imposing place in the centre of Noumea. There is a new Musée de Tahiti et des Iles, which promises to reward closer attention in its depiction of Polynesian life (7). Perhaps tourists do not travel to such exotic locations primarily for the sake of their museums; but certainly, once in the region, tourists will visit what they are shown, and there they will see inscribed timely statements of national and regional identity, and new visions of what Pacific museums can offer non-Western eyes.

It is interesting to consider the models they reflect, and from which they seem increasingly to depart. Many of course begin with the European model, an architectural statement most visible today in Australia and New Zealand, typically embodied in a classical or formal public building with an imposing edifice, that in effect commands veneration and respect (8). This tradition we now see translating into buildings of more suitable local style, using the local vernacular to be representative of the habitation of everyday people. Internally, these imply a shift from traditional European object lessons, and the arrangement of peoples in hierarchies and sequences, into arrangements that communicate local skills and crafts, celebrating the material culture of gender and tribal customs. Moreover, these museums come to occupy an important place in the protection of prohibited exports, placing themselves in a pivotal role in relation to the commer-

cial trade in objects and eco-tourism (9). Finally, they bear a new relationship to government, seeking support not only from public sources, domestic and international, but also from private enterprise, including the regulated sale of artifacts made by local craftsmen. The net effect of these changes is to show the people of the islands as living cultures, rather than exotic residues, or as disembodied moments in a pattern of historical evolution which the industrial cultures of the world have left behind (10).

While it would be impossible to summarise the diversity of examples presented by these new museums, it is useful to consider the new museum in Honiara, on Guadalcanal in the Solomon Islands, set up by the Solomon Islands government to preserve local artifacts against being "lost" (11). Where there are fears that a culture is lost as its objects are taken away, so there grows a closer identification with the objects of that culture. Second, the Solomon Islands museum stresses the importance of informing the rest of the world about local languages. Thus, the museum becomes a repository of competences in local knowledge, to enhance a sense of belonging and *pride among the people of the islands*. In the Cook Islands, a very small museum – only two rooms, has developed a similar formula, to cultivate local talents and skills, including weaving, and cooking, and many aspects of traditional women's work, which are in danger of becoming lost to memory (12). Again, the word 'pride' enters the mission statement of this small but hardy example – *pride in workmanship and handiwork*, which rises above the tourist dollar.

In Papua New Guinea, a colonial museum has existed since 1913, when it was used to store any objects of interest found by colonial officers. It occupied a building next to the National Parliament, seen as an important projection of the colonial mandate. Ultimately, it became a place not only to hold objects, but also to protect them from exportation as souvenirs. Today, the museum in Papua New Guinea has become a register of national sites, with instructions to preserve and promote all aspects of Papua New Guinean culture – a huge task, given the vast number of language groups in the island. Again, the concept of local pride comes to the fore, together with a celebration of diversity and multiculturalism that is becoming a hallmark of the museum movement in Australia and New Zealand as well. In Wellington, the theme is enshrined in the new museum now under construction which organises the representation of New Zealand's history and geography around the lives of the Maori people, among whom the Europeans are late arrivals (13).

Of course, diversity has its contradictions. The Fiji Museum, established by the Fijian Society in 1904, represents perhaps one of the more difficult challenges (14). Set in a beautiful garden, a recognisably European building next to the former colonial government buildings of Suva, the museum has been transformed from a repository of war clubs and canoes into a lively encounter with Fijian life, past and present. But to some observers, important features remain among the silences that neglect the history of the large Indian minority who have shared life in the Fijian islands for over a century (15).

Today, the museum culture of the Pacific is inevitably struggling with ambivalences that survive its historical ties with Europe, and Europeans in the region. A new culture of exchange and repatriation may arise as a result (16). Some of the island museums seem less interested in collecting and conserving than in displaying; what is displayed,

has much to say to the living, rather than to the dead. Many see their task as centrally pedagogical, not only to world knowledge, but to the needs of local people, and dedicated to the preservation and reproduction of skills that are not taught in the school classroom or laboratory. This engagement represents the indigenising of an introduced concept, in which the central idea of a museum is adopted from colonial or European discourse, but then refined in terms of local needs and opportunities. This is happening at the same time that other introduced concepts are being redefined – including the costs and benefits of tourism, fishing agreements, and deforestation. The circumstances of participation in a world economy driven by overseas capital is placing pressures on island political structures – pressures which are, in effect, reflected in the museum world. So, too, are the challenges facing life in the islands, from earthquakes to disease, poverty, illiteracy and malnutrition. From an Atlantic perspective, the museum idea is being adapted by the Pacific into a new discourse, drawing upon local resources, producing indigenous solutions, and rejecting roles relegated to them by European institutions. Pacific museums are increasingly involving their people in their institutional lives, becoming spaces of negotiation and cultural reference, as well as repositories of skills and objects. We may be seeing. In so coming to terms with its colonial past and post-colonial destinies, they have vital lessons to teach students of science and empire in the Atlantic world.



