

Victoria
University of
Wellington

GORDON
H. BROWN
LECTURE

13
2015

A Critique of the Natural Artefact: Anthropology, Art & Museology

Nicholas Thomas



PREVIOUS TITLES IN THIS SERIES

Art History Lecture Series 01 2003
GORDON H. BROWN
*Elements of Modernism in
Colin McCahon's Early Work*

Art History Lecture Series 02 2004
TONY GREEN
Toss Woollaston: Origins and Influence

Art History Lecture Series 03 2005
ROGER BLACKLEY
A Nation's Portraits

Art History Lecture Series 04 2006
ANNIE GOLDSOHN
Memory, Landscape, Dad & Me

Art History Lecture Series 05 2007
LEONARD BELL
*In Transit: Questions of Home &
Belonging in New Zealand Art*

Art History Lecture Series 06 2008
SARAH TREADWELL
Rangiatea Revisited

Art History Lecture Series 07 2009
MARY KISLER
*Displaced Legacies—European Art
in New Zealand's Public Collections*
Available on line at
http://www.victoria.ac.nz/Art-History/downloads/MaryKisler_lecture.pdf

Art History Lecture Series 08 2010
REX BUTLER
Colin McCahon in Australia

Art History Lecture Series 09 2011
PAUL TAPSELL
The Art of Taonga

Art History Lecture Series 10 2012
ROBERT LEONARD
Nostalgia for Intimacy

Art History Lecture Series 11 2013
ROSS GIBSON
Aqueous Aesthetics: An Art History of Change

Art History Lecture Series 12 2014
DEIDRE BROWN, NGARINO ELLIS
& JONATHAN MANE-WHEOKI
Does Māori Art History Matter?

Victoria
University of
Wellington

GORDON
H. BROWN
LECTURE

13
2015

A Critique of the Natural Artefact: Anthropology, Art & Museology Nicholas Thomas

Published by Art History,
School of Art History, Classics
and Religious Studies
Victoria University of Wellington
PO Box 600, Wellington

© Art History, Victoria University of Wellington
and Nicholas Thomas (essay), 2015

ISSN 1176-5887

This book is copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study, research, criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright Act, no part may be reproduced by any process without the permission of the publishers. Every effort has been made to trace the copyright holders of the images contained in this booklet. Any omissions are unintentional and we would be pleased to insert the appropriate acknowledgement in any subsequent edition of this publication.

Edited by Geoffrey Batchen
Designed by Sarah Maxey

Printed and bound by Service Print Ltd,
Wellington

For further information about the
Gordon H. Brown Lecture Series or to
order previous publications:
Art History Administrator,
School of Art History, Classics
and Religious Studies
Victoria University of Wellington
PO Box 600, Wellington, New Zealand
www.victoria.ac.nz/art-history

Preface

This essay, the edited text of a lecture presented by Dr Nicholas Thomas, addresses a key vehicle for the practice of art history: the museum. Thomas argues that a museum is a far more complex entity than a mere collectivity of objects. Looking in particular at museums devoted to artefacts gathered from the Pacific, he proposes that we need to appreciate them as ‘systems’, as living assemblies of relationships rather than as static depositories. And we need to move beyond an unhelpful field of understandings that includes what he calls a ‘naturalism of the collection’. His essay offers some vivid examples of other ways of thinking about collections and the way they might be engaged in a museum setting.

This lecture was delivered on Thursday 10 December 2014 at the City Gallery in Wellington. It is the thirteenth in Victoria University’s Art History Lecture Series and the twelfth to be delivered as the Gordon H. Brown Lecture. Named in honour of pioneering New Zealand art historian, Gordon H. Brown, this annual public lecture is intended to ‘provide the occasion for the presentation of new scholarship on an aspect of New Zealand art history’. A key issue for any history of art practiced in New Zealand is the way we are to engage the art and culture of our region. This text is therefore central to the aims of the Gordon H. Brown Lecture series.

The Gordon H. Brown Lecture series is being sponsored by the Art History Programme at Victoria University as part of a greater mission to support research initiatives that relate to the theme of ‘contact’. The aim is to enable the production of art histories written from our perspective in the

Pacific, a focus inspired by New Zealand's own complex heritage but also by concerns we share with many neighbours in the region and beyond. In this sense, Art History at V.U.W. is adding its efforts to the search for appropriate methods of practice that can acknowledge difference and hybridity as well as continuity and exchange within international, regional and national cultural production—even while recognizing that each of these terms is open to dispute.

Building on the experience of New Zealand's own history of negotiation between Māori, Pākehā and Pacific Island cultures, the Art History Programme is dedicated to developing a way of working that will, by engaging with issues pertinent to its own region, have something important to offer both to that region and to the rest of the world. The sponsorship of the annual Gordon H. Brown Lecture and its publication very much falls within this mission.

In realising this lecture and its subsequent publication we acknowledge the School of Art History, Classics and Religious Studies at Victoria University and City Gallery Wellington. Both have supported the series since its inception. Of particular importance to this year's lecture is the funding initially provided by Deborah Willis, former Dean of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Victoria University. Pippa Wisheart, Art History Administrator, always manages this event with efficiency and good humour, while Sarah Maxey has been responsible for the elegant, award-winning design of the publication. Roger Blackley has also

offered invaluable assistance with the preparation of the text. In conclusion, we hope this publication enhances the legacy of Gordon H. Brown and appropriately acknowledges his important contribution to the discipline of art history here in New Zealand.

Geoffrey Batchen, PROFESSOR, ART HISTORY

Biographical note

NICHOLAS THOMAS first visited the Pacific in 1984 to research his PhD thesis on culture and history in the Marquesas Islands. He has since worked on material culture, exploration, empire and art in Oceania, and published, among other books, *Oceanic Art* (1995), *Discoveries: the voyages of Captain Cook* (2003) and *Islanders: the Pacific in the Age of Empire* (2010), which was awarded the Wolfson History Prize. Since 2006, he has been Director of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at Cambridge University, where he has most recently curated *The power of paper: 50 years of printmaking in Australia, Canada and South Africa*.



