Book and Media Reviews
to Pacific studies, Hawaiian studies, Indigenous studies, ethnic studies, religious studies, and related fields.

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*Repositioning Pacific Arts: Artists, Objects, Histories* draws together expanded versions of papers delivered at the Pacific Arts Association’s 7th International Symposium held in Christchurch, Aotearoa/New Zealand, in June 2003. The volume consists of an introduction, keynote essay, and sixteen chapters organized into three thematic sections. Reflecting the interdisciplinary nature of Oceanic arts scholarship, contributors represent a variety of viewpoints (eg, art history, architectural practice and history, philosophy, anthropology, art practice, and museum professions) as well as Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives.

Volume editor Anne E Allen’s introduction describes how the essays, despite the range of their cultural and historical subjects, address issues of identity and authenticity, striving “to position/reposition Oceanic art within a contemporary sensibility that takes into account the histories and current realities of Pacific peoples” (1). Adrienne Kaeppler’s keynote essay argues that visual and performance arts provide a historical discourse centered on “intercultural dialogues” about social and cultural change in the Pacific. Examining Tahitian music, Tongan barkcloth design, traditional art forms “recycled” into contemporary art forms, and Hawaiian movement and dance, Kaeppler discusses (1) the ways “traditional” arts changed as Polynesian peoples came into contact with foreign materials and ideas, and (2) how Indigenous visual cultures have an impact on contemporary arts.

Part 1 of the volume is dedicated to the broad theme of “Artefacts and Traditions.” Chapters by Ngārino Ellis (Ngāpuhi, Ngāti Porou) and Hilary L Scothorn discuss the ways Indigenous cultural traditions were transformed through sustained contact with Euro-Americans in the nineteenth century. Ellis demonstrates how moko (permanent body marking)—taking the forms of signatures on land deeds, self-portraits drawn at the request of foreigners, wood carvings, and contemporary artworks—make political statements about the identities of those associated with them and provide a source of memory and reverence for descendants. Scothorn chronicles the evolving functions and design of Samoan barkcloth (siapo), which responded to the introduction of Christianity, foreign goods, and changing ideas about bodily presentation and emerged as a key marker of Samoan religious and social identities.

The four remaining chapters in this section analyze visual culture in the western Pacific. Pauline van der Zee identifies connections between Asmat and Kamoro (West Papua)
wood-carving myths and practices and their relation to male initiation rites focused on “the inseparability of life and death, and the creation of new life out of death” (44). Deborah B Waite analyzes western and central Solomon Islands maramaraitapa, carved and painted boards replicating canoe prows, which, though they do not resemble defensive shields, functioned as ritual shields, aided in social transformation, and marked clan and village identity in boys’ puberty initiations of the mid-twentieth century. Michael Gunn provides a descriptive overview of nineteenth-century New Ireland art traditions based on the study of objects in museums and private collections, published accounts, and fieldwork undertaken in 2001 and 2003. Working with John Tomowau, Harry Beran investigates carved canoe-shaped containers, which have been dated to be 200–500 years old, found in the Massim region of Papua New Guinea. Based on historical evidence and fieldwork, Beran suggests the containers functioned as ossuaries and identifies widespread connections between the recently deceased and canoes in the broader region, suggesting the containers aided the deceased’s journey to the land of the dead.

Part 2 of the volume, titled “Collections and Collecting,” presents a varied selection of essays. Moira White details debates surrounding the Maori Antiquities Act (1901) and shows how this piece of legislation was linked to creating a national museum to preserve and display Māori culture and express the uniqueness of New Zealand national identity founded on a “passing” Indigenous culture. Christian Coiffier traces the history of a large Biwat painting (Papua New Guinea) from its photographic documentation by ethnologists Margaret Mead and Reo Fortune in 1932 to its dismemberment and sale to the Korrigane Expedition in 1935, then the exhibition and dispersal of its parts in Marseilles in 1938, and the process of identifying the pieces of the painting and reconstituting it for display at the Musée de l’Homme’s Korrigane Exhibition of 2001–2003. Coiffier also provides an analysis of the motifs, suggesting representations of a primordial crocodile, totemic birds, a microcosm of Biwat society, human conception, river spirits, and the origins of humanity. In her account of the Māori collection at the British Museum, Jill Hasell describes its sources (mostly from the Cook voyages; nineteenth-century military, colonial, and missionary personnel; and other visitors) and its display history; how Māori academics, curators, and artists have used the collections; and efforts in the 1990s to include contemporary art and create a separate Māori exhibition.

