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Voices of the Pacific: Art, Tradition, and Innovation at CaixaForum Madrid

Abstract

*This article reviews the exhibition *Voices of the Pacific: Innovation and Tradition* (CaixaForum Madrid, May 28–September 14, 2025), which featured more than 210 artifacts from the British Museum and other collections. The exhibition explored the artistic and cultural expressions of Oceanic island communities through seven thematic sections: innovation and tradition, innovators, weavers, dancers, warriors, carvers, and travelers. It gave special attention to emblematic objects such as Polynesian idols, Melanesian weaponry, Micronesian ceremonial gear, and an installation by Māori artist George Nuku.*

Keywords: *Pacific Island cultures, CaixaForum Madrid, Oceanic art, British Museum, George Nuku, Indigenous representation, ethnographic exhibition, cultural heritage, museology*

Through its exhibition *Voices of the Pacific: Innovation and Tradition* (May 28–September 14, 2025), CaixaForum Madrid transported visitors to the islands of the Pacific. The exhibition showcased the cultural and artistic richness of the peoples inhabiting those archipelagoes, so distant from Spain. It featured 210 objects from the British Museum’s collection—one of the most significant Pacific collections outside the region itself. Two additional pieces complemented the exhibition: a Hawaiian helmet (*mahiōle*) loaned from the Museo de América in Madrid (Fig. 1) and a crocodile-head-shaped prow ornament from Papua New Guinea, loaned by the Museu Etnològic i de Cultures del Món in Barcelona.

The exhibition was curated by Dr. Julia Adams, curator of the Oceania Department at the British Museum, with support from Isabel Fuentes, director of CaixaForum Madrid, and artistic collaboration from Māori artist George Nuku, whose installation offered a striking interpretation of a plastic-polluted ocean.



Figure 1. A display case featuring two *mahiole* (helmets) and an *‘ahu ‘ula* (feather cape), Hawaiian Islands (left), and a shark-tooth trident, Kiribati (right). Installation view from *Voices of the Pacific: Innovation and Tradition* at CaixaForum Madrid, May 28–September 14, 2025. Photograph courtesy of F. Mellén

A Journey Through Pacific Voices: A Cultural Dialogue

Objects from the British Museum’s extensive Oceanic collection, representing around seventeen countries, was organized into seven thematic sections: Innovation and Tradition, Innovators, Weavers, Dancers, Warriors, Carvers, and Travelers. Each section highlighted the diverse talents and deep-rooted traditions of Oceanic islanders. The exhibition began with a large map of Oceania, spanning from New Guinea to Rapa Nui (Easter Island), and from Hawai’i to New Zealand; it excluded Australia in order to focus on island cultures shaped by their close relationship with the sea. These communities—expert navigators for more than 60,000 years—were in constant movement and were connected to one another hundreds of years before European contact. Their art forms are deeply interwoven with their natural environments and voyaging traditions.

Before reaching the map, visitors encountered a large display case housing several ancestral figures: a female idol (*‘otua fefine*) from Tonga carved from whale ivory; a wooden figure from the Cook Islands; a *yipwon* from the middle Sepik region of Papua New Guinea (PNG); a wooden figure from Wuvulu Island, PNG; a painted figure from the Wosera region, PNG; a striking *moai kavakava* from Rapa Nui; a painted mask (*tapuanu*) from the Caroline Islands (Fig. 2); a human figure from Malakula Island, Vanuatu; a Māori central post (*pou tokomanawa*) from an ancestral house (*wharenui*) (Fig. 3); two ceremonial paddles or clubs from Baku Island influenced by the Solomon

Islands' spirit figure *kokorra*; and a spectacular basalt pestle shaped like a bird from PNG (Fig. 4).

