

NICHOLAS THOMAS

Pacific Presences: A Retrospect

Abstract

This essay is a reflection on the five-year research project “Pacific Presences: Oceanic Art and European Museums,” which was supported by the European Research Council from 2013 to 2018. It highlights the very rich and still largely under-researched potential of Oceanic collections across smaller and larger European museums, as well as the benefits of collaborative, collections-based research for communities and source nations across the Pacific.

Keywords: *Museums, collections, Pacific art, collaboration, Pacific Presences, Oceania, European voyages, critical heritage studies*

Toward the end of 2012, I was delighted to receive an email from the European Research Council (ERC) confirming that an application for an “advanced grant” that colleagues and I had submitted earlier in the year had been successful. The project, entitled “Pacific Presences: Oceanic Art and European Museums,” received just under €2.5 million to support a wide-ranging programme of work based at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge over five years.¹ The moment was fortuitous, for the project built on others that were just coming to fruition. From Cambridge, Amiria Salmond had led an application around “Artefacts of Encounter,” an exploration of Polynesian collections across Europe; I took over as this project’s convenor when she moved to Germany and then Brazil (but remained involved). The project initiated links with museum curators in Germany, Italy, France, and Spain and arranged joint study visits by Māori colleagues to their collections. Lissant Bolton from the British Museum and I had co-directed a five-year investigation of its Melanesian collections that extended or initiated relationships with many curators, researchers, and community members from across Melanesian nations. A north-south group of scholars and curators from the UK and New Zealand, convened by Peter Brunt, completed the publication, *Art in Oceania: A New History* (2012).² Most importantly, an outstanding group of researchers, including Julie Adams, Lucie Carreau, Alison Clark, and Maia Nuku signed up to take on postdoctoral roles with Pacific Presences; Alana Jelinek and Mark Adams were affiliated artists; and Erna Lilje joined later. Other

researchers, artists, and students later participated in Pacific Presences on one basis or another.

Most fortuitously, after we submitted the ERC application, but before we learned of its success, I was approached by the Royal Academy of Arts, which had for many years aspired to mount a major Oceania exhibition, and in due course Peter Brunt and I agreed to co-curate such a show. Research for Pacific Presences informed and stimulated our curatorial work over five years, and the exhibition *Oceania* (2018) became one of the major outcomes of the ERC project.³ In strictly academic terms, the core outcome of Pacific Presences was a book series, published open-access by Sidestone Press in the Netherlands. Nine titles, including a summative two-volume book with the same title as the project, totalled nearly 3,000 pages.⁴ The project also generated what we called “community books” in local languages; smaller exhibitions in Cambridge and pop-up exhibitions in the Pacific, including pop-up exhibitions in New Caledonia and elsewhere; and many other publications, events, residencies, art projects, and acquisitions.⁵

The second volume of our summative book concluded with reflections by members of the core project team. Having had my say through an extended introduction, I did not contribute to that section. Now, more than five years later, it seems timely to say something about the project’s strengths and limitations, what it revealed, and what future priorities and opportunities it points towards. By way of context, Pacific Presences was motivated by several large questions. We were aware that museums across Europe, from Spain to Russia, held collections brought to that part of the world from the Pacific from the eighteenth century onwards. We knew that the collections were cumulatively vast, especially in Britain, Germany, the Netherlands, France, and Switzerland, and that they also included notable holdings in many other countries including Ireland and Estonia. We asked: What was collected? What significance, values, and uses did artefacts have in their communities of origin? How and why were artefacts gifted, traded, or appropriated? What lives had they had in Europe? How could their salience be understood now?

One implication of investigating these questions should be noted at the outset: the project aimed not only to be documentary and analytical but also generative. We hoped to make collections—which in some cases had been neglected in museum stores for generations—better known and accessible, in particular to the Islanders who were our research partners. We shared images and discussed works via email or otherwise online. But we prioritised having in-person contact with things, and visited collections with co-researchers from many communities. Rather than merely analyse connections, we aimed to create them.