## NOTES

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- 1) Roger Silverstone, "The Medium is the Museum: On Objects and Logics in Times and Spaces", in John Durant (ed.), *Museums and the Public Understanding of Science* (London: Science Museum, 1992), 34.
- 2) Alain Morley and Guy Le Vasseur, *Guides des 6500 Musées et Collections en France* (Paris: Le Cherche Midi, 1991) and Hermann Lübebe, citing the *Handbuch der Museen*, in *Deutsches Museum Jahresbericht*, 1986, 13. See also Susan Pearce, "Preface" in Stella Butler, *Science and Technology Museums* (Leicester: University of Leicester, 1992). See also Kenneth Hudson and Ann Nicholls (eds), *The Directory of Museums and Living Displays* (New York: Stockton Press, 3rd edition, 1985).
- 3) See Nicholas Thomas, "Licensed Curiosity: Cook's Pacific Voyages", in John Elsner and Roger Cardinal (eds), *The Cultures of Collecting* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1994), 116-136.
- 4) Quoted by Soroi Eoe, "The Role of Museums in the Pacific: Change or Die", *Museum*, 42 (1), (1990), 29.
- 5) "Indigenous Models of Museums in Oceania", *Museum*, 35 (2), (1983), 98-99.
- 6) See the useful but limited summaries in the pioneering catalogue prepared by Sorio Marepo Eoe and Pamela Swadling (eds), *Museums and Cultural Centres in the Pacific* (Port Moresby: Papua New Guinea National Museum, 1991).
- 7) *Ibid.*
- 8) In Australia, a large and growing literature on museum and cultural policy has so far been unaccompanied by much historical reflection. Exceptions, from two different perspectives, include Ronald Strahan, *Rare and Curious Specimens: An Illustrated History of the Australian Museum, 1827-1979* (Sydney: The Australian Museum, 1979) and Sally Gregory Kohlstedt, "Australian Museums of Natural History: Public Priorities and Scientific Initiative in the Nineteenth Century", *Historical Records of Australian Science*, 5 (1983), 1-29. For the colonial experience more generally, see Susan Sheets-Pyenson, *Cathedrals of Science. The Development of Colonial Natural History Museums during the Late Nineteenth Century* (Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1988).
- 9) Luis Montreal, "Problems and Possibilities in Recovering Dispersed Cultural Heritages", *Museum*, 31 (1), (1979), 49-66.
- 10) See Greg Dening's illuminating review, "Disembodied Artifacts: Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*", in *Scripts*, 9 (1), (September 1993), 79-83.
- 11) Catherine Cole, "Preserving Culture in the Solomon Islands", *Muse*, 12 (1), (1994), 30-39.
- 12) Personal communication from P.E. Richmond-Rex, Government of Niue, Huanaki Cultural Center, Niue, Cook Islands, 26 July 1994; O. Joseph, "Cook Islands", in R. Edwards and J. Stewart (eds), *Preserving Indigenous Cultures* (Canberra: Australian Government Printing Service, 1980), 141-143. Consider also the example of Western Samoa, as described by Malama Meleisea in "Culture is not something you can eat: Some thoughts on cultural preservation and development in Oceania", *Museum*, 33 (2), (1981), 122.
- 13) "Once again the light of day? Museums and Maori Culture in New Zealand", *Museums issues in the Pacific*, *Museum*, 42 (1), (1990), 35-38.
- 14) "The National Museum of Fiji — A Thumbnail Sketch", *Museum*, 42 (1), 34.
- 15) Charles Hunt, "Museums in the Pacific Islands: A Metaphysical Justification", *Museum*, 30 (2), (1978), 69-75.

- 16) In its policy of repatriation, the Australian Museum in Sydney is taking a leading role. See, *inter alia*, Lissant Bolton, "Recording Oceanic Collections in Australia: Problems in Questions", *Museum*, 36 (1), (1984), 32-36. See also R.R. Cater, "Return and Restitution of Cultural Property", *Museum*, 34 (4), (1982), 256-264.



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