

PHYLLIS HERDA and BILLIE LYTHBERG

‘Amui ‘i Mu‘a/Ancient Futures: Late Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth-Century Tongan Arts and Their Legacies

Abstract

This essay introduces the two issues of Pacific Arts dedicated to the New Zealand-based, Marsden Fund (Royal Society of New Zealand)-financed research project ‘Amui ‘i Mu‘a/Ancient Futures: Late Eighteenth- and Early Nineteenth-Century Tongan Arts and Their Legacies and its affiliated traveling exhibition. The project’s participants included Phyllis Herda (anthropologist and Pacific historian), Billie Lythberg (art historian, anthropologist, and now lecturer in organizational studies), Melenaite Taumoefolau (Pacific linguist and researcher in Pacific studies), Hilary Scothorn (art historian and Pacific textile specialist), and Tongan artists Sopolemalama Filipe Tohi and Dagmar Vaikalafi Dyck. These academics and artists worked collaboratively to locate, examine, and interpret late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Tongan artifacts in more than thirty collections throughout Europe, the United Kingdom, the United States, Japan, and Australasia, as well as to investigate the legacies of Tongan–European encounters in this era.

Erratum notice: This article previously stated on page 7 “The second issue of *Pacific Arts* dedicated to this project (vol. 25, no. 2, forthcoming in 2025). . .” and was corrected on 1 October 2025 to state “The second, forthcoming issue of *Pacific Arts* dedicated to this project. . .”

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The late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were a time of encounter between Indigenous Polynesian societies and European explorers who entered the Pacific. In Tonga, foreign visitors were met and entertained by the local elite of the islands, who presented them with lavish feasts and elaborate gift exchanges that included “art” and chiefly regalia. Through this feasting and reciprocal exchange, hosts and visitors established relationships. When the voyagers left the islands, the items they took with them became vestiges of their encounters and

exotic representations of the people who fashioned and gifted them. Many of these objects have since become detached from their original context and are often identified only with regard to their place of origin, material, or Indigenous purpose which is just not the whole story.

'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures, a project funded by the Royal Society of New Zealand Te Apārangi under a Marsden Grant, brought academics and artists together to locate, examine, and interpret late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Tongan arts ("Ancient") from these Tongan–European encounters and consider their legacies ("Futures"). Working collaboratively, project members and affiliates applied their research experience and knowledge to newly encountered Tongan artifacts in over thirty collections dispersed throughout Europe, the United Kingdom, the United States, Japan, and Australasia. Names, terminologies, construction techniques, and decorative practices were uncovered and reinstated and, in doing so, we learned more about the intentions of objects' makers, donors, and collectors. Our research on these items, estranged from their places within Tongan communities for nearly two centuries, was intended to elucidate Tongan knowledges, European and Tongan history-making, and agency in Tongans' early engagements with Europeans. Gifting and reciprocal exchanges in traditional Tongan society were far from being simple transactions; they involved multifaceted performances of the status, power, and *hohoko* (genealogy) of the giver, receiver, *and* the object. A social relationship, manifested in the object, was formed through the presentation of the gift, which endured long after the exchange event.

The 'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures team included Phyllis Herda (anthropologist and Pacific historian), Billie Lythberg (art historian, anthropologist, museum studies scholar, and now lecturer in organizational studies), Melenaite Taumoefolau (linguist and Pacific studies scholar), and Hilary Scothorn (art historian and Pacific textile specialist), as well as senior Tongan artists Sopoalemalama Filipe Tohi and Dagmar Vaikalafi Dyck. The team was joined at museums and venues by international colleagues, knowledgeable and supportive curators of collections, and, where possible, experts in traditional Indigenous knowledge.

Two special issues of *Pacific Arts*—this issue and a forthcoming one—are dedicated to presenting the project's research results. Our research pivoted around close examination of the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Tongan arts objects we encountered and the records made of them—ranging from Indigenous oral histories and traditions to descriptions written by foreigners in manuscripts to old and obscure publications. We made an effort to reinstate the

artifacts' genealogies and intrinsic cultural and historical values, as well as develop a new conceptual framework for their consideration. We looked for continuity between these ancient artifacts and contemporary practices, as well as innovation in the arts of Tongan ancestors and their descendants, and sought to reclaim and repatriate the knowledge systems encoded in objects that are woven, layered, wrapped, and carved.

This issue of *Pacific Arts* highlights the artistic contribution of Sopolamalama Filipe Tohi and Dagmar Vaikalafi Dyck, core project members and senior Tongan artists who convey the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Tongan art practices they encountered in museums through their work in new media. It also presents the 'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures exhibition, held first in the Tongan capital of Nuku'alofa (2019), and then in Auckland (2021) and Hastings (2023), Aotearoa New Zealand. Each hosting venue held a week of events connected to the exhibition, which included a public symposium supported variously by Creative New Zealand, the New Zealand High Commission in Tonga, the Tanoa Dateline Hotel, the Marsden Fund through the 'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures project, the Wörlitz Foundation, and the Ancient Tonga Museum.