Figure 1. Mark Adams, 31 October 2013. Julie Adams, Teikitevaamanihii Robert Huukena, Philippe Peltier, Maia Nuku, Marie-Noëlle Ottino-Garanger. Musée du quai Branly - Jacques Chirac. Paris. France. Digital photograph, from the series published in Mark Adams and Nicholas Thomas, *Photo-Museology: the Presence of Absence and the Absence of Presence* (Pacific Presences 7, Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2022). Courtesy of the artist



Figure 2. Mark Adams, 25 September 2016. Suurgildi Hoone. Great Guild Hall. Nicholas Thomas, Anne Ruusaar, journalist, cameraman. Estonian History Museum. Tallinn. Estonia. Digital photograph, from the series published in Mark Adams and Nicholas Thomas, *Photo-Museology* (Pacific Presences 7, Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2022). Courtesy of the artist



Figure 3. Mark Adams, 9 June 2016. At Nessakoéa, Djeine, Daniel Bonwé, Brenda, Kapoipa Kasarhérou, Julie Adams, Joel Nei, Edmond Saumé, François Wadra, Lucien, Yamel Euritein. Houailou Valley. Grande Terre. Kanaky New Caledonia. Digital scan from 8 x 10 in. colour negative film, from the series published in Mark Adams and Nicholas Thomas, *Photo-Museology* (Pacific Presences 7, Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2022). Courtesy of the artist



Figure 4. Mark Adams, 20 July 2015. Noelle Kahanu. An 'ahu'ula of Kamehameha II. Bevan Workroom. Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. University of Cambridge. United Kingdom. Digital photograph, from the series published in Mark Adams and Nicholas Thomas, *Photo-Museology* (Pacific Presences 7, Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2022). Courtesy of the artist

The ERC bid identified cultures and regions that were proposed foci—including the Marquesas, the Solomon Islands, and the Sepik—and a number of partner institutions with whom we made agreements regarding access to collections. But as the project got underway, these foci and partnerships were superseded by new opportunities and discoveries. Although we did do a good deal of work with most partner institutions, Julie Adams and I made just one visit to the *Kunstkamera* in St. Petersburg, which was difficult but rewarding. We addressed Kanak collections from New Caledonia (among others) that had not been among our identified foci, but never had the capacity to address the Sepik.

Aside from the range of standard methodologies of artefact analysis, ethnography, and historical research, the project extended the practice of Amiria Salmond's "Artefacts of Encounter" group, which had foregrounded collective engagement with collections (without ever quite deliberately planning to do so, or announcing that as our particular approach). That is, we visited museum holdings not as individual scholars engaged in an object version of library research, but as a community. This often meant that a small group might include one or more members of the project team, one or more Islander visitors, an affiliated artist, and collections staff members from the institution we were visiting. Some of the local curators were Oceania specialists, while others had collection-wide responsibilities, but knew institutional histories and the aspects of provenance that the styles or handwriting on labels evidenced. Our visits were thus dialogical encounters in multiple directions: we met remarkable creations by Islanders' ancestors and shared and debated cultural expertise. We also began to understand the bewilderingly complex journeys that particular works had undertaken. In some cases, objects had passed between many hands as travellers presented works to scientific societies that later merged or disbanded, or collections were transferred to museums that had, in turn, been renamed and/or amalgamated with others. We shared versions of these encounters when we visited various Pacific communities and took advantage of cross-cultural gatherings such as the Festival of Pacific Arts in Guam in 2017, where we set up stalls at artists' fairs.