Fig. 1: Claude-Francois Fortier (engraver), after Jean-Baptiste-Francois Genillion (artist), 'Echasses de Whitahu [Vaitahu] ou Santa-Christina', from Claret de Fleurieu, *Voyage* (1798-1800), pl. V. © Trustees of the British Museum



Fig. 2: Record (engraver) after Chapman (artist), 'Ornaments and weapons at the Marquesas', from Cook, *Voyage toward the South Pole* (1777), II, pl. XVII. © Trustees of the British Museum

A Critique of the Natural Artefact: Anthropology, Art & Museology

It was a great honour to be invited to give the Gordon H. Brown lecture for 2014. When I became interested in contemporary art in New Zealand, and in New Zealand art history, in the early 1990s, Gordon Brown's *Colin McCahon: artist* was one of the very first books I bought, and one that I often referred to during the subsequent years. The book remained a stimulating companion, not only an immensely valuable resource for understanding McCahon, but also for reflecting on New Zealand's modernist art history, and on what it was to do art history in New Zealand. I was subsequently fortunate to collaborate with Wellington colleagues, Peter Brunt and Sean Mallon, in trying to come to terms with the art history of Oceania. I continue to struggle with the question of how disciplines such as history, art history and anthropology help us understand and interpret the magnificent and bewilderingly diverse artistic achievements of the peoples of the Pacific. This essay attempts to take that reflection further, looking in particular from the perspective of someone who works in a museum. Its underlying questions are: what do we learn and how do we learn from collections, and for whom, and how, are collections salient today?

CLARET DE FLEURIEU'S *Voyage autour du monde... par Etienne Marchand*, was published in Paris, in four volumes, between 1798 and 1800. It included many maps, but just one illustration (Fig. 1).¹ The engraving, like many of the period, depicted what were described as the ornaments, implements or

arms of peoples encountered by travellers and voyagers, but had the distinction of being the very first to make one of Oceania's great art traditions visible to Europeans.

Thirty years earlier, in the course of Captain Cook's voyages, the acquisition of indigenous artefacts had become an enthusiasm of officers, naturalists and ordinary seamen. During his second expedition, Cook passed through the southern Marquesas and the island of Tahuata was visited briefly. Objects were collected, and a print in due course published. It represented five of the pieces acquired, each singular, yet none bearing the sculptural style exemplified by one particular *tapuvae*, a carved stilt step, that would later become renowned among scholars, curators, and connoisseurs (Fig. 2). Etienne Marchand's trading voyage had been a commercial failure, but in the wake of Cook, the Pacific remained a region of great novelty and interest for intellectuals. As a consequence, his journal was worked up for publication by an eminent geographer, and the text included a description of the stilt step and misleading speculation concerning the uses of stilts. The specimens—the plural *échasses* in the caption implied that the illustration was of a pair, not of one example shown both frontally and in profile—were notably still attached to the stilts themselves, and were very likely the earliest examples collected by any European. The practice with which the art form was associated—a ritualised competitive sport, in which men on stilts vied to knock each other over—is not documented from elsewhere in Polynesia. Indeed, nothing like this carved form was made elsewhere in the Pacific, nothing like the style was created anywhere else at all.



Fig. 3: Detail of u'u, club, Marquesas Islands, early nineteenth century.
H 150 cm. Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge (MAA 5944)

Immediately recognizable, but difficult to describe, Marquesan art was characterized at once by the presentation of tiki, of god-figures, often by their surprising multiplication, but also by a particular tension between convention and innovation (Fig. 3). As Paul Gauguin put it, Marquesan style was ‘toujours la même chose et cependant jamais la même chose’ [‘always the same and nevertheless never the same’].² Every carved artefact seemed to bear subtle, even witty, variations upon the standard forms and motifs. Tapuvae frequently feature a subordinate figure or face beneath the main tiki. One example, collected during the first Russian circumnavigation of 1804 and now in what is almost the oldest of Europe’s anthropological museums, the Kunstkamera in St Petersburg, bears not only this secondary face, but also an odd winking or blind eye. Alfred Gell has suggested that the ‘principle of least difference’ and the proliferation of eyes and faces make Marquesan art the most intelligible as a technology of enchantment. It was a system that armoured and empowered the person, most especially the person of the warrior, in a notoriously fractured, devolved, and competitive society. These works of art, deservedly celebrated in the galleries of institutions such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, yet too often secreted, conceptually if not literally, in the gated neighbourhood of the tribal art connoisseur, speak directly to one of the most fundamental, if essentially intractable questions of cultural analysis. As Peter Brunt has recently written, ‘The question is: how is Marquesan style, not just in the prevalence of war clubs, tattooing and body adornment but in the very logic of its formal

language... to be related to the temper of warfare and social instability that characterized Marquesan society’?³ How, in other words, are art’s relations to be related to social relations?

The study of the arts of Africa, Oceania and native America is comparatively modern, as an intellectual endeavour; in the Pacific, among candidates for the founding figure might be Alfred Haddon, who published *The Decorative Art of British New Guinea* in 1894, the first monograph-length treatment of any aspect of the subject.⁴ But he was preceded and succeeded by many who recorded, described and speculated about particular artefacts and genres. Some of these travellers and scholars fortunately reported indigenous identifications of and commentaries upon, the works in question. I am concerned not with this historiography, but with where we have got to now. And I want to address this concern by reflecting on a book that once marked a fresh framing of the issues, despite its dated and now unpalatable title.

Primitive Art and Society was the upshot of a New York-London collaboration, a Wenner-Gren conference organised by Douglas Newton and Raymond Firth. The book, formative for the anthropology of art then emerging, was edited by Anthony Forge, who introduced it with the observation that ‘the place of the arts in anthropology’ had a ‘curious history’.⁵ He referred to the split that had emerged in the inter-war years between museum-based artefact studies and the growing and ambitious anthropology of the university departments. ‘From the 1920s to the 1960s [Forge

wrote] social and cultural anthropology were making great advances in theory and analysis... but virtually ignoring art, while the museum-based studies were concerned with documentation and stylistic comparison but made no theoretical contribution'. Over the same decades, the hallmark of the modernists, the canonical figures of twentieth-century art, was their interest in tribal form, their latterly notorious primitivism. Hence, as Forge put it, it was ironic that anthropologists ignored, 'precisely that aspect of non-European culture which [their] own culture found most stimulating'. (Robert Goldwater, a leading voice of the primitivist interest, had been among the symposium participants and contributors to the book). But by the early seventies, prompted particularly by the new linguistics, anthropologists were rediscovering art, and beginning to analyse visual material as an 'independent' system, but one that could also be related to other 'cultural systems'.

