

Oceanic Art Society
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NMA Review Secretariat
Department of Communications,
Information Technology and the Arts
GPO Box 2154, Canberra, ACT 2601

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To the Review Committee,

Oceanic Art at the NMA

I do not propose to address the main Terms of Reference for this Review on behalf of the Oceanic Art Society, except to say that the society, along with most other cultural bodies in Australia, welcomes the new National Museum of Australia as part of the Australian museum scene, and that most members have visited the Museum as individuals.

Since its opening, the National Museum of Australia has exhibited very little Oceanic art. The Oceanic Art Society recommends that the NMA include exhibitions of traditional and contemporary Oceanic art in its future priorities. (Oceania is taken to consist of Melanesia, Polynesia, and Micronesia.)

We offer three reasons for this recommendation

1. Australia's geographical location and present and historical relationship with many of the countries of Oceania, especially Papua New Guinea, gives Australians a vital interest in the cultures of its nearest neighbours.
2. It is intrinsically appropriate for Australia's national museum to have exhibitions of Oceanic art. The limitations of exhibitions in other major cities of Australia make it even more appropriate.
3. Traditional Oceanic art is now recognised as an important part of the cultural heritage of mankind. This is shown by ever-more sophisticated publications on it, ambitious exhibitions of it at major European and American public institutions, and its inclusion in histories of world art. No other population of the world of comparable size (say, five million at the time of early contact with the West) has produced such a great variety of art forms of such high quality.

The NMA has several extremely important collections of this material. These are the Official Papuan Collection (formed by Sir Hubert Murray, Lieutenant-Governor of Papua 1908 - 1940), the Rabaul Collection (an official collection of material from the Mandated Territory of New Guinea, transferred from the Rabaul Museum to the Australian Institute of Anatomy in the 1930s), and a number of smaller collections. These collections have not been seen by the public for many years (parts of it were once on display at the Institute of Anatomy) and very few items from them have been published. They include some significant pieces which are the only examples of their types in Australia. Perhaps, the NMA could also draw on the collections of Oceanic art held by the National Gallery of Australia, including the S.B. Fellows Collection of Trobriand Island objects, formed in the 1890s, and the collection of contemporary Papua New Guinea art.

At present, there are no major exhibitions of Oceanic art in a number of Australian capital cities. (There are only very small temporary displays at two or three of the public museums and art galleries in Sydney, Canberra, Perth, and Darwin.) The exhibitions that do exist have mostly been in place with little or no change for many decades. (The South Australian Museum has an outstanding extensive exhibition of Melanesian objects but the display has been changed little for fifty years or more. There are exhibitions at the Queensland Museum and at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery but they have been in place unchanged for decades. The Museum of Melbourne has a display of some fifty maritime objects from Oceania.)

However, the Australian Museum did have a number of exhibitions at its Djamu Gallery before it closed for financial reasons and Sydney University's Macleay Museum has recently had two temporary exhibitions of Oceanic art and artefacts. In the last 35 years, only one exhibition of Oceanic art at an Australian public institution has been accompanied by a published catalogue.

The only Oceanic art exhibitions planned for the near future of which we are aware are a permanent exhibition of Melanesian art at the National Gallery of Victoria and an exhibition of New Guinea Highland art at the Art Gallery of NSW.

This limited activity in Australia contrasts with major exhibitions of Oceanic art in Europe and the United States, all accompanied by significant catalogues (some are listed below). The Louvre in Paris in 2000 for the first time staged an exhibition of tribal, including Oceanic, art. Other outstanding major exhibition of the last three years include one of Easter Island art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, of New Britain art at the Linden-Museum in Stuttgart, of New Guinea art in Dresden, of Papuan art in Marseille, of Admiralty Islands art in Basel, and a travelling exhibition of Vanuatu art in Europe. These special exhibitions were in addition to numerous substantial permanent exhibitions in Europe and America.

There is significant interest in the sleeping collections of the NMA among scholars, artists, and collectors, both in Australia and overseas. We understand it was part of the Government's vision that the 'collections would be accessible to scholars, students and communities, for research and re-interpretation' (DCITA Secretariat). We request that the NMA's wonderful collections of Oceanic material be made available through display and publication.

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Recent overseas Oceanic art exhibition catalogues

Bonnemaison, J., Kaufmann, C., Huffman, K., & Tryon, D. 1996, *Arts of Vanuatu*. Bathurst: Crawford House Publishing.

Heermann, Ingrid (ed.) 2001. *Form Colour Inspiration: Oceanic art from New Britain*. Stuttgart: Arnoldsche

Kjellgren, Eric. 2001. *Splendid Isolation: Art of Easter Island*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Réunion des musées nationaux. 2000. *Art Papou: Austronésiens et Papous de Nouvelle-Guinée*. Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux. (Catalogue of Papuan art exhibition at Marseille.)

Réunion des musées nationaux. 2000. *Sculptures: Africa Asia Oceania Americas*. Paris: Réunion des musées nationaux. (One of a number of catalogues of the exhibition of tribal art at the Louvre.)

Tiesler, Frank. Forthcoming. *The Art of New Guinea*. (An unpublished book in German, currently being translated into English, on which the exhibition in Dresden was based.)