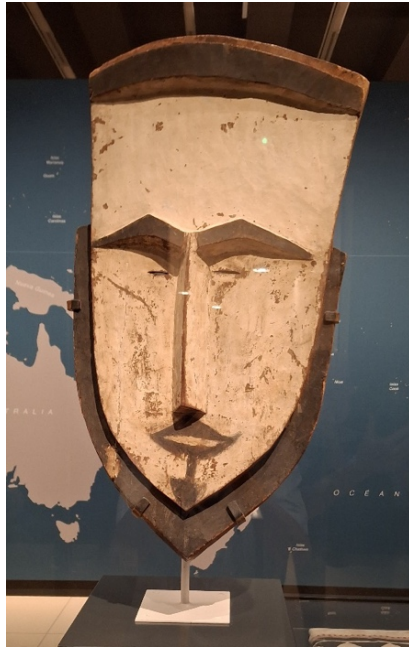


Figure 2. *Tapanu* (painted mask), Caroline Islands. Wood, pigment. Installation view from *Voices of the Pacific: Innovation and Tradition* at CaixaForum Madrid, May 28–September 14, 2025. Photograph courtesy of F. Mellén



Figure 3 (left). *Pou tokomanawa* (central post for a *whareniui* [meeting house]), New Zealand. Wood. Figure 4 (right). Pestle, Aikora River, Papua New Guinea. Basalt. Installation views from *Voices of the Pacific: Innovation and Tradition* at CaixaForum Madrid, May 28–September 14, 2025. Photograph courtesy of F. Mellén



Figure 5. Model of a double-hulled canoe, Fiji. Wood, pandanus, sennit. Installation views from *Voices of the Pacific: Innovation and Tradition* at CaixaForum Madrid, May 28–September 14, 2025. Photograph courtesy of F. Mellén

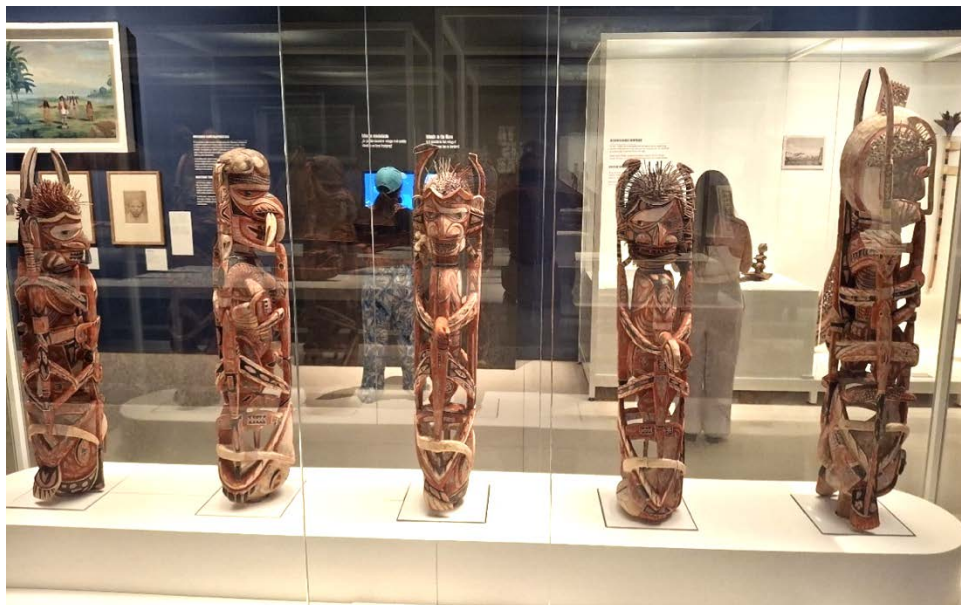


Figure 6. Five *malangan* figures, New Ireland, late nineteenth–twentieth century. Wood, pigment, shell, and plant fibers; maximum height 153.5 cm. The British Museum, London: Oc1884,0728.1, Oc1884,0728.2, Oc1884,0728.7, Oc1884,0728.9, Oc1884,0728.49. Installation view from *Voices of the Pacific: Innovation and Tradition*, CaixaForum Madrid, May 28–September 14, 2025. Photograph courtesy of F. Mellén

Elsewhere in the exhibition were several models of catamaran canoes from Fiji and Vanuatu featuring outrigger supports and triangular or crab-claw sails made from pandanus mats, replicating those used in ancient times (Fig. 5). A separate display showcased five vividly colored *malagan* figures from New Ireland, notable for their striking red and white tones (Fig. 6). Originally created to honor ancestors, these sculptures were typically later burned in elaborate ceremonial rites.