This fresh view of art 'as a symbolic system' departed from the traditional focus upon artifacts and motifs to consider the aesthetics of what Forge called 'natural objects'—he was referring to work revealing the imagination of landmarks and ancestral land in Australia. Equally, or more importantly, he rejected an interpretive reductionism. 'In primitive [sic] art', Forge wrote, 'art objects are rarely representations of anything, rather they seem to be *about* relationships'.⁶ This move away from what he called 'simple translation' made art revealing and surprising, but it also made its anthropology peculiarly difficult, since the indigenous artefact ceased to possess

natural legibility. While 'ancestor figure' was a sort of default description of any anthropomorphic or quasi-anthropomorphic Melanesian artefact, in museum catalogues and coffee-table books and art-market publications, Forge doubted that many such figures were in fact accurately described by those words. A work could no longer just be named; instead, the relationships that it was 'about' awaited analysis. His own essays on Abelam painting are enormously suggestive, yet also peculiarly inconclusive, and attest to just how complex the project had become (Fig. 4).

Forge concluded his introduction with the suggestion that 'with the reawakened interest in art among university anthropologists the split between them and the museum men [sic] will be reduced'.⁷ But four decades on we have a sense of why it wasn't, or wasn't to a meaningful extent. Of course, the writings of James Clifford, Sally Price and others have given the histories and politics of collections and museums a certain cross-disciplinary prominence.⁸ But from a methodological perspective, art's 'relationships' were accessible to the fieldworker rather than the curator, insofar as they were accessible at all. The museum as a resource could only remain marginal, its value hypothetical.

Now, however, it's just possible that the museum, and in particular the artefact and the collection, can assume their potentiality in a fresh way. If this is to be the case, we need a deeper understanding of the singular and remarkable formations that comprise these institutions. The debates about the politics of exhibitions and the negotiation of representation



Fig. 4: Decorated men's house, Abelam, Papua New Guinea. Photo: Anthony Forge, 1962

that have preoccupied commentators, curators and activists over the last twenty or so years have been of vital importance. But they have also passed over seemingly simple questions: such as, what do museums contain? We need to appreciate museums as 'systems' (in Forge's terms), as emerging assemblies of relationships rather than as static depositories. And we need to move beyond an unhelpful field of understandings, those understandings that I characterize as a naturalism of the collection, a naturalism of the object, and a naturalism of heritage. In this text, I focus on the second of these three issues, but it may help if I place the specific argument in the context of a tripartite critique.⁹

A collection appears to be a vast set of objects, and it is: an overwhelming number of things may daunt the viewer of a crowded display or the visitor to a storage facility. Yet the tens or hundreds of thousands of artefacts found in a museum do not constitute 'the collection' any more than a physical territory of, say, 7.7 million square kilometres or a population of, say, 22 million people constitute a nation. A nation is a complex institutional and political entity, as well as an imagined and contested community. Without pushing the analogy too far, a collection is likewise emphatically a relational thing, made up of complex associations, connections and representations. It is the outcome of historical events, travels and transactions, and an always emerging assembly, one continually undergoing reconfiguration and revaluation, as people engage with it or in relation to it.

Artefacts can be related to each other in obvious ways: they are of the

same type, they are from the same place, they were gathered by the same person, they form a chronological series. They bear labels and numbers and can be related to documents, images, and archival records such as field-notes. They are related via catalogue records in both historic handwritten and modern online forms, which may now be ‘harvested’ by other databases. A good example is the Reciprocal Research Network at the University of British Columbia, which assembles collection records associated with certain northwest coast Aboriginal groups, with the intention of making the digital collection accessible to those groups themselves as well to other interested parties.¹⁰

A collection, then, is not so much a mass of individual things or even sets of things. It is a complex evidentiary accumulation rather like an archaeological deposit, a site-specific formation defined by things that have been brought from elsewhere. W. J. T. Mitchell has influentially asked ‘What do pictures want?’ He entertains what on the face of it might be considered a theoretical heresy—that paintings, photographs, and other images may make demands on us and play active and forceful parts in our lives.¹¹ If we’re concerned with what collections want, and what artefacts want, we must think, not only in terms of activation, but also in terms of an archaeological investigation that gives the collection scope to speak, to tell its own story: a story of growth, accumulation, layering and loss. Collections have been assembled, but they have also been substracted from, as so-called ‘duplicates’, such as clubs of ostensibly the same type, were exchanged or sold.

Collections have also been shifted periodically across institutions and disciplines, been divided and freshly amalgamated. If the passage from the Musée de l’Homme to the Quai Branly was a focus of heated debate, the migration and reconstitution of holdings and institutions has become increasingly common. It has recently been accomplished in Antwerp and Marseille; it is in progress, most ambitiously in Berlin, but also in Barcelona, among other places.¹² Hence, if we are to further entertain the analogy with the nation, ‘the collection’ is like Catalonia, Slovenia, South Sudan, even Donetsk: it is a collectivity susceptible to division, reconstitution, fragmentation and colonisation.

Of course both the archaeological site and the collection reveal very much more than their own formation: they are lenses upon wider human and environmental histories, histories of travel, trade, empire and art. They empower understandings of the past, and in particular an understanding of European, colonial and indigenous exchanges, from the oblique vantage point of ethnographic collecting. Yet a collection is also more than a historical resource. It is something that we work with prospectively, it can be a technology that enables the creation of new things.

By the naturalism of heritage, I mean the assumptions made in the policies and programmes of national and international organisations such as UNESCO that people have or should have an organic attachment to artefacts and practices associated with their ancestors. This is an attachment presumed to be important to their identity, that contributes to a sense of

belonging. Of course, historic artefacts, as well as sites and intangible forms of heritage, may indeed be cherished by people in these terms, but interests in the material culture of the past are in fact heterogeneous, and are as often marked by indifference or explicit rejection as by affirmation. In many parts of Africa an aspiration to embrace and appropriate modernity is, and has long been, of profound importance, as is an (often linked) commitment to evangelical Christianity. Neither identification prompts people to go around talking about the importance to them of old stuff. In South Africa, moreover, traditional art and craft carries the double taint of apartheid segregationism and tribalism, the latter an anathema from the perspective of the ANC's ongoing nation-building effort. The picture on the ground is of course complicated, but the short version is that money has been lavished on museums of struggle. These have often sought to emulate, or in fact been designed by, Daniel Libeskind, in a loose sense following the model of his Holocaust and Jewish history memorial institutions. Ethnographic collections appear, for the moment, to have nothing to offer such collective imaginations and aspirations, and accordingly suffer a lack of both patrons and a public.¹³

In the Pacific, customary culture tends to be in a different place, but those Islanders who are keenly interested in the historic artefacts they may see in museums, in Suva, Noumea, Auckland, Sydney, or London, do not respond to them in the same way or for the same reasons. Someone may treasure a piece of barkcloth because it has particular associations with remembered people or a known place; a practitioner may be absorbed in

the intricate examination of weaving or carving technique; a community leader may look to revive crafts to generate income, or consider that awareness of tradition will help keep young people out of trouble; a youth may seek a tattoo motif from an appropriately local source.¹⁴ We cannot map the contemporary salience of historic collections or adjudicate their politics unless we acknowledge the range and idiosyncrasy of these investments and disinvestments.

