

Samoan Art & Artists: O Measina a Samoa, by Sean Mallon. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002. ISBN 0-8248-2675-2, 224 pages, maps, photographs, bibliography, index. US\$29.95.

Samoan Art & Artists: O Measina a Samoa is a broad-ranging book aimed at a general audience, with the hope (as the author says) that it will also appeal to the specialist, anthropologist, historian, and art historian. It is written in an extremely accessible style. Its content is derived from three sources: existing scholarship, particularly the 1928 work by Te Rangi Hiroa (Sir Peter Buck) on Samoan material culture; photographs and objects found in the Museum of New Zealand (with a few exceptions); and new research on the practitioners of Samoan contemporary arts. Mallon's reason for writing this book is based on the dearth of available information about Samoan art, much of it being unpublished or in scholarly journals. The book is divided into seventeen chapters that provide historical background on a wide array of material objects and their relationship to cultural practice. This is augmented with archival and contemporary photographs, descriptions of manufacturing techniques, and profiles of contemporary artists. I approach this review as a museum curator who is always seeking good reference sources for material culture. Given this, I had to keep reminding myself that this is an introductory text and its limitations and spasmodic attention to detail are inevitable within such a large scope of enquiry.

Mallon examines the works of Samoans who live in Sāmoa and those who have migrated elsewhere. He looks at the issue of authenticity and the stereotyping of "traditional." If it doesn't "look" Samoan or is made of manufactured material, then how real is it? Does it still have cultural significance? He argues that the meaning is what really counts, and it is not marginalized by utilizing modern material. When a woodworker was asked why he was using plywood instead of traditional material he responded that "if they had had [plywood] in those days they would have used it" (10). Throughout the book Mallon maintains the view that artists are active agents of change, not passive victims.

Sāmoa, says Mallon "was not an island . . . but part of a chain of distinct communities along which ideas, objects and people flowed" (13). A similar point was made some sixty years earlier when E E Evans-Pritchard said, "Material objects are chains along which social relationships run . . . people not only create their material culture and attach themselves to it, but also build up their relationships through it and see them in terms of it" (*The Nuer*, 1940, 89). It is this constant flowing that motivates and encourages sharing and exchanging of materials and ideas. At the same time, we learn that some arts have disappeared or have been re-constructed only for specific occasions (ceremonies and festivals) and others have survived but in different forms. For example, the silhouettes of churches and meeting houses in countries where Samoans have settled mirror that of the traditional big house. They are sym-

bolic of an enduring culture and the local community that built it. In Sāmoa, however, the churches are built in European style, but the meeting houses retain the form of the traditional big house, albeit with concrete floors and corrugated iron roofs. Again, it is the meaning that is important, not the material.

Some art forms are more easily transportable than others. The author is very enthused about tattooing, tatatau. He says that “it is seen as both a treasure and a stepping stone to manhood, something that garners respect for the wearer by speaking of his inner strength and resilience. . . . but in migrant Samoan communities overseas, tatatau has also become an identity marker, a way of signifying Samoan heritage and an important link to what can sometimes seem like a distant heritage and way of life” (105). In chapter 8 he uses illustrations to explain the meanings of the different underlying structural features—an approach that would have been useful elsewhere in the book as well.

In the chapter on weaving, I would have better understood the brief outline of the materials and manufacturing techniques if they had been accompanied by photographs. But when photos are used, it is difficult to relate the image to the accompanying text. Typical examples are a discussion about three types of mats with only two illustrated; Samoan names given in the text but not on the photographs; and an artist talking about his or her work but no illustrations of the work. As well, although the complexity of the various mat types,

their ranking, and their usage is well described in the text, I yearned for a table or graph that would make this all clearer.

Although Mallon gives a good description of the making of siapo and its continued relevance, it is in this chapter that, for me, the limitations of the book first become apparent. I was intrigued by the missionary-inspired appearance of ponchos, tiputa. Mallon mentions this, but there are no illustrations of tiputa and he does not mention that they are still worn (there is a “Tiputa wear” category in the Miss Samoa contest). Clearly, they are being made, but by whom and where? At the beginning of this same chapter, siapo maker Va’amuli Moli-Salu is shown making siapo and her process is well described. At the end of the chapter she is the “featured” artist with illustrations of her work, yet there is no connection made to the photographs of her that appear a few pages before. As well, this artist is spoken *about*, whereas other artists *do* the speaking. Inconsistencies such as this run throughout the book and could have been avoided with more stringent editing. They are extremely frustrating and reduce the book’s capacity to be a really accessible reference.

It would seem that many practicing artists in Sāmoa produce works that echo traditional themes. These are made for tourists and for Samoans living elsewhere who want tangible evidence of their culture. Tourist arts are, according to Mallon, “the most visible and accessible of Samoa’s arts” (191), and they are important because they create income opportunities and

keep traditional arts alive. Earlier in the book he speaks about notions of what is “traditional” and what is “contemporary” and how these might be related to ideas about authenticity and stereotyping. A tanoa (carved wooden kava bowl), for example, is described as being tourist art, traditional art, and still used in contemporary practice. If that tanoa had been made for a tourist in the 1800s, it would now reside in a museum collection and be generally accepted as an example of the “real thing.” There are no practitioners profiled in Mallon’s short chapter on tourist art and the pieces illustrated have information about the collector but not the maker. Tourist art may be “the most visible” but it remains an essentially anonymous domestic industry. Perhaps it’s time for a less Eurocentric word than “tourist art”? Contemporary art, on the other hand, is overwhelmingly produced by migrated Samoans, whose work can be found in galleries in Australia and New Zealand, with some growth now happening in the US and parts of Europe. Many of these artists are of mixed heritage and are not comfortable being labeled just as Samoan. Being Samoan is *part* of who they are, not *solely* who they are, and issues relating to identity provide much of the foci of their art. Issues of identity continue through Mallon’s discussions about the roles of oratory (lauga), theater, photography, filmmaking, storytelling, literature, and music. Oratory is viewed as an ancient art of debate, symbolism, allusion, and proverb (131), whereas theater deals with tensions and conflicts by providing a mirror in which the audi-

ence can see aspects of themselves (137). Photography, literature, music, and filmmaking can deal with difficult subjects such as immigrations, culture clash, generation gap, and drugs. As much of this work is created outside of Sāmoa, Mallon rightly notes that “in a sense they are tourists of their own culture, involved and living within it, but also documenting and looking in from the margins” (155). He expects the uninformed reader to gain a better appreciation “of the great diversity and possibilities that Samoan art can encompass” (25), yet it is unclear how the contemporary artists individually profiled actually reflect this diversity.

This book intends to be, and succeeds as, a general survey of Samoan arts. I often found myself, as the author predicted, asking more questions than this book could hope to answer. My journey would have been easier had there been a list of illustrations and artists for me to refer to, and perhaps a glossary of terms. Overall, Mallon has done a good job in unraveling some of the intricacies unique to the Samoan experience. He opens the door to further research and study. I will use this book as a reference; it is already well thumbed.

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