Nearby was a contemporary replica of a seventeenth-century figure of the Polynesian god A'a from Rurutu (Austral Islands), crafted by art professor Hihirau Vaitoare (Sāmoan) of the Centre des Mètiers d'Art de la Polynésie française (Fig. 7). Alongside an *umete* (Tahitian bowl) made of black dolerite at the Museo Nacional de Antropología in Madrid (unfortunately not included in this exhibition), the original A'a figure is among the most iconic art pieces of Polynesia. The original A'a, in the collection of the British Museum, is on loan to the new Musée de Tahiti et des Îles in Pape'ete until 2028.



Figure 7. Hihirau Vaitoare, replica of figure of the god A'a from Rurutu, Austral Islands, 2020. Wood. Installation view from *Voices of the Pacific: Innovation and Tradition*, CaixaForum Madrid, May 28–September 14, 2025. Photo courtesy of F. Mellén

The original A'a statue, taken to England in the early nineteenth century by missionaries from the London Missionary Society, is hollow with a detachable back panel sewn with coconut fiber. It lacks feet, has missing leg parts, and a damaged phallus. Its surface bears thirty small carved figures—sixteen with arms crossed over the chest, and fourteen with limbs outstretched. Vaitore composed a figure on the phallus, which is missing in the original.

Visitors interested in the original could watch a documentary about it near the replica. Another screening told the story of the legendary Polynesian canoe Hōkūle'a, which made its first voyage from Hawai'i to Tahiti in 1976, guided by Micronesian navigator Mau Pailug using traditional non-instrument navigation methods.

Continuing through the exhibition, a remarkable Marshall Islands navigation chart, crafted from palm ribs and two shells, was displayed. Such charts fall into three categories—*rebbelib*, *mattang*, and *meddo*—but, unfortunately, the museum did not provide the native name for this specific chart. A beautiful model war canoe (*tomako*) from the Solomon Islands—featuring the distinctive prow adorned with white cowries (*Ovula ovum*) and an image of the guardian spirit *Nguzu Nguzu*—was also on view (Fig. 8).



Figure 8. Model of a canoe, Solomon Islands, ca. 1900–1920. Wood and shell, 55 x 255 x 183.4 cm. The British Museum, London, Oc1921,1102.1. Installation view from *Voices of the Pacific: Innovation and Tradition*, CaixaForum Madrid, May 28–September 14, 2025. Photo courtesy of F. Mellén

Other display cases presented a variety of paddles and clubs (Fig. 9): a dance paddle from the Nomoi Islands (Federated States of Micronesia), a double-bladed paddle from the Caroline Islands, and a dance shield (*koka*) from

Bougainville. There were clubs such as the *gugu* from Fiji and others from the Solomon Islands. Notably absent were Solomon Islands *barava*—ornamental or currency items made from fossilized giant clam shells (*Tridacna gigas*)—and shell pendants such as *tarkola* and *tema*, which are important symbols of high social status. All are significant and representative artifacts of Solomon Islands culture, and their inclusion would have added greater breadth to the exhibition.



Figure 9. A display case showing various paddles and clubs, including: a dance paddle, Nomo Islands, Federated States of Micronesia (wood, fiber, cotton, wool, feathers) (far left); a double-bladed paddle, Caroline Islands (wood, coir, lime, ochre) (top row, center right); and a *koka* (dance shield) from Bougainville (wood, chalk) (center row, far right). Installation view from *Voices of the Pacific: Innovation and Tradition*, CaixaForum Madrid, May 28–September 14, 2025. Photo courtesy of F. Mellén

Numerous wooden spears were also on display (Fig. 10), including a particularly fine example from the Cook Islands: the *momore'akatara*, a ceremonial spear made of heavy (*Casuarina equisetifolia*) wood. Hawaiian objects included a small feather cape (*'ahu'ula*) from The British Museum, of lesser quality than those at the Museo de América.