Pacific Presences was stimulated by a sea change happening in work around Oceanic art; it aimed to accelerate it, and indeed render it irreversible. Collections have long been, and still are, studied without much regard for the voices and perspectives of Islanders. Even now—in the context of the tribal art market, rather than curatorship or research—there is a discourse of Oceanic art that presumes that the scene of interpretation and valuation is one of European or North American connoisseurs or curators, rather than a conversation in which Islanders' voices are prominent. At a time when the academic humanities and

social sciences have long embraced postcolonial perspectives, it should be unnecessary, indeed old-hat, to insist that the best scholarship can only be based in collaboration, and that projects can only be responsive to local perspectives and agendas. But the challenges and costs of long-distance international travel; the widely distributed nature of collections; the fragmented, complex, and multilingual archival record; and the relatively fragile nature of training and capacity-building in Pacific studies and art studies make sustaining and nurturing Islands-based and collaborative scholarship around art collections and histories at once important and fertile in principle, but also challenging—and often simply difficult to get funded—in practice. Support from the ERC enabled us to undertake and facilitate a good deal of work over the period 2013 to 2018, but left us painfully conscious of how many collections were unexamined and how many Pacific communities still had little or no access to relevant collections.

As project lead, I was, and still am, too interested to usefully assess Pacific Presences' successes and failures—critical adjudications can only come from elsewhere. But the project experience did highlight issues for the future that I would like to point to here.

Above all, the project revealed both the extraordinary importance of collections as expressions of heritage and research resources, and the manifold complexities and obstacles to genuinely unlocking their potential, for ourselves as researchers, and for wider constituencies in the Pacific and elsewhere.

We responded, as I have noted, to a sense that vast and extraordinarily significant collections were held in institutions in many countries. Both Islanders and interested people located in formerly British colonies often assumed that the bulk of important artefacts were in the major metropolitan institutions, in particular the British Museum. While it and equivalent national institutions in France and Germany hold highly important collections, we were struck by the extent and importance of holdings at less prominent institutions; while numerically smaller, they frequently included exceptionally significant artefacts and collections, often associated with particular individual voyagers, missionaries, or colonists. They were sometimes well-provenanced or had the potential to be richly documented on the basis of further research into scientific, evangelical, naval, and sometimes punitive military missions. An underlying point is that material culture ethnologists had studied artefacts through a lens of "types" and "specimens." Over recent decades scholars in the field have moved on, to recognise that, beyond minor variations, objects in museums were often more appropriately conceived as individual works of art. They are not interchangeable and there is much to be gained from close, in-person examination of, for example, Marquesan 'u'u (war clubs), which

exhibit rich nuance and individual variation—every example is, in fact, a singular work. What could be discovered, through visits to smaller, out-of-the-way institutions, was thus much more than “more of the same.”

In five years—notwithstanding revelatory, exciting, and often emotionally moving encounters with artefacts across dozens of museums in many countries—Pacific Presences did no more than scrape the surface and selectively sample the extraordinary collections that have long been all but inaccessible to everyone but the curators responsible for them and occasional specialist researchers. Because of issues with museum infrastructure, some stored collections have been, quite literally, physically inaccessible even to the staff of their own institutions for many years; others have been hard to understand and/or access in the absence of online catalogues or publications; some have been difficult to access because staff have lacked capacity or (thankfully now only occasionally) been obstructive. In other words, the collections in reserves are still largely under-researched resources. Digitisation has progressed a great deal from when the project started; in 2013, certain collections that we could only explore by walking around stores and opening boxes can now be searched, at least partially, online (though online catalogues rarely encompass all relevant accession records, documents, or images). It is encouraging that funding agencies and universities are increasingly recognising that collections have been intellectually and institutionally marginalised for too long, that they demand dedicated investment, and that databases and portals to cultural and natural collections, such as Europeana⁶ and national equivalents are becoming more inclusive of material, and functional, for users. Yet at the same time, the funding environment across universities and museums in many countries is unpromising, and support for collections care and documentation is fragile.

