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Teaching the Future of Pacific Art

Abstract

Although a few scholars have examined the training of Indigenous Pacific artists during the period of early contact with Europeans and Americans, as well as the education of Indigenous artists who practice heritage arts in the Pacific today, almost nothing has been written on the instruction of art in modern classroom and workshop settings with regard to Pacific Islanders and Aboriginal Australians. The four Discussion Roundtable articles in this volume focus on teaching art in Oceania—three address art education for Pacific Island students in a variety of settings, while the fourth is concerned with the presentation of Pacific arts and artists to an outside audience made up of American college students. As a departure from the academic articles usually found in these pages, and in contrast to the other contributions to this volume, these four pieces are narratives of personal journeys of discovery.

Keywords: art, education, Oceania

For decades, art historians, anthropologists, and a wide range of academics have investigated the Oceanic arts of the past and the continuing creativity of artists from this region. Although the training of Indigenous Pacific artists during the period of early contact with Europeans and Americans has been examined by some scholars, and the education of Indigenous artists who still practice heritage arts has been discussed by a few others, almost nothing has been written on art instruction in modern classroom and workshop settings in regard to Pacific Islanders and Aboriginal Australians. Since its inception in 1990, *Pacific Arts: The Journal of the Pacific Arts Association* has published on myriad aspects of the creativity of the cultures and individuals that come from or identify with *moana*. However, the topic of art education in secondary schools, colleges, universities, and community workshops, has not been investigated. Of the four Discussion Roundtable articles in this volume, all of which focus on teaching art, three address art education for Pacific Island students in a variety of settings, while the fourth is concerned with the presentation of Pacific arts and artists to an outside audience consisting of American college students.

As a departure from the academic articles usually found in *Pacific Arts*, and in contrast to the other two papers presented in this volume, these four pieces are narratives of personal journeys of discovery. Laura Sunderland speaks of her many years as an art teacher in Aotearoa New Zealand—her joys and frustrations, as well as those of her high school students. Leua

Latai presents the history of art education in the nation of Sāmoa and the challenges for both teachers and students as they try to make their way as active creatives. In contrast to these school-based accounts, Ela To'omaga recounts efforts to integrate art production and cultural self-awareness into a community arts program, with a particular focus on a *siapo* workshop that bridges past and present in the making of tapa by using contemporary materials. Finally, the focus of my paper provides the flip side to these narratives: I write not about the training of future artists, but about the presentation of historic and contemporary Pacific art to American college students from Indiana in the United States.



Fig 1. *Siapo* maker Makulata Fa'atoafi working with Indiana University Southeast student Rachel Mulvey. Siutu Sala'ilua, Sāmoa, 2014. Photograph by Cassandra Guernsey. Courtesy of the author

It is my hope that in each article the reader catches a glimpse of the continuing creativity of Pacific Islanders and, perhaps, sees promise for the future. It is today's young people, truly the focal point of these articles, who will have to contend with the challenges of climate change, the inequities of capitalism, and a world divided in the future. "Art is not a mirror held

up to reality, but a hammer with which to shape it.”¹ If the arts are a tool with which reality can be shaped, it is art education that helps the next generation fashion and use those tools. This is my hope. It is why I take students to Sāmoa every couple of years. It is why the authors featured in this volume decided to dedicate themselves to teaching.

Notes

¹ This quote is variously attributed to Bertolt Brecht, Leon Trotsky, and Vladimir Mayakovsky. See, for instance, respectively, Peter McLaren and Peter Leonard, *Paulo Freire: A Critical Encounter* (NY: Routledge, 1993), 80; Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, edited by William Keach, translated by Rose Strunsky (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2005), 120; Rjurik Davidson, “Under the Hammer,” *Overland*, Nov. 11, 2011, <https://overland.org.au/2011/11/under-the-hammer/>; and Andrew Samuels, *The Political Psyche* (NY: Routledge, 1993), 9.