Figure 10. A display case showing various clubs and spears, including a *momore'akatara* (ceremonial spear), Cook Islands (wood [*Casuarina equisetifolia*]) (front, center). Installation view from *Voices of the Pacific: Innovation and Tradition*, CaixaForum Madrid, May 28–September 14, 2025. Photo courtesy of F. Mellén



Figure 11. Suit of armor, Kiribati, ca. 1800–1900. Coconut fiber, wood, human hair, and shark teeth. The British Museum, London, Oc1922.1009.1–3, Oc1972, Q.100.a, Oc.1108, and Oc1921,0221.81–82. Installation view from *Voices of the Pacific: Innovation and Tradition*, CaixaForum Madrid, May 28–September 14, 2025. Photo courtesy of F. Mellén

From Micronesia, and specifically Kiribati, was an extraordinary helmet (*te barantauti*) made from the skin of a porcupine fish; a trident weapon crafted from wood, shark teeth, fiber, and human hair; and, most striking of all, a full suit of armor, known as *bwai ni buoka* (Fig. 11). The armor was woven from coconut fiber, and included a breastplate (*te nana*) and helmet (*te baratekora*).

Unfortunately, some object labels failed to include the pieces' indigenous names. For instance, the dance paddle (*rapa*) from Rapa Nui, the canoe (*hōe*) from Raivavae, the paddle (*cula-cula*) from Fiji, the nephrite ceremonial club (*gi okomo*) from New Caledonia, and the jamb mask (*apuoema*) from New Caledonia (Fig. 12) were all unnamed in their makers' native languages. This lack of information was particularly curious when one considers the online record of every Oceanic piece in the British Museum includes that piece's Indigenous name. In contrast, this is not the case for online records of Oceanic works held by the Museo de América. Such omissions can inadvertently reduce the richness of Pacific cultures to generic descriptions and underscores the importance of inclusive and culturally informed curatorial practice.



Figure 12. *Apuoema* (door jamb), New Caledonia. Wood. Installation view from *Voices of the Pacific: Innovation and Tradition*, CaixaForum Madrid, May 28–September 14, 2025. Photo courtesy of F. Mellén

From the Palau Islands, the exhibition included a large bird-shaped wooden bowl inlaid with mother-of-pearl birds (likely albatrosses) (Fig. 13), a ceremonial knife, and a small vessel decorated with warrior figures. Despite their labeling as Palauan, the mother-of-pearl inlays suggest Solomon Islands influence. Shields from various islands—some elaborately decorated, others modern and made from natural materials with vivid colors—shared exhibition space.



Figure 13. Bowl, Palau. Wood with snail shell inlay. Installation view from *Voices of the Pacific: Innovation and Tradition*, CaixaForum Madrid, May 28–September 14, 2025. Photo courtesy of F. Mellén

Ceramics were almost entirely absent, with only one item from Vanuatu on display: a wooden replica crafted in 2016 by artisan James Zepeta. This is understandable, as the Lapita culture, which originated in Southeast Asia and Taiwan, and then traveled east to Indonesia, Micronesia, and Melanesia, found suitable materials for pottery only on a few islands and largely disappeared upon reaching the Fiji–Sāmoa–Tonga triangle. By 1990, around eighty Lapita sites had been identified, ranging from Aitape and Aimbon (PNG) to Mulifanua in Sāmoa. In villages such as Wusi, Pepsia, and Olpot on Santo Island (Vanuatu), women still maintain pottery traditions.