By the naturalism of the object, I mean the assumption that the museum artefact has been extracted from some organic use, from the flow of life of its source community, from the practice of ritual, from its context in whatever sense, into a collection in which it is, above all, decontextualised. I should be clear that I am not suggesting that the taonga that concern us were anything other than significant creations of Pacific cultures that have been removed to metropolitan institutions or their counterparts in the settler-colonial societies. I recently introduced a companion to Melanesian art, the upshot of a collaborative project on the collections of the British Museum, with the observation that artefacts lived double lives, 'between the gardens, villages, beaches and ritual precincts of Melanesian environments, and the institutions, collections and critical traditions associated with Western museums and Western anthropology'.¹⁵

And this too was the argument of a summative outcome of the programme of research and engagement that generated Ralph Regenvanu's painting, *The Melanesia Project*, in 2006, the response of this artist from



Fig. 5: Ralph Regenvanu, *The Melanesia project*, 2006, acrylic on canvas, 50 x 100 cm, British Museum, London (Oc2006,02.1). © Ralph Regenvanu

Malakula, Vanuatu, to a visit to the British Museum (Fig. 5). What I have to offer here is a set of qualifications to this understanding; a series of small stories, that may look more like the forays of a postcolonial antiquarian than a critique of consequence. My gamble is that, incrementally, these instances enlarge our sense of what museum objects were, are and can be.

Let me preface these small stories by noting that a good many museum objects were made for sale or made on commission. They represent obvious exceptions to the notion that the museum artefact is first and foremost something that has been appropriated: Tene Waitere's Ta Moko panel, essentially a sculptural illustration of male and female tattoos, was made for the New Zealand ethnologist Augustus Hamilton, author of the foundational study, *Maori Art*, and subsequently director of the Colonial Museum, the antecedent institution to Te Papa, New Zealand's present national museum (Fig. 6).¹⁶ Waitere's work was innovative in multiple respects, it bears a carved signature on the reverse, it is an icon of Oceanic art and has had many contexts—but it did not have a place in Māori culture from which it was removed, and consequently it has never suffered decontextualization. The models that are numerous in many collections, some souvenirs, some scaled-down forms of houses and boats made for ethnologists unable to collect actual examples, are similarly novel creations. I am interested, however, in instances where things are, in more subtle respects, not what they have been made out to be.

A carving of two double figures and a quadruped was collected during Cook's first voyage. It was among a hundred or so objects presented by the



Fig. 6: Tene Waitere, Ta Moko panel, 1896-99, H 77 cm, commissioned by Augustus Hamilton, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington (ME004211)

navigator to his Admiralty patron, the Earl of Sandwich, which Sandwich in turn gifted to Trinity College, Cambridge, and which were in due course transferred to the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (Fig. 7). The collection is of exceptional significance, not only because it includes some of the earliest artefacts collected by any European from Australia, New Zealand, and various other places, but also because the pieces were carefully listed, very soon after the Endeavour's return to England, and were all obtained by, or given to, Cook personally. Hence they reflect indigenous engagements with a European perceived to be of the highest status, even if, in New Zealand, Tupaia rather than Cook seems to have been treated as the expedition's leader. This carving is, moreover, significant for being the very first work of figure sculpture collected in any part of Oceania by any European that remains extant and documented today. It has over the years been exhibited in the United States, France, Germany, Austria and Switzerland, and may be MAA's most published object.¹⁷

In other words, it's well known, except that we don't know what it is, nor have we known where it's from. Scholarly commentary has in general addressed, not the piece itself, but its affinity with the equally famous archaic Kaitiaki lintel, an object notably very different in style to the classic Māori carvings of the late eighteenth and nineteenth century (Fig. 8). In the early 1930s the parallels between the angular figures in each enabled Kenneth Emory and H. D. Skinner, Bishop Museum and Otago Museum ethnologists respectively, to substantiate their arguments for the deriva-



Fig. 7: Sculpture of two double figures and a quadruped, 17th/18th centuries, L 53 cm, Tahiti, Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge (D1914.34)

tion of Māori culture from eastern Polynesia—arguments since fully substantiated by archaeology and linguistics as well as oral tradition. But this identification did little to clarify the provenance or nature of the Cambridge sculpture.¹⁸ The squat, angular figures have echoes across the Pacific but resonate particularly with works known to come from the Austral Islands, south of Tahiti. On the first voyage, Cook encountered people in passing, off Rurutu, one of the Australs. However the voyage journals refer only to pieces of barkcloth being bartered between men in a canoe and the ship, and it seems improbable that a carving of this kind, surely of some religious significance, should be casually traded, or that it would be in a fishing canoe in the first place.¹⁹ Yet virtually every catalogue and publication, including those published by MAA itself, and some I have co-authored, have attributed the sculpture to the Austral Islands.²⁰ The argument could have been made that it somehow reached Tahiti, perhaps as a gift or loot, prior to being collected during the more extended visit there.

