

visitors. Plans are in the works to continue to add more exhibit cases and to supplement some of the preexisting panels with additional images and photos.

TAMMY DUCHESNE

*War in the Pacific National  
Historical Park, Piti, Guam*

\* \* \*

Adorning the World: Art of the Marquesas Islands. Exhibition, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 10 May 2005–15 January 2006.

In 1988, Arthur Danto, philosopher of art, described a hypothetical instance in which the baskets and pots of two fictitious African tribes were displayed in two museums, one of art and one of natural history, facing one another across a park (“Artifact and Art,” in *Art/Artifact*, edited by Susan Vogel, 1988). Danto referred explicitly to the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York in his discussion of how African objects in the art museum are viewed as “vehicles of complete ideas,” while those in the natural history museum are “implements that help human beings to live out their material lives” (as discussed by Alfred Gell in his article, “Vogel’s Net,” in *The Art of Anthropology*, 1999, 194). The display strategies in each museum thus follow the delineations of their tribal makers, and differentiate the pots and baskets from each area as either poetic “art” or prosaic “artifact.”

The ways in which “cultural” objects should be exhibited and inter-

preted within metropolitan museums continues to provoke lively debate and public interest. Moving forward twenty years, a visitor to the African collections of both the American Museum of Natural History and the Metropolitan Museum of Art might be surprised to find that these galleries are still perfect illustrations of Danto’s discussion. The AMNH African galleries reconstruct African habitats and peoples in “life-like” tableaux, or group artifacts together in functional and regional categories. At the Metropolitan Museum of Art, African art is displayed in reverent, timeless darkness, individual pieces on stark pedestals or in glass cases, spotlighted from above.

However, the Oceanic collections are displayed somewhat contrarily in both museums, provoking us to question our classifications of art and artifact and the contexts usually associated with them. The AMNH Margaret Mead Hall of Pacific Peoples, while organized according to cultural areas and functional themes, is also strikingly modernist in its style of presentation. Divided by evocative panels of color, the central axis of the hall is formed around a large replica Easter Island head, spotlighted dramatically as “art,” a concept that, in turn, following Mead’s explicit intention, becomes the conceptual focus of the gallery (see Diane Losche’s “The Margaret Mead Peoples of the Pacific Hall at the American Museum of Natural History,” a paper presented to the New York Academy of Sciences, 24 January 2005).

At the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Pacific hall of the Michael C Rockefeller wing displaying the Arts

of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas is currently closed for renovation and redesign. Art of the Pacific Islands may be viewed in a temporary exhibition space, carved out of the African galleries and currently home to *Adorning the World: Art of the Marquesas Islands*. The exhibition, curated by Eric Kjellgren, is marked out from the ochre backgrounds of the African displays by turquoise panels. In addition to this insertion of Oceanic blue, *Adorning the World* sets itself apart from the rest of the gallery by its incorporation of secondary representations and detailed textual commentaries in the display.

The strength of *Adorning the World* is in the juxtaposition of beautiful artifacts with the historical contextualization of Marquesan patterning that these secondary sources provide. The exhibition focuses on artistic production in the Marquesan archipelago in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the inclusion of European books, drawings, and lithographs not only expands our perception of the wealth and diversity of Marquesan design at the time, but also inspires a gentle meditation on the cross-cultural efficacy of Marquesan aesthetics.

The introductory panel in the gallery acknowledges that this is the “first exhibition devoted exclusively to Marquesan works presented by an art museum” (although Marquesan art has long been displayed in art contexts, for instance Charles Ratton’s 1936 exhibition juxtaposing surrealist and tribal art in Paris). The exhibition has been strongly endorsed by the Marquesan people. Toti Te’ikiehu’u-poke (director of the Académie Mar-

quisienne, and president of the Fédération Culturelle Motu Haka des Îles Marquises) writes in the preface to the catalogue, “The exhibition will represent one of the most important moments in the history of the islands itself and will introduce a larger public to the artistic achievements of our ancestors.” Like the exhibition *Te Maori*, held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1984, *Adorning the World* speaks beyond the confines of the art museum and mobilizes historic artifacts in a contemporary valorization of Marquesan artistic and cultural heritage.