Between Tradition and Innovation

The exhibition also featured contemporary textile works in the form of a wedding dress and train by Samoan-Chinese designer Paula Chan Cheuk, who specializes in wedding, bridesmaid, and pageant dresses made from barkcloth (Fig. 14). Innovation was evident not only in Chan Cheuk's elaborately crafted ensemble, but also in a range of other objects, such as a Hawaiian *pa'u* (skirt) fashioned from barkcloth printed with decorative motifs. This same impulse toward creative transformation could be observed in handbags made from recycled soda cans and stitched with plant fibers, produced by local artisans from Sāmoa, Micronesia, and elsewhere for the tourist market. Moreover, the reworking of pop culture imagery onto shields modeled after ancient forms (Fig. 15) illustrates the dynamic interplay between tradition, material experimentation, and contemporary visual culture.



Figure 14. Paula Chan Cheuk, barkcloth wedding dress and train, 2014. Paper mulberry bark, pandanus leaf, coconut fiber, mother of pearl, and *harakeke* (New Zealand flax). The British Museum, London, 2014, 2032.1.a-b. Installation view from *Voices of the Pacific: Innovation and Tradition*, CaixaForum Madrid, May 28–September 14, 2025. Photo courtesy of F. Mellén



Figure 15. Left to right: Wooden shields, including that from the Solomon Islands (bark, rattan, paint, mother of pearl; nineteenth century); New Britain (wood, pigment; early twentieth century); and two from the Wahgi people of Papua New Guinea (wood, metal, fiber, paint, plastic; twentieth century). Maximum dimensions 168 x 59 cm. The British Museum, London; Oc.8016, Oc1936,0720.282, Oc1990,09.6, Oc1990,09.2. Installation view from *Voices of the Pacific: Innovation and Tradition*, CaixaForum Madrid, May 28–September 14, 2025. Photograph courtesy of F. Mellén

The exhibition closed with *Bottle Ocean 2123*, a futuristic installation by the artist George Nuku (Fig. 16). The piece depicts marine creatures—turtles, sharks, rays, jellyfish—using only recycled plastic bottles. For Nuku, plastic is a spiritual material because of its capacity to suggest beauty. He argues that we must learn to engage with it from a philosophical and cultural perspective. His work is not merely a denunciation, but also an invitation to rethink our relationship with materials, with the earth, and with ourselves.

In summary, *Voices of the Pacific* was a valuable and visually compelling exhibition, though not without its shortcomings. Notably, unlike previous CaixaForum events, no exhibition catalogue has been published and no lectures were scheduled to deepen public understanding of Pacific Island cultures. Each object tells its own story, and many could inspire individual articles dedicated to their specific features and uses. The exhibition could be a valuable opportunity for CaixaForum to consider a future exhibition showcasing

outstanding Oceanic artifacts held in Spanish collections. Institutions such as the Museo de América, the National Museum of Anthropology, the Naval Museum, the Army Museum, Barcelona’s Ethnological Museum, as well as notable private collections like those of Juan Carlos Rey Salgado and Jordi Clos, house remarkable pieces that could offer visitors a deeper appreciation of the region’s cultural richness.



Figure 16. George Nuku, *Bottled Ocean 2123*, 2023. Plastic bottles and Perspex; dimensions variable. Installation view from *Voices of the Pacific: Innovation and Tradition*, CaixaForum Madrid, May 28–September 14, 2025. Photograph courtesy of F. Mellén

Francisco Mellén Blanco's work primarily encompasses the field of Pacific history, addressing not only Spanish expeditions but also anthropology and ethnology, with particular emphasis on ethnological objects from the Pacific Islands housed in Spanish museums. Now retired, he serves as a corresponding member of Academia Naval y Marítima the Naval and Maritime of Chile, an honorary member and former president of the Asociación Española de Estudios del Pacífico, and was curator in Australia and Vanuatu of Spanish Expeditions to the Pacific in the 16th–18th Centuries (2006–07). He has received awards from Cultura Hispanica (1983) and the Australasian Hydrographic Society (2006). He has published several studies on Oceanic artifacts in Spanish museums, including the Museo de América, Museo del Ejército, Museo Naval, Museo Nacional de Antropología, and Museo Cerralbo.