

Book and Media Reviews

The Contemporary Pacific, Volume 28, Number 1, 247-275
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Marshall Islanders to light in a way that draws and holds our attention not just emotionally, but politically and historically as well. Any undergraduate or graduate course on people and history in the insular Pacific or on the moral contradictions of modernity would find it a useful resource. General audiences would certainly benefit from seeing it too.

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Melanesia: Art and Encounter, edited by Lissant Bolton, Nicholas Thomas, Elizabeth Bonshek, Julie Adams, and Ben Burt. London: British Museum Press; Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014. ISBN 978-0-8248-3853-9; xix + 362 pages, illustrations, bibliography, index. Cloth, US\$120.00.

Melanesia: Art and Encounter includes fifty-seven essays by fifty-two authors, including the volume's five editors, highlighting some of the British Museum's twenty thousand objects from Melanesia. Organized geographically, sections are dedicated to New Guinea (including south and southeast Papua New Guinea, north and highlands Papua New Guinea), West Papua, Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and New Caledonia. The richly illustrated volume is a result of the five-year project "Melanesian Art: Objects, Narratives and Indigenous Owners," also known as the Melanesia Project, led by Lissant Bolton and Nicholas Thomas and based at the British Museum. The project was a response to the "scandal"—that such a cultural resource had remained largely unresearched for so

long" (xiv). From 2005 through 2010, the project included research trips to Melanesia as well as visits to the British Museum by representatives from Melanesia, including several artists, to study and respond to the collections. As Bolton writes, "We were using the objects in the British Museum to engage in relationships with Melanesians themselves" (331).

Driven by a sense of responsibility to those represented by the museum collection and by a desire to change understandings of ethnographic collections, the book's editors sought to "approach the field in an entirely different way" (ix) by learning from indigenous collaborators, collaborating with Melanesian communities, and inviting indigenous practitioners to engage with the collection. Although their approach is not unprecedented—this is a model previously used by the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum, Te Papa Tongarewa, and hopefully others in the future—collaboration with representatives of the knowledge-holders and descendants can help institutions like the British Museum become more responsible stewards and enliven and protect their priceless collections. As West Papuan Benny Wenda reminds the reader, "You can't separate the object from the human being, because the humans are part of the objects and the objects are part of the people" (159). Wenda's sentiment prevails throughout an impressive range of essays that acknowledge the contentious history of the British Museum's collection and highlight the complexities of encounters, legacies, and histories around the artworks representing genealogies, cultural knowledge, or ritual.

Melanesia is a beautifully designed and illustrated volume that will appeal to experts as well as those not yet familiar with Oceania. Although I was initially intimidated by the length, I was quickly drawn in by accessible, short essays by artists, cultural practitioners, art historians, curators, and anthropologists. These cover myriad subjects including fiber production, imperial trade, interpretations of customary works, and new aesthetics told through personal experiences and theoretical inquiry. This comprehensive volume, “designed as a companion to Melanesian art” (ix), is one to which I am certain to return. The essays sit well together and are sometimes in conversation, but for the most part they stand alone and offer intriguing possibilities for recollection and repeat reflection. Returning is also how I learn through museum collections themselves. I revisit collections and exhibits many times—sometimes following as the curator intended and other times following the whispers of the artworks. Although I found the quality of essays in this volume occasionally uneven, I appreciate the accessible overview of topics and am certain that readers will find numerous opportunities here for sustained engagement.

Due to the historical contexts of the encounters through which the British Museum’s collection was developed, the majority of the works in the collection were produced or used by men. However, *Melanesia* strives to include works made by women and to acknowledge the role of women in the processes of production and exchange. The volume thus succeeds in drawing attention to the significance of gender

in relation to cultural expression and social structures. One notable example is a personal story from University of Sydney doctoral student Erna Lilje, which traces her connections to fiber-skirt research and the entanglement with her parents’ homeland, Papua New Guinea (54).

The volume also addresses the sensitive and contentious issues of repatriation and reciprocity—important topics for museums, curators, and those researching in and enjoying collections built and sometimes problematically sustained on colonial legacies. When repatriation is not an option or goal because communities lack adequate facilities to protect fragile and precious artworks or prefer the inclusion of relics in prestigious foreign museums, reciprocity allows for the return of knowledge and engagement with the artworks. Although this option is neither ideal nor a solution, the *Melanesia* Project is a significant example of using the museum collection to build reciprocal relationships with Melanesian communities. *Melanesia* captures the personal and theoretical intricacies of relationship building with the traditional owners, who contribute integral information far beyond provenance to help readers understand the complex histories while appreciating the technical skills, creativity, and elegance of art from Melanesia. Ralph Regenvanu describes a painting he made while in residence at the museum: “It is an aspect of my cultural heritage coming out of the Museum and returning to the place of its origin. In fact, by using this design in this painting, I am repatriating it” (297).

Melanesia is the kind of text that

I will use for personal research and teaching. The introductions, for the volume and for each section, provide a historical overview and context, allowing those unfamiliar with the region to engage with the nuances of the personal essays. I value the reflexive inquiry and constant reminders of the varied interpretations, definitions, and intimate stories evoked by the artworks. For example, after quoting Melanesia Project artist-in-residence Samuel Luguna's reaction to a Trobriand shield, Thomas comments, "For Samuel, the questions the shields raised were not about iconography or meaning, nor were they about heritage. . . . These rather were weapons, indissociable from the practice of fighting, a practice of the past that had reverberations in the present"

(27). Many curators and researchers will expect definitions, which are provided by several other Melanesian collaborators, but Luguna's response to the shield is a potent reminder of the complexities of knowledge construction that is detached from the creation site and community. As an art historian and educator, I was pleased by the reminders by Luguna, Thomas, and others that language, material culture, and histories have many interpretations, which in this volume are superbly and respectfully enriched by local perspectives.

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