The piece has been described as a ‘canoe ornament’ by Adrienne Kaeppler. In two publications she has reproduced a drawing by John Webber of a Tahitian va’a, with the implication that the feature on the far left might correspond to a carving of this kind (Figs. 9, 10).²¹ Close examination of the drawing, however, makes it apparent that these elements bear no particular resemblance to the carving, the form of which is difficult to relate to any known prow or stern ornament. An alternative argument would work in reverse from the ethnologists’ comparison of the Cambridge carving and

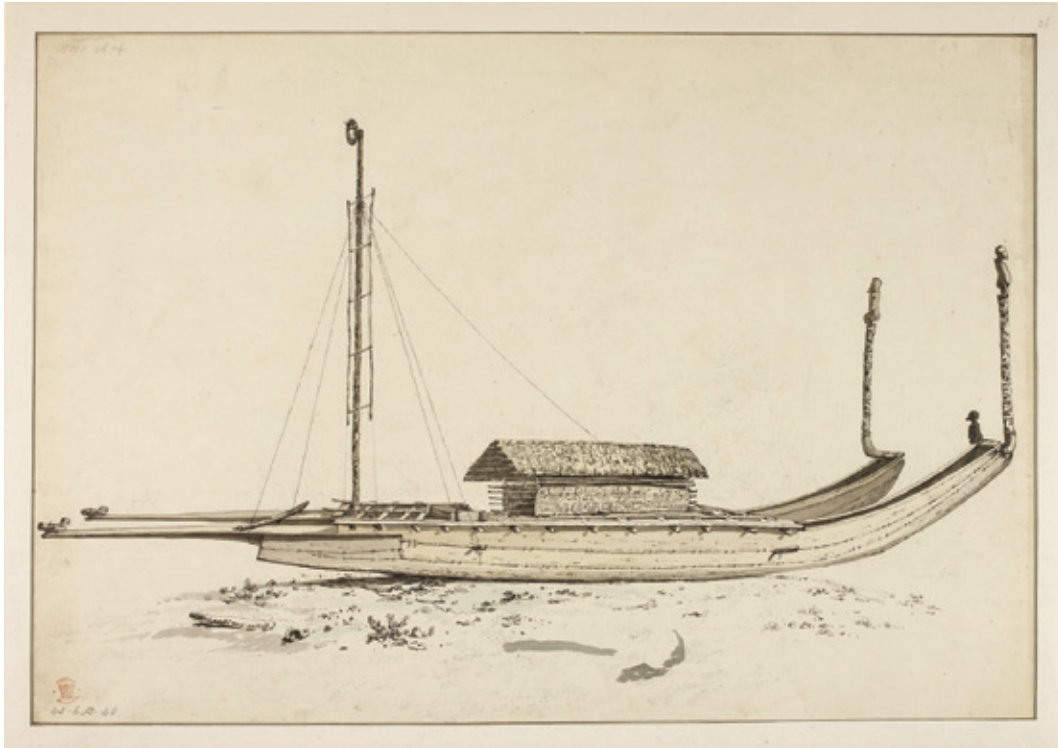
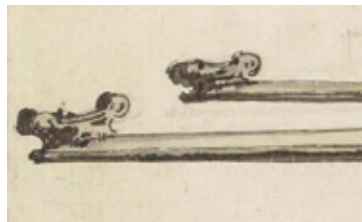


Fig. 8: The Kaitaia lintel, 14th century (attr.), L 225 cm, Auckland Museum

Fig. 9: John Webber, *A canoe of a chief of Tahiti*, September 1777, pen, wash and watercolour, 36.4 x 52.7 cm (BL Add MS 15513, f. 26)

Fig. 10: Webber, *A canoe of a chief of Tahiti*, detail.



A Critique of the Natural Artefact

the Kaitaia lintel. A double-sided figure or set of figures is perforce intended to be visible, intelligible, indeed confronting, from both sides. My own response, informed by that of my colleague, Maia Nuku, is that the piece was part of a lintel over a gateway into a ceremonial or sacred precinct.²²

Asymmetry is an important feature of Polynesian art, but incompleteness is not. Figures are, virtually without exception, balanced or integrated into a coherent form. The pair of linked tiki seem at one time to have joined hands with another figure, perhaps even a series of such figures. The carving must have at least incorporated some additional element which has been broken off, though the loss has been compensated for in the sense that the wood has been reworked and reshaped. The most straightforward explanation of its form is that it was one of a pair, the counterpart of a similar carving that formed the opposed end of a pare or lintel, with or without some larger central figure or cluster of figures, on the Māori model.

In our encounter with the work, my colleagues and I were struck by the fact that the damaged parts of the sculpture are as heavily patinated as any of its surfaces, suggesting that it possessed considerable antiquity in the form in which it now exists (Figs. 11, 12). The observation prompted us to carbon-date the wood, and also use isotope analysis to attempt to resolve the question of its provenance.²³ These studies have revealed that the stylistic affinities between the work and Austral Island artefacts such as drums and fly whisks from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were a distraction. The piece was made in Tahiti, and it is unlike the Tahitian



Fig. 11: Sculpture of two double figures, detail. 17th/18th centuries, Tahiti, Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge (D1914.34)

Fig. 12: Sculpture of two double figures, detail. 17th/18th centuries, Tahiti, Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge (D1914.34)

A Critique of the Natural Artefact

sculpture familiar to us because it was made in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century. Hawaiian, Māori and Rapanui arts all developed very distinctive styles and identities over the course of the few centuries of their separate evolution, following the voyages and migrations of ancestors from a shared archipelagic home and culture in eastern Polynesia. So it should not surprise us that a Tahitian artwork of the 1690s or 1720s might look quite different to one of the 1760s or 1770s.

Inevitably, historians of the arts of the Pacific must identify works on the basis of style, with a greater or lesser degree of certainty. Yet they must inevitably also be misled, by the historical fluidity of artistic styles and identities, as well as by the mobility of artefacts, that are found, surprisingly often, to be somewhere other than where they are supposed to come from. The Cambridge carving proves the point. There is much more to be said about this remarkable work. My particular argument now is that, if it suffered decontextualization during its various passages, from the voyage in the *Endeavour* back to England, its incorporation into the library of a Cambridge college, and its transfer to an anthropological museum, the sculpture had, before it left Tahiti, already been detached. It was most likely some kind of sacred relic, kept on a marae, prior to its presentation to a prestigious visitor. It was, in other words, at the time of its European acquisition, already something other than what it had formerly been.

There are considerable numbers of tapuvae, of stilt steps, in museum collections. The most conventional form features a single tiki. Where col-



Fig. 13: Tapuvae, stilt step, 18th century, H 34.7 cm, Musée du Quai Branly, Paris (72.1968.6.1)



Fig. 14: Tapuvae, stilt step, detail 18th century, Musée du Quai Branly, Paris (72.1968.6.1).

lections preserve a pair, the pieces will be similar but subtly different, often in the detail of the diagonal surface decoration rather than more obviously in the form. Many variations include additional or subordinate figures. A distinct type features a rotation of the lower half of the main figure's body, so that the buttocks as well as the face and chest are thrust outwards.²⁴ This form exemplified a well-known Polynesian, and specifically Marquesan, gesture of contempt. Cross-cultural encounters are often said to feature misunderstanding, but when missionaries were confronted by Islanders thrusting their arses, even farting, at them, they understood perfectly well that the evangelical enterprise was getting nowhere fast.