Susan Kennedy Zeller’s biographical study of Australian anthropologist Charles Pearcy Mountford discusses his film-screening and lecture tours in the United States in 1945–1946, intellectual exchanges with American scholars and collectors, appreciation of his photography in the United States, and the impact he had on shaping American views of Australian Aboriginal art as primitive curiosity. Rose Evans analyzes the motivations driving the “contemporary” collecting of Oceanic art by white New Zealanders (she does not specifically define
the historical scope of her study). She identifies different types of collectors, examines how exhibitions have influenced the collection value of Oceanic material culture and contemporary art, and suggests that collecting practices are linked to forming collectors’ sense of a “Pacific” identity. Mike Austin provides a critique of the architectural forms of museum buildings in relation to their contents and functions. He argues that the theme-park appearance of the National Museum of Australia “regurgitates” components of other prominent building designs and adheres to an ironic and subversive narrative of antipodean inversion; that the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa “cannibalizes” the Indigenous buildings and artifacts it displays within; and that while the Tjibaou Cultural Centre tries to work with Indigenous architecture rather than simply consuming it, the center similarly engages in architectural cannibalism through its primitivizing misappropriation and isolation of Indigenous building forms.

Part 3, “The Contemporary Pacific,” comprises four chapters exploring recent visual and performance arts. Caroline Vercoe examines work produced by New Zealand–born Samoan artist Andy Leleisi’uao in the 1990s–2000s, which advances a vivid and confrontational approach to stimulate action on urgent political and social issues facing diasporic Pacific Islander communities. Also addressing the role of art in the Pacific diaspora, Jacquelyn Lewis-Harris writes about three Solien Besena women—Wendi Choulai, Alma Adamson, and Theresa Barlow—who organized dance performances in Australia at the turn of the twentieth century. She describes how their art traditions resulted from complex cultural exchanges in Papua New Guinea since the nineteenth century and how cultural adaptations continue as they negotiate new audiences, urban settings, materials, and personal goals. Saumaeafe Vanya Taule’alo examines contemporary art in Sāmoa through the work of Ernesto Coter, Momoe Malietoa von Reiche, Dan Taulapapa McMullin, and Taule’alo herself. These artists have different biographical and cultural relationships to Sāmoa, but Taule’alo argues that their works commonly draw on transcultural sources to further a postmodern approach to expressing identities that transcend cultural and geographic borders while remaining essentially personal. Encouraging careful historical scrutiny to explore past and future trans-Tasman creative alliances, Pamela Zeplin narrates the ebb and flow of non-Indigenous art exchanges between New Zealand and Australia, circa 1970–2000, and how these relate to regional social relations, foreign policy, and engagement with distant international cultural institutions.

While the diversity of issues, methods, and voices presented is one of the volume’s strengths, coherence among the chapters and within each thematic section is somewhat lacking. Part 3 is the most unified, with a consistent focus on cross-cultural negotiation in contemporary art. Encouraging the authors to speak to each other’s contributions, directly or indirectly, would have lent unity to each of the sections and helped to build conversations between the fairly disparate chapters. Including a brief
introductory essay to each section would also have aided in drawing connections between the essays by identifying common issues or differing approaches to a subject. Allen lists the various subjects addressed by the contributors in her introduction but could have pushed these brief descriptions and broad themes (“identity,” “authenticity,” “recycling”) into analytical frames that explore common and contested ground with more specificity and depth. She makes a determined effort to conceptually stitch together the chapters, but frequent references to “recycled traditions” and the relationships between past and present artistic practices are sometimes forced and tenuous. This is not to overly fault the editor, as there are significant challenges in transforming conference proceedings consisting of wide-ranging scholarship into an organized edited volume. Overall, each author makes a welcome contribution to the vast terrain and historically broad field of Oceanic art scholarship.

The volume is appreciated, as scholarly books on Pacific arts are not commonly published. Accessibility to researchers, students, and the general public is key to the field. Unfortunately, the high cost of this modest, though amply illustrated, book is rather prohibitive for those with limited budgets.

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Above all, David Robie’s Don’t Spoil My Beautiful Face: Media, Mayhem and Human Rights in the Pacific is a damning indictment of the parlous state of affairs in parts of this region. The book is also a telling account of the continuous failure of leadership on a fairly grand scale, with ordinary people bearing the brunt of it.

Robie, a professor of journalism at the Auckland University of Technology and director of the Pacific Media Centre, deals with the vital issues of environmental degradation, media censorship, social chaos and human suffering (largely caused by bad governance), various types of violent and nonviolent conflicts, and colonialism and neocolonialism. Allegedly apathetic international and local media also attract some flak. Robie, who has a long record of service in the Pacific Islands, laments that a region with so much promise due to its relative tranquility, natural beauty, and richness of culture has been in such a prolonged state of decline, despite the postindependence optimisms.

That tranquility has been shattered by coups, civil uprisings, and corruption; the region’s pristine environments damaged by nuclear testing, wanton resource exploitation, and the specter of climate change; and indigenous cultures threatened by the twin forces of neocolonialism and neoliberal economics. These adversities are superimposed on growing incidences