Pacific Presences pointed to the importance of cross-institutional, international, and comparative research, not only because it is critical that we connect Islanders (in French Polynesia, for example) with collections in Europe, but because European collections were, through scientific and museum exchanges among other processes, often divided across a number of countries. One of our methodologies, reassembling collections, was vital to documenting the artefacts from the Krusenstern expedition in the Marquesas, which had ended up in Moscow, St. Petersburg, Tallinn, Tartu, Munich, Leipzig, Zurich, and Leiden.⁷ Dispersed collections of this kind cannot be researched effectively through work bound by institutions, as relevant archives, print publications, and visual images can be, and in this case were, distributed even more widely—in North America, as well as Europe—than the artefacts themselves. One of the strengths of the project was that several research strands—not only on the Marquesas but on the collections

associated with the d'Entrecasteaux and *Royalist* voyages, among others—were reassembled as comprehensively as possible.⁸ But there is, to some extent, a mismatch between the distribution of material culture over space and time and the parameters of even a well-funded research project: the work just cannot be done by individuals, or by a small team, over three or even five years. It can only be sustained and advanced collectively. The second issue to consider for the future is to recognise how the political context changed over the life of the project. In so far as longstanding commitments on the part of the Pacific art research community—to consultation, engagement, and the co-production of research—were scrutinised and given greater urgency, this change was positive. In so far as reductive and unambiguously negative characterisations of collections and museums became more prevalent, the decolonial turn was potentially more negative. A stereotypical view—that any ethnographic or colonial-era collection had been looted from its Pacific origins—has come to be widely enunciated in the media and by academics less aware of the messy actualities of collection histories. At the same time, “source” communities’ perspectives were presumed rather than investigated, and often presumed to be homogeneous. Giving collections greater prominence in public debate was, on the one hand, positive—they had been sidelined for so long—but their stigmatisation risked diminishing their potential as a resource.

The 2018 Sarr-Savoy report on the restitution of African cultural heritage was published during the run of the *Oceania* exhibition and the renewed debate about restitution surfaced in reports relating to the show.⁹ A prominent newspaper ran an exposé-style story which “revealed” that the spectacular Solomon Islands food trough in the British Museum’s collection had been looted; the journalist was in fact aware of the provenance because it had been stated and discussed in the media pack, the catalogue, and on the label in the show itself.

While the exhibition, like the Pacific Presences project more generally, was premised on collaboration and dialogue, its narrative regarding encounter was always susceptible to challenge. One perspective might be that colonial violence and dispossession, and acts of resistance, received insufficient emphasis. Similarly, consultation and collaboration were always uneven. Members of the research group had prior connections and indeed friendships that were enormously valuable over the course of the project and informed aspects of the exhibition. We made new relationships or initiated specific consultations when we could, but some engagements were more limited than others and the exhibition included artefacts from communities with whom no dialogue had taken place.

Pacific Presences was a pre-Covid project. Given that so much of the work depended on travel, in-person study visits to collections, and interaction with groups of people, we were extremely fortunate that the programme was not disrupted, as so many were just a couple of years later. A project such as Pacific Presences could not have relied on online communication to initiate or develop relationships with community members with whom we had not yet worked. Now there is, rightly, pressure to limit air travel for environmental reasons, but research dealing with cross-cultural artefacts cannot be undertaken without “going the distance.” Multiple visits, a preparedness to engage in proper familiarisation, and the capacity and willingness to bring individuals and community representatives to collections, museums, and the European milieu in which they are situated are all essential if work is to be seriously undertaken. Yet the capacity we now have, to meet online, does enable more continuous dialogue, even as it throws distance into relief, highlighting the very differences between the island environments that artefacts are from, and the European institutions and milieu in which they are now found.

At the time of writing, Pacific nations have gained visibility in the global media due to events such as the landslide in Enga, Papua New Guinea, and civil turbulence in New Caledonia. In the context of such crises, research on historic artefacts may appear antiquarian. Yet evidence mounts for the broad and positive socioeconomic impact of heritage and culture. Just one research project can enable skills development, training, access, the creation of new artwork, and new international partnerships and opportunities. In the Pacific, the connection with living heritage and cultural energy are palpable. Collections, conceived generatively, are vital not only for advanced academic inquiry, but in more challenging and exciting ways for the future of the region and its communities.

