

Book and Media Reviews

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and Sāmoa, tattoo needles, and a small wooden leg from the Marquesas inscribed with tattoos. On the second floor, a display of similar objects emphasizes a different message; here, visitors learn that Polynesian tattoos and geometric motifs most likely developed from the Lapita peoples and their distinctive pottery designs in Near Oceania some 3,500 years ago.

The museum's archaeological research on the settlement of Oceania dominates the second floor. A wall map of migration routes, object cases, computer stations, and an interactive display on how scientists gather and analyze data offer a variety of learning experiences. The cases are sparer and more aesthetically striking than those on the main floor. In some instances, the central text panel must be read through objects suspended in the foreground, making viewing and reading a compelling process. The dramatic use of lighting from below also enhances the details of pottery designs, adzes, fishhooks, and shell chisels.

As a non-Native museum scholar, I was impressed by the range of exhibits, including a large community mural and a section devoted to interactive games. However, the few Pacific Island museum administrators and graduate students I queried could not hide their disappointment on visiting the hall: "Where are we?" "I only found two objects from my culture." "I didn't see much." Their reactions reveal the burden of expectation that Pacific Hall shoulders. Furthermore, when the museum's newly restored Hawaiian Hall opened in 2009, it featured unprecedented exhibits on political upheaval in Hawai'i. It is thus troubling to find

no direct references to contentious histories or colonial politics in Pacific Hall. Nevertheless, there are suggestive references in an introductory wall text ("cataclysmic changes wrought by an outside world") and a label for a contemporary painting ("the work is about nuclear fallout in the Pacific"). Addressing these issues somewhere in the galleries or online would prevent inadvertent idealizations of the region. Fortunately, the museum's staff is eager to augment the exhibits. An audio tour will soon provide additional perspectives. And in response to feedback from a community collaborator, a section of the floor map will change, replacing outdated terms with contemporary names. An exhibition of this importance will undoubtedly involve ongoing conversations with Pacific Island stakeholders for years to come.

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Atua: Sacred Gods from Polynesia. Exhibition, National Gallery of Australia (NGA), Canberra, Australia, 23 May–3 August 2014. Exhibition catalog available at the NGA Shop: A\$39.95.

Approaching *Atua: Sacred Gods from Polynesia*, one's first encounter is with two semi-abstract totemic figures from a marae by Cook Islands artist Eruera Nia. Embedded in a low, square, grey plinth, these silver-weathered wooden arabesques are at once descriptive and abstract, hieratic and dynamic, leaping up into vision and consciousness in a manner comparable to that of the

National Gallery of Australia's modernist masterpiece, Constantin Brancusi's *Birds in Space*. Then, turning right to enter the exhibition galleries, one is confronted with a pair of related figures: two Tongan ceremonial clubs, their tall, narrow staves fanning out at the top into lethal, skull-splitting wedges. The inlaid marine ivory of the one and reflected light from the other's richly lozenge-carved surface scintillate, like navigators' stars or drifting sea spray.

The profound formal refinement, the natural elegance of these two pairs of objects has immediate appeal to a contemporary Western sensibility, and this frisson of aesthetic near-recognition repeats as one proceeds through the installation. Thus a Hawaiian figure of the god Mo'i crouched on all fours weirdly pre-echoes Jacob Epstein's arch-backed *Woman Possessed*, another of the collection's great twentieth-century European sculptures. Indeed, through the lens of *Atua*, Polynesian culture is revealed as a powerful presence within the gallery: the beaked head of Habakuk, a Max Ernst sculpture in the foyer, also resonates with that of a Rapa Nui bird-man, while on the ground floor a vitrine full of surrealist pictures and objects has been assembled on the basis of *Le monde aux tempes surréalistes*, a fantasy map that includes both a very wobbly Pacific equator and a vastly hypertrophied and anthropomorphized Rapa Nui.

Yet despite an immediate recognition of the primal power and beauty of Pacific art, the explorers, missionaries, whalers, traders, and, eventually, artists of the West signally failed to comprehend Pacific Islanders' elaborate

cosmology, with its regularly repeating duality of migration and settlement, of the stranger and the ancestor, of the vaka (canoe) and the marae, its periodic transfers of power among the sea god Tangaroa, war gods Tu and Rongo, and Tane, god of the forest. It is a failure amply demonstrated by Captain Cook himself, whose return to Hawai'i at the wrong moment in the ritual calendar ultimately resulted in the navigator's death at Kealakekua Bay. More generally, there is a profound disjunction between the popularly received or inferred impression of precontact Polynesian lifeways as all "luxe, calme, et volupté" and a very different reality accessible through historical documents, anthropological deduction, and oral tradition: that of an inherently expansive network of aggressive warrior societies, of powerful ariki (chiefs) and priesthoods, of complex encounters before and after the arrival of Europeans in the region. Behind the philosophical myths of noble savagery and sailors' erotic tales of willing wahine lie much less comfortable, more violent stories of invasion, oppression, loss, and death.

Atua is demonstrably more in tune with this more complex history. Indeed, curator Michael Gunn displays an eccentrically intense sensitivity to his charges, and it is said that the arrangement of the different gods, the placement of the sculptures in relation to one another, was based as much on his intuition of inter-deity "personal" relationships as on historic or aesthetic principles. He even staged a ceremony prior to the opening in which a canoe-figure portrait of Māori warrior Te Rauparaha was made "king" of all the atua in the exhibition, to ensure a

peace for the duration. While this kind of immersion curation may be a little unconventional, it produced a show that is archaeologically, anthropologically, and historically well informed as well as aesthetically highly alert, and that succeeds in conveying something of the potent objects' original mana.

Text panels inform us that sometimes the objects are themselves the god, sometimes they are bodies or vessels within which the god occasionally resides, and sometimes they are spiritually inert images or representations. But whatever their particular religious status, they are all pretty potent. The energetic masculinity of the Polynesian gods and ancestor-heroes inheres in their very shapes. The cranial curvature and strong jawlines of *atua* from the Austral, Society, and Cook Islands contain a powerful suggestion of the head of an erect penis, and there is something equally visceral in the deeply undercut, repeated patterning of "staff gods," with their suggestion of exposed vertebrae or ribs. Dominance and control also appear to be the semiotic subtext of a group of seated-god canoe ornaments from the Marquesas, saucer-eyed, tattooed ancestors whose feet rest on tiny figurines—prisoners of war or descendants.

Perhaps less bellicose but more nightmarish are a mutant Society Islands double-headed figure, another from the Gambier Islands with a human head and torso atop four legs, and *A'a* from the Austral Islands, the god's fertility function expressed in thirty homunculi (tiny humans) emerging from and crawling over its head, body, and limbs. Remembering that 1929 surrealist map, it is

perhaps appropriate that among the exhibition's most visually challenging—dreamlike sculptures are those from Rapa Nui: elegantly curved eighteenth-century figures rocking or floating in space like canoes on a wave or frigate-bird feathers drifting in the air; hybrid bird-men and lizard-men; skeletal-ribbed, grimacing Moai *Kava-kava*; and a couple of dry-cadaverous bark-cloth "revenge figures," terrifying in their raw metaphysical expressionism.

The show is not without flaws. The low lighting levels may increase the visual drama and the tapu-spookiness, but they reduce the visibility of detail, a significant frustration in the case of finely carved works. The design is pretty dreadful, a half-hearted, anesthetic affair of dull blue colorways and heavy, inelegant plinths and vitrines. It feels a bit like a warehouse. From a broader, political perspective, the presence of such profoundly significant objects in a public context far from homelands and home communities raises complex issues of intellectual property, art and the sacred, and contemporary Pacific communities' sometimes passionate desires to see many of these objects repatriated—notably, tattoo-inscribed New Zealand heads. Moreover, for some viewers the most unfortunate aspect of the exhibition must be that, apart from the *Eruera Nia* sculptures and a handful of its catalog texts, *Atua* conveys little sense of the continuing vitality of indigenous Pacific cultures.

Nevertheless, given its curatorial premises, here a restricted, antiquarian presentation does make sense. In its modest scale (there are fewer than eighty objects, plus a European

epilogue of Webber engravings), the exhibition testifies to the rapid, intense impact of Christian missions on traditional Polynesian culture. From the first decades of the nineteenth century, missionaries' strategic conversion of the most powerful chiefs led to wholesale destruction of thousands of atua and their marae; as Gunn notes in his catalog introduction, "All the images of Rongo and Tane were destroyed, three or four images of Tangaroa have survived as shapeless pieces of whalebone or wood, and perhaps two or three images of Tu remain." This almost universal Pacific iconoclasm was an artistic and perhaps socio-cultural tragedy; the relatively few survivals are accordingly precious and warrant close attention.

Atua is a moving testament, both to the rich material culture of Polynesia in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and to the catastrophic effects of Western imperialism. It is an important reminder to its Australian audiences that the Islands of the Pacific Ocean loom large in the map of the Australian imagination: from the voyages of Captain Cook to Samuel Marsden's missionary and trading engagements with New Zealand; from colonial participation in the Māori Wars to national leadership of the RAMSI peacekeeping mission in the Solomons; from Bernard Smith's *European Vision and the South Pacific* to Greg Denning's *Beach Crossings*. It is also an aesthetically demanding, intellectually challenging museum experience.

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Tonga: The Last Place on Earth.

Documentary film, 57 minutes, color, 2013. Written and directed by Phil Travis; produced by The Mission, inc; distributed by Pacific Islanders in Communications, Honolulu. Available at <http://vimeo.com/ondemand/lastplace/76883759>. Rental, US\$3.99.

Against the backdrop of increasingly fraught relationships between US immigration and criminal justice policies as experienced by Pacific Islanders, including Tongans living in the United States, Pacific Islanders in Communication and PBS Hawaii bring us a disturbingly shallow and distorted documentary of Tongan gangs and US deportation called *Tonga: The Last Place on Earth*. Produced and broadcast as part of the second season of *Pacific Heartbeat*, a series that promises a "glimpse of the real Pacific," what *Tonga: The Last Place* actually does is perpetuate the same racialized animus that has enabled the United States' media and juridical and regulatory systems to stigmatize a generation of immigrants as dangerously criminal.

While the producers and director of this film deserve credit for attempting to present the experiences of diasporic Tongans, and perhaps other Pacific Islanders, with the US criminal justice system in the context of broader American politics of immigration and citizenship, this program well demonstrates why sensitivity to historical, social, and cultural contexts is absolutely critical for clear, balanced dialogue and documentary reporting. *Tonga: The Last Place on Earth* joins other contemporary television representations like the series *Jonah from*