The contemporary resonance of these historical pieces and the representational histories displayed in the exhibition goes a long way in breaking down our conventional assumptions that displaying objects, or bodies, first and foremost as “art” can be limiting or demeaning to their “cultural” context. In viewing Marquesan design contained within and inscribed on diverse media in *Adorning the World*, we learn not only about our own artistic sensibilities, but also about an alternative aesthetic in which design and pattern are embodied practices that invoke important cultural and historical interconnections, highlighting social and political status.

The exhibition draws together a visually stunning collection of Marquesan artifacts, drawn from diverse museum and private collections. All of these pieces either represent the body (especially in the form of tiki [human figures] carved in wood or bone) or adorn the body (clubs, feather headdresses, fans, ear plugs, and necklaces). Tattooing unites these corporeal interests through the con-

stant layering of pattern on skin, accrued over a lifetime of ceremonial and social activity. Marquesan tattooing is displayed in the exhibition through the drawings, etchings, and engravings of a variety of European spectators including William Hodges, Clarissa Chapman Armstrong, and John Shillibeer. Through this we not only gain insight into the “look” of tattooed Marquesans such as Vokaima and Tamahitu, but we see how they looked to visiting Europeans. The effect of juxtaposing European representations alongside Marquesan-made objects not only makes salient the historical moment of European exploration and colonization of the Pacific (a context of collection still often all too lacking in exhibitions of the “Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas”) but also suggests that the primary aim of tattooing—to astound and impress the viewer through skillful design and to embody and signify the status or social role of the person tattooed—was as successful in captivating Europeans as Marquesans. A much-reproduced engraving of a fully tattooed Marquesan by Wilhelm Gottlieb Tilesius von Tilenau is displayed on the open page of a large bound volume, with the description: “The regular designs with which the bodies of the men of Nukahiwa are punctured from head to foot supplies in some sort the absence of clothing” (G H von Langsdorff, *Voyages and Travels in Various Parts of the World*, 1813, 1:117). The curatorial comment on the exhibition reinforces this early interpretation, commenting, “Although nearly naked he is effectively clad in the finest raiment a Marquesan could possess.” This is a



FIGURE 1. Leg image, Nuku Hiva, early 1880s, wood, height 20.5" (52.1 cm). Bernice P. Bishop Museum, Honolulu. Reproduced with permission.

perfect example of patterning on skin being a vehicle of complete ideas that help human beings to live out their material lives.

The convergence of interests in decorated bodies suggests a certain “stickyness” (to borrow a phrase of Alfred Gell’s) of Marquesan pattern: its ability to migrate across media, in the process transmitting meaning and creating aesthetic effect. For example, the exhibition displays two enigmatic Marquesan carved wooden legs, incised with tattoo-like designs (see figure 1). These disembodied depictions of tattooing marks are strikingly similar to the schematized representations of Marquesan tattoo motifs found in many early ethnological illustrations (some of which are reproduced in Carol Ivory’s authoritative essay for the exhibition catalogue, “Art and Aesthetics in the Marquesas Islands” (in *Adorning the World*, edited by Eric Kjellgren, 2005, 34), which divide bodies into tattooed areas. Perhaps these two modes of representation and understanding of patterning have more in common than we might usually presume?

Overall, the Metropolitan Museum of Art has made aesthetics an overriding subject and context for the objects on display. Throughout the museum,

collections are carefully contextualized in the settings that they were produced for—a Chinese scholar’s garden, a medieval church, formal nineteenth-century galleries, and white cube spaces. The Rockefeller wing is an exception to this—displaying its collections in the context of Western reception and modernist interest, rather than that of original production or intention. *Adorning the World* both continues this tradition, and makes a refreshing intervention, providing an insightful vision of the profound interest in vibrant patterning that was shared between Europe and the Pacific. Even if these complex issues are not explicitly highlighted within the exhibition, the movement of Marquesan pattern, from the body of Marquesans, onto Marquesan artifacts, and eventually into European reproductions may be seen as symbolic of the complex processes of cultural and political engagement that co-opted both Marquesans and Europeans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and that continue into the present day.

HAIDY GEISMAR  
*New York University*

\* \* \*