Nicholas Thomas is the director of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA) at Cambridge University. He is the author and editor of nearly fifty influential books and exhibition catalogues, including Entangled Objects (1991), Possessions: Indigenous Art/Colonial Culture (1999), Islanders: the Pacific in the Age of Empire (2012), and Gauguin and Polynesia (2024). Thomas has also written extensively about contemporary art, museums, and related issues for the Financial Times, The Art Newspaper, Apollo, Artlink, and Art Asia Pacific, among other magazines and journals. The exhibition Oceania (2018–19), which he co-curated with Peter Brunt for the Royal Academy of Arts in London and the Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac in Paris, was acclaimed as a landmark exhibition by critics in the UK, France, Germany, and the United States, as well as in Pacific nations themselves. Thomas has curated or co-curated many other exhibitions at MAA and elsewhere, often in collaboration with contemporary artists.

Notes

¹ It is a pleasure, again, to acknowledge the ERC's support under the European Union's Seventh Framework Programme (FP7, 2007-2013), grant agreement 324146.

² The main outcomes of these initiatives were the books *Artefacts of Encounter: Cook's Voyages, Colonial Collecting and Museum Histories*, ed. Nicholas Thomas, Julie Adams, Billie Lythberg, Maia Nuku, and Amiria Salmond (Dunedin: Otago University Press / Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2016 [completed with support from the Pacific Presences project]); *Melanesia: Art and Encounter*, ed. Lissant Bolton, Nicholas Thomas, Elizabeth Bonshek, Julie Adams, and Ben Burt (London: British Museum Press / Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2013); and Peter Brunt, Nicholas Thomas, Sean Mallon, Lissant Bolton, Deidre Brown, Damian Skinner and Susanne Küchler, *Art in Oceania: A New History* (London: Thames and Hudson / New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012).

³ The exhibition was held at the Royal Academy from September to December 2018 and at the Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac from March to July 2019. The catalogue was *Oceania*, ed. Peter Brunt and Nicholas Thomas (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2018). For reflections and responses, see Nicholas Thomas, Adrian Locke, Noelle M. K. Y. Kahanu, Simon Jean, and Lagi-Maama, "Reviewing *Oceania*," *Museum Worlds: Advances in Research* 7, no. 1 (2019): 262–91.

⁴ The book series can be accessed and downloaded via <https://www.sidestone.com/books/?q=pacific+presences>.

⁵ Community books relating to collections from Kiribati, New Caledonia, and the Solomon Islands were produced, in part, in local languages. Exhibitions at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at Cambridge University included *Magic and Memory* (September 2014–March 2015), *Sounding Out the Morning Star: Music and West Papua* (March–November 2015), and *Swish: Carved Belts and Fibre Skirts of Papua New Guinea* (2017).

⁶ See www.europeana.eu.

⁷ Elena Govor and Nicholas Thomas (eds.), *Tiki: Marquesan Art and the Krusenstern Expedition* (Pacific Presences 5; Leiden: Sidestone, 2019).

⁸ Bronwen Douglas, Fanny Wonu Veys, and Billie Lythberg (eds.), *Collecting in the South Sea: The Voyage of Bruni d'Entrecasteaux 1791–1794* (Pacific Presences 3; Leiden: Sidestone, 2018); Alison Clark, with Eve Haddow and Christopher Wright, *Resonant Histories: Pacific Artefacts and the Voyages of HMS Royalist 1890–1893* (Pacific Presences 6; Leiden: Sidestone, 2019).

⁹ Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, "The Restitution of African Cultural Heritage. Toward a New Relational Ethics," trans. Drew S. Burk (Paris: Ministère de la Culture; Université Paris Nanterre, 2018).