The engraving of a tapuvae in the Claret de Fleurieu volume would have been prepared on the basis of a drawing by a draughtsman or illustrator accustomed to delineating botanical or zoological specimens, technical devices, or perhaps antiques. In any case, these drawings were typically precise, and this accuracy is important and useful. The piece shown in the engraving bears affinities with one now in the Musée du Quai Branly (Fig. 13). Clearly the two are not the same, since the treatment of the subordinate figure is different. But the approach to form is very similar, as, more remarkably, are a number of specific attributes. The lower legs of the upper figure rest on the shoulders of the one below; the feet are represented by a flat but clearly defined disk at the base of the leg; and in each case the hands of the lower figure are close but not fused. Perhaps most tellingly, the upraised arms of the main tiki on both the piece in the engraving and the piece in

Paris have a sculpted quality, and a clearly-defined elbow (Fig. 14). In virtually every other example of this sub-genre, the arms are flat and thick, as if to introduce a robust architecture, rather than an animated anthropomorphic dynamism, into the work (Fig. 15). No other museum example that I am yet aware of features either the elbow, or anything like this combination of traits. If we can ever attribute two museum objects to one artist, we surely can do so in this case.

The Quai Branly carving, acquired through an American dealer in the mid-1960s, bears what looks like a nineteenth-century label on the reverse. This reads, 'Part of a pair of Stilts brought from Oa Hiva island, one of the Marquesas group, by Lieut. C. M. Dundas [of] HMS *Topaze*' followed by further words which haven't been deciphered. The voyage of the navy steamship *Topaze* is notable for investigations on Easter Island, and particularly for the acquisition of the two ahu moai now in the British Museum.²⁵ One Charles Dundas was indeed among the officers, and the *Topaze* indeed did pass through the southern Marquesas before the Rapanui visit. Dundas's journal, in the National Library of Scotland, unfortunately makes no reference to the stilt step, nor to artefacts or collecting at all. But both the manuscript and the label on the object call the island as 'Oa Hiva', an inversion of the correct name of Hiva Oa. There is no particular reason to doubt the veracity of the label, but the repetition of the error, not one generally made by other travellers of the period, diminishes any uncertainty.

Of the two works we may attribute to this carver of brazen buttocks,

one was therefore obtained in 1791, the other, remarkably, not until 1867, over seventy-five years later. We have no way of knowing whether in 1791 the carvings were new or already old, nor whether the artist was alive and active at the time. Stilt competitions certainly were taking place in the 1790s but the practice had long been abandoned by the time of Duncan's visit. This suggests that the Marchand and Dundas stilt steps had had different lives and significances. If the former—with the stilts attached—sampled the technology of an ongoing practice, the latter, detached 'part of a pair' was something other. A piece of this kind had not been preserved by accident. It could only have been wrapped in barkcloth or trade cloth and squirrelled away under a bed or in a box. It could have been, but was not necessarily, a family heirloom. But it was certainly an archaic thing, a sign of history and surely also of loss. By the time of its acquisition, the Marquesan social order had, over more than a half-century, been hollowed out by depopulation, assaulted by missionaries whose persistence eventually secured formal conversion, and intermittently oppressed by various French administrations. The artefacts were physically the same, but Duncan's acquisition was decontextualized before he collected it. It had suffered subtraction but also been burdened with addition, with a past-present relationship that no Marquesan artefact of the 1790s had possessed.

This carving is one of three Māori pieces in Cambridge collected by Baron Carl, or Charles, von Hügel, an Austrian soldier and diplomat renowned for his botany and gardening (Fig. 16).²⁶ In the late 1820s, he

was engaged to a Hungarian princess, said to be one of the great beauties of the age, but who then became the third wife of the great Austrian statesman Prince Metternich, a family friend of von Hügel's. He dealt with his apparently acute distress by embarking upon an extended voyage, through Kashmir and what was Ceylon in the early 1830s. This resulted in major publications and very large collections of natural history specimens, as well as coins and other rarities, in due course presented to the state museums in Vienna. Von Hügel's single long voyage included a period in Australia and a short visit, but one rich in encounter, to the Bay of Islands in northern New Zealand. During this period, in March 1834, von Hügel spent a good deal of time in the company of William Yate, of the Church Missionary Society, a gifted linguist, an enthusiastic student of Māori culture, and author of perhaps one of the earliest truly insightful accounts of Māori taonga. Just a couple of years after meeting von Hügel, on the ship back following a successful period in England promoting the mission and his book, *An account of New Zealand*, he was discovered engaged intimately with another male passenger, and was in due course excluded from the CMS. When he met von Hügel, his standing yet to suffer from this exposure of his sexuality, he proudly entertained the naval gentlemen and presented the aristocrat traveller with a number of pieces from his own collection. What has recently been renamed the Weltmuseum in Vienna holds some forty Pacific artefacts donated by Carl von Hügel, which must include those given him by Yate. A few were retained in the family. Sixty years later, Carl's son, Anatole von



Fig. 15 (top left): Tapuvae, stilt step, 18th-19th century, H 38.1 cm, Brooklyn Museum (56.6.106)

Fig. 16 (right): Tekoteko carving, Te Arawa style, collected by Carl von Hügel in the Bay of Islands in March 1834, H 90. Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge (1939.70)

Fig. 17 (bottom left): Tekoteko carving, East Cape style, collected by Carl von Hügel in the Bay of Islands in March 1834, H 79. Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge (D 1897.76)

Hügel, in part no doubt as a project of piety, had undertaken his own Pacific long voyage. He gathered extensive collections, especially in Fiji, was subsequently appointed the founding curator of what was then the Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology in Cambridge, and, in the course of vigorously enlarging the collections, deposited the three pieces his father had obtained.

One such work is a tekoteko, an apical carving from the facade of a house; this type was probably from, or intended for, a larger, impressive building, and has characteristics associated with a pataka or food store rather than a meeting house. Robert Jahnke, of Massey University, is among those most knowledgeable about nineteenth-century Māori carving. He has examined the sculpture and noted that it is fully consistent with the Te Arawa style; that is, the art tradition of the region around Rotorua in the centre of the North Island. He also pointed out that the surface decoration on the lower part is unfinished, and that the naturalistic approach to the fingers and hands is an innovation of the 1830s. This was an innovation not found in carvings of just a decade or so earlier, such as another of the pieces that von Hügel obtained, now also in Cambridge (Fig. 17). Whereas this slightly older work, in the style of the East Coast, was perhaps among those given to von Hügel by Yate, the Te Arawa piece may be one mentioned in his journal.

Among the other possibilities is that the carving was the work of a man von Hügel called ‘the lame tattooist’, whom he met several times and was evidently impressed by. On first sighting Māori men, he had been repelled by their famous or notorious involutioned facial tattoos, but confessed

that he came quickly to admire the ‘inimitable boldness’ of the art, and even had this man inflict a small sample tattoo on his own arm. During a subsequent meeting on 19 March 1834, von Hügel states that the ‘lame tattooist’ presented him with a ‘mask’, most likely a piece now in Vienna. Moreover, if the artist chose to give or sell other carvings to von Hügel—he had received already things in return—it might well have been a piece he was working on, that therefore was unfinished. The reason that the work is in the Te Arawa style rather than that of the Bay of Islands relates to the decades of turbulence prior to this particular encounter. Traders had been visiting the region since the 1790s, and local competition and conflict had intensified. Most crucially, the warrior chief Hongi Hika had visited England and Australia and imported firearms on an unprecedented scale. The musket wars of the 1820s were marked by sustained invasions of Te Arawa territory, and so-called slaves were taken in considerable numbers and resettled among the tribes of the north. Those captives included a good many carvers, and by 1830 the art tradition particular to the north had been all but abandoned. The work of carving in the region was given to these subordinate, assimilated, Te Arawa instead.

Over 2005–6, an exhibition was developed at MAA, curated by Rosanna Raymond and Amiria Salmond and entitled *Pasifika Styles*. It brought a number of New Zealand artists to the museum and enabled them to respond both to specific works and to the institutional context.²⁷ Lisa Reihana was among the group and she created work related to Hongi

Hika's visit to Cambridge—he had helped the linguist Samuel Lee prepare an early Māori grammar. But she also produced a piece (Fig. 18) that incorporated the tekoteko collected in 1834 by Carl von Hügel. Her project bore a symmetrical relationship to an act of repatriation. She undertook extensive filming and gathered a variety of audio materials: 'the Manukau Institute of Technology Maori choir, and the "tap-tapping" sounds as Maori artist Lyonel Grant carves the pattern found on the mouth of the tekoteko on to another work'. As she wrote, 'The tekoteko is erected inside a vitrine, contextualised by sounds and images of home. Footage of blue skies signifies that he was once seen on top of a meeting house, silhouetted by New Zealand skies. On the tekoteko are 1960s headphones, and when the viewer listens to the Nokia phones [that is, to handsets attached to the display], the combination of the two, visually and conceptually, evokes conversing with this ancestor'. While Lisa will joke that she has a thing about the clunky design of sixties and seventies technology, there is a deliberate and sophisticated disconnect or awkwardness here.

Had the project been simply to enliven the figure in the present, the artist could have introduced the ubiquitous earphones we associate with iPods and similar devices; in fact, something more complicated is going on here. We all tend to relate to artworks by associating them in some way with our own lives or interests. For tangata whenua, they are the works of ancestors (or even are those ancestors). Others of us sense that paintings offer representations and imaginations of the places we know and



Fig. 18: Lisa Reihana, *He Tautoko*, mixed media installation, 2006, Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge (2010.3). Courtesy of and © Kerry Brown

inhabit—consider the work of Colin McCahon, for example. For others of us, Christianity or Islam connect us with works of religious art. And there are many other personal, biographical and idiosyncratic kinds of associations that make artefacts and images present to us, that bring them home to us. If *He Tautoko* is evidently concerned at once to bring home to the tekoteko, through the operation of reverse repatriation, and to bring this work from the past to life now, the artist would seem to have him inhabit, not our own time, right now, but a time within the span of our own lives, yet one contemporaneous with our childhood (the artist has recently turned 50).

This is to say that history, that great things from the past, are things that we can have and hold in our own lives right now. We can do so in a way that coincides with our own life experiences, made up as they are of earlier and more recent passages, the former susceptible to loss and defamiliarisation as we age. A Fitzwilliam Museum conservator told the poet Owen Sheers that he worked ‘at the edge of loss’.²⁸ This is an evocative caption, and not only for the work of museology. In a time of palpable climate change, we all live ‘at the edge of loss’. I therefore conclude with a comment on the work that museums can and must do in the public sphere, now and for the future.

Reihana’s work illuminates the sense in which a collection can now be understood, not primarily as a conserved and ordered artefact assemblage but as a creative technology. Materials and relationships that bear information and narrative enable the invention of new things, in this case works of contemporary art that are internationally exhibited, published,

curated, and collected. This creative manipulation of the collection is not just the privilege of the occasional artist-in-residence. The practice of taking photographs with smartphones, that most museums sensibly don’t attempt to police, and the emergence of social media mean that many visitors take visual notes, and create personal collections that they annotate, post and share. Artefacts appear on Facebook and in blogs, variously illustrating a silly joke, a political hobbyhorse, a connoisseur’s preoccupation, a debate among makers about the minutiae of technique. While online outreach obviously excites museum professionals, the practices make visible the capacity that visitors always possessed to respond to displays in varied and personal terms, to create idiosyncratic mental collections, to use them in ways as familiar as object drawing: focussed and productive in its attention to the artefact, yet indifferent to the contextualisations and rationales offered by curators and institutions. Perhaps the most profoundly important shift we associate with the now not-so-new museology is the shift away from didacticism and the sense that the museum is a place where people can be stimulated and can acquire skills, by asking questions such as ‘What is it?’ ‘Why is it here?’ ‘What is it for?’ and ‘Who owns it?’, as well as making connections with their own values and experiences.

