

MAT TRINCA

# cook and the pacific

Australians will soon have a rare chance to see the world's largest identifiable collection of artefacts from the three Pacific voyages of Captain James Cook. More than 300 objects collected in the course of his voyages will be on show at the National Museum from 30 June.

The exhibition, *Cook's Pacific Encounters*, presents an array of well-preserved artefacts collected from the breadth of the Pacific by the scientists, artists and crew from aboard Cook's ships. There is a stunning mourning dress from Tahiti, a rare feathered Hawaiian helmet, and a selection of beautifully woven and dyed barkcloth from Tonga, Tahiti and Hawai'i. Highly patterned flax mats from New Zealand are also included.

These precious objects have a unique communicative power, both as historical documents of the Cook voyages and as cultural artefacts of continuing significance to Pacific peoples. They embody the spiritual and cultural strength of the communities from which they came, and the history of their own remarkable odyssey halfway round the world.

Most of the artefacts come from the Cook-Forster Collection of the Georg August University of Göttingen, in Germany. Until their first showing in Hawai'i earlier this year, few had ever been on public display. Some were occasionally used in teaching programs at the university, where they had been kept for more than 220 years. Others were catalogued, stored but rarely seen.

How did this precious collection come to be in Germany? The answer goes to the heart of the ways in which the Cook voyages transformed European understanding of the Pacific in the late eighteenth century.

It is difficult now to imagine just how much impact the Cook expeditions had on the European imagination. Cook sailed at a time when there were still large gaps on the globe. Sure, the Spanish had ventured into the Pacific from the time of Magellan, while the Portuguese and then the Dutch traversed the Indian Ocean in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But knowledge of the South Seas was sketchy and largely incomplete.

When Cook's *Endeavour* sailed round the Horn in 1769, he brought a keen gaze and methodical mapmaker's intent to the region. The expedition's stated purpose was scientific, but the redoubtable commander also carried secret instructions inspired by imperial ambition. Search for the great south land, Cook was told, and claim territories in the name of George III.

Cook later felt that he had failed in delivering on the main heads of his brief. The scientific observations of the transit of Venus at Tahiti produced uncertain results. He also searched without success for the great south land. Yet he and his shipmates, particularly the naturalists Joseph Banks and Daniel Solander, were honoured on their eventual return to Europe.

What animated audiences at home was the vision of new worlds that Cook and his colleagues pictured, described and evidenced through material goods. The rich cultural artefacts collected during the long Tahitian and New Zealand layovers and the

reports of these communities excited popular attention and refigured philosophical debates. The flora and fauna specimens that comprised Banks' trove and Cook's excellent charts redrew European knowledge of natural history and cartography.

The *Endeavour* voyage had far-reaching consequences. Cook himself returned to the Pacific, not once but twice, spending the greater part of the rest of his life in the South Seas rather than at home. Each voyage added to the store of artefacts and knowledge accumulating in Europe. German-born Johann Reinhold Forster and his son Georg joined Cook on the second voyage, focusing collecting efforts on artefacts as much as natural history. On the third voyage, Cook and his crew – now able and experienced collectors themselves – took the lead in making a material record of their journey.

For its part, the Pacific would never be the same again, with subsequent expeditions and competing imperial interest determining the fate of its peoples. Just as Europe learned about the Pacific through Cook's efforts, the Pacific learned about Europe as a result of his voyages, often to its eventual cost. In many senses, these and other maritime expeditions in the region altered the course of human history.

European centres from St Petersburg to Paris recognised the significance of these voyages, at the very time they were happening. Across the continent, translated accounts of Cook's expeditions and his meticulous charts were pored over and read. Artefacts from the voyages were pursued with avidity.

In the case of the Saxon town of Hanover, the fates conspired to help it secure an enviable record of the Pacific. The British monarch, George III, was also Elector of Saxony and sympathetic to the interests of his German subjects. An approach in 1781 by the highly-regarded polymath, Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, for a representative selection of Pacific artefacts from the Cook voyages won royal support.

By 1782, a consignment of 'curiosities' compiled by the London collector and dealer George Humphrey was en route to the Academic Museum of Göttingen University. There, the collection helped inspire the developing scholarship of ethnology in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Blumenbach, a professor of medicine, became famous for his support and patronage of this new field.

Remaining elements of Johann Reinhold Forster's own collections made in the course of the second voyage were also given to the Academic Museum. Most of the Forsters' collection was acquired by the Pitt Rivers Museum at Oxford, but a sizeable holding was retained by the elder Forster till his death in 1798. These holdings were given to the Museum at Göttingen the following year.

There the collection remained, used occasionally for teaching and limited exhibition, until earlier this year. In February, the greater part of the artefacts travelled back to the Pacific, for the first time in more than two centuries, when they were shown at the Honolulu Academy of Arts, in Hawai'i. With the support of the Academy, Göttingen and Arts Exhibitions Australia, the collection is now in Australia for a limited time. Don't miss it.



Matt Trinca photo: George Serrus