The week of activities in Nuku'alofa launched with an exhibition of artworks made by Tohi and Dyck, as well as one featuring work by young Tongan artists. In Auckland, the Wallace Arts Centre at the Pah Homestead also held an exhibition of artworks by Tohi and Dyck, including historic Tongan artifacts from the Canterbury Museum in Christchurch and the Auckland War Memorial Museum Tāmaki Paenga Hira. In Hastings, the Hastings City Art Gallery (HCAG) Te Whare Toi o Heretaunga featured historic artifacts from the collection of the Hawke's Bay Museums Trust, along with Dyck and Tohi's artwork. Each week of events also included public lectures, *talanoa* (discussion), and workshops. These events were well attended by both the public and local Tongan community members, and generated rich discussion. These events—presenting the interpretation and interlocation of past, present, and future—were inspired windows to the past and creative legacies for the future.

Thanks to Rim Books' publisher and owner (and renowned photographer) Haru Sameshima, this issue includes the original catalogue essays done for the Pah Homestead exhibition, which were published in 2021 as a beautifully printed book.¹ We are grateful to photographer and academic Raymond Sagapolutele, who took many of the photographs initially published there and now republished here, and to other photographers where named. We are grateful to *Art New Zealand* for allowing us to republish Hatesa Seumanutafa's review of the exhibition.² Billie Lythberg's report on the conference was first published in

Museum Worlds.³ Several key essays are published in both lea faka-Tonga, translated by Alioth Helu, as well as in English, and the texts reproduced from HCAG include translations into te reo Māori by Te Ara Ripeka-Rangihuna (Ngāti Porou, Ngāti Kahungunu, Ngāti Tūwharetoa). New articles have also been prepared for this special issue to extend its coverage of the *Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures* exhibitions and their public outreach activities.

The second, forthcoming issue of *Pacific Arts* dedicated to this project lays out the aims and praxis of the 'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures project, and introduces the museums and institutions visited by the research team, as well as the nature of their traditional Tongan collections. We explore the genealogies of artifacts that have been estranged from their original places within Tongan communities for nearly two centuries, tracing their paths from when they left the Tongan archipelago with European visitors to their acquisition by foreign museums. We investigate the agency of Tongans in their early engagements with Europeans, and elucidate Tongan knowledges, as well as European and Tongan history-making, through the mobilization of the art objects that changed hands between them. Central to this investigation is the identification of the Tongan individuals who met and hosted the European visitors. Tongan *hohoko*, Tongan oral traditions, and European accounts of the encounters directed us in our analysis. While Europeans' descriptions of Tongan history and culture, and the identification of the elite individuals they met, were certainly not flawless in their understanding, they do provide a contemporary, yet imperfect, picture of the encounters between Tongans and Europeans. Contextualizing these descriptions with the informative Tongan *hohoko* and oral traditions produced a much more informed understanding of the individuals involved.

The 'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures team also explores traditional Tongan society, politics, language, and religion, with a special emphasis on art objects and the Tongan gift economy. Tangible aspects of Tongan *koloa tukufakaholo* (cultural heritage), such as the objects gifted to Europeans in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, become Indigenous cultural artifacts ripe with meanings significant to their time. We establish the traditional contexts of their manufacture and investigate the social messages they encapsulate in their form, fabrication, accumulation, and presentation to foreigners. We consider offered and collected ancient Tongan artifacts including divine and chiefly objects, body marking, fiber arts, adornments, carving, and tools of the land and the sea. The two special issues of *Pacific Arts* present two aspects of the research project. Project members and affiliates offer salient analyses of Tongan art and artifacts and their legacies in

both historic and contemporary contexts as well as insights of the complexities of investigating historical Tongan–European encounters.

Phyllis Herda works across the disciplines of anthropology, Pacific history, and women's/gender studies. She holds degrees from the University of Arizona (BA, anthropology), the Waipapa Taumata Rau | University of Auckland (MA, 1st class, anthropology) and Australian National University (PhD, Pacific history). She began working in Tonga in the early 1980s and continues to research, publish, and teach on topics such as Tongan ethnography, oral tradition, and history; European explorers in Polynesia; gender; disease; colonialism; and Polynesia art and material culture, including traditional and contemporary textiles. She has taught at Victoria University of Wellington and the Waipapa Taumata Rau | University of Auckland, from which she recently retired.

Billie Lythberg is of Swedish, Scottish, and English descent. She is a senior lecturer in the Department of Management and International Business at Waipapa Taumata Rau | University of Auckland, and an affiliated researcher of Vā Moana–Pacific Spaces at Te Wānanga Aronui o Tāmaki Makau Rau | Auckland University of Technology. She has worked with Māori and Moana colleagues on multiple projects for the Royal Society of New Zealand, including the Marsden-funded 'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures project. She publishes extensively, curates and critiques exhibitions, and develops documentaries for broadcast television.

Notes

¹ Billie Lythberg, ed., *'Amui 'i Mu'a/Ancient Futures: Dagmar Vaikalafi Dyck, Sopoalemalama Filipe Tohi* (Auckland: Rim Books, 2021). The hardcopy catalogue of *'Amui 'i Mu'a* (ISBN 978-0-9951194-5-4) is available for purchase by contacting the artists on social media.

² Hatesa Seuma Utafa, "Ngatu Led Me North: Reflections on 'Amui 'i Mu'a—Ancient Futures," *Art New Zealand* 179 (Spring 2021): 88–92.

³ Billie Lythberg, "'Amui 'i Mu'a: Ancient Futures Conference, Tanoa International Dateline Hotel, Tonga, 7–12 October 2019," *Museum Worlds* 7, no. 1 (2019), 236–7.

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