Yet, the last five years have been marked in many countries by a resurgent xenophobia. It is unnecessary to detail the triumphant advances of far-right and anti-immigrant parties in various European nations, nor the extraordinary steps taken by the Australian government, and supported



Fig. 19: Visitors in front of the introductory case, Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge, May 2012. Courtesy of and © Lucie Carreau

in some form by both mainstream political parties, to deny asylum seekers rights set out in international law. Ethnographic collections, in some countries marginalized, in others newly showcased, bear an extraordinary variety of peculiar stories, of micro-histories of the kind I have considered here. But they also have a simple message of fundamental importance. From Boas's magnificent and strange Hall of Northwest Coast Indians to the collections of sometimes-enigmatic Pacific objects I have described here, they celebrate humanity's diversity, and humanity's creativity. They also reveal the making of culture over the longer term through migration, trade and encounter. The sorts of small stories I have told reflect deep and formative interactions, the meetings that shaped the global multicultural order we all inhabit, that anti-immigrant politicians would wish away. We can't predict or prescribe what visitors make of ethnographic exhibitions, but should approach curatorial work and public engagement ambitiously rather than defensively (Fig. 19). Anish Kapoor said recently that artists are people who do stupid things for serious reasons.²⁹ Anthropology museums could likewise be said to be stupid inventions that exist for serious reasons. At least slightly mad colonial institutions, they are now fertile and necessary engines of creativity as we think and work, not only beyond colonialism, but beyond the world we have, toward a future we still could have.

1 Charles Pierre Claret de Fleurieu, *Voyage autour du monde, par Etienne Marchard, pendant les années 1790, 1791 et 1792* (Paris: Imprimerie de la République, An VI, 1798-1800). The image of a pair of stilts in David Porter's account of his notorious 1813 occupation of the Nuku Hiva, *Journal of a cruise made to the Pacific Ocean* (Philadelphia: Bradford and Inskeep, 1815), II, facing 128, is a crude copy of the Claret de Fleurieu plate, not an illustration of pieces actually seen or collected by Porter.

2 Paul Gauguin, *Oviri, écrits d'un sauvage* (1903; Paris: Gallimard, 1974), p. 324.

3 Alfred Gell, *Art and agency: an anthropological theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Peter Brunt, 'Marquesan style', in Peter Brunt and Nicholas Thomas (eds.), *Art in Oceania: a new history* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2012), pp. 262–3.

4 A. C. Haddon, *The decorative art of British New Guinea: a study in Papuan ethnography* (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1894).

5 Anthony Forge, 'Introduction', in Forge (ed.), *Primitive art and society* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. xiii.

6 Forge, 'Introduction', pp. xiv–xviii.

7 Forge, 'Introduction', p. xxi.

8 E.g. James Clifford, *The predicament of culture: twentieth-century ethnography, literature and art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988); Sally Price, *Primitive art in civilized places* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

9 These arguments are more fully elaborated in Thomas, *The return of curiosity: what museums are good for in the twenty-first century* (London: Reaktion, 2016).

10 See www.rrncommunity.org (accessed 25 July 2015).

11 W. J. T. Mitchell, *What do pictures want? The lives and loves of images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

12 I refer here to new museums created out of amalgamated, reconfigured, or relocated collections: Museum aan de Stroom (MAS) in Antwerp; the Musée des civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée (MUCEM); the Humboldt-Forum in Berlin; and the Museu de cultures del Món (MCM) in Barcelona; for further discussion see Thomas, *The return of curiosity*.

13 See Annie E. Coombes, *History after Apartheid: visual culture and public memory in a democratic South Africa* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003).

14 For such varied valuations of a historic Polynesian barkcloth tradition, see John Pule and Nicholas Thomas, *Hiapo: past and present in Niuean barkcloth* (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2005).

15 Thomas, 'Introduction', in Lissant Bolton, Nicholas Thomas, Julie Adams, Elizabeth Bonshek and Ben Burt (eds.), *Melanesia: art and encounter* (London: British Museum Press, 2013), p. xi.

16 See Augustus Hamilton, *Maori art: the art workmanship of the Maori race in New Zealand* (Wellington: New Zealand Institute, 1896–1901). Waitere's significance was importantly acknowledged by Roger

Neich, 'The Maori carving art of Tene Waitere: traditionalist and innovator', *Art New Zealand* 57 (1990), 73–79, and more fully contextualized in Neich, *Carved histories: Ngati Tarawhai woodcarving* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2001). See also Nicholas Thomas, Mark Adams, James Schuster and Lyonel Grant, *Rauru: Tene Waitere, Maori carving, colonial history* (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2009).

17 For fuller discussion, see Nicholas Thomas, Julie Adams, Billie Lythberg, Maia Nuku and Amiria Salmond (eds.), *Artefacts of encounter: Cook's voyages, colonial collecting and museum histories* (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 2016).

18 Kenneth P. Emory, 'A Kaitaia carving from south-east Polynesia', *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 40 (1931), 253. In his comment, Skinner considered there to be 'little doubt' that the piece was from the Austral Islands 'following, doubtless, a more ancient Society Islands original'.

19 J. C. Beaglehole (ed.), *The Endeavour Journal of Joseph Banks 1768–1771* (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1962), p. 329.

20 For example: Peter Gathercole, Adrienne L. Kaeppler and Douglas Newton, *Art of the Pacific islands* (Washington: National Gallery of Art, 1979); Adrienne L. Kaeppler, Christian Kaufmann and Douglas Newton, *L'art océanien* (Paris: Citadelles et Mazenod, 1993); Mark Elliott and Nicholas Thomas (eds.), *Gifts and discoveries: the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge* (London: Scala, 2010); Brunt and Thomas (eds.), *Art in Oceania*.

21 Adrienne L. Kaeppler, 'Artificial curiosities': being an exposition of native manufactures collected on the three Pacific voyages of Captain James Cook, R. N. (Honolulu: Bishop Museum, 1978); [Adrienne L. Kaeppler, et. al.], *James Cook and exploration of the Pacific* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2009).

22 Our study of the sculpture was in the context of a project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council of the UK, 'Artefacts of Encounter' (2010–13).

23 Thomas et. al. (eds.), *Artefacts of encounter*, Appendix II.

24 The most extended discussion remains Karl von den Steinen's classic, *Die Marquesaner und ihre kunst* (Berlin: D. Reimer, 1925–28); see also Gell, *Art and agency*; and Eric Kjellgren with Carol S. Ivory, *Adorning the world: art of the Marquesas Islands* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2005).

25 Jo Anne van Tilburg, *Remote possibilities: Hoa Hakananai'a and HMS Topaze on Rapa Nui* (London: British Museum, 2006).

26 This discussion draws also on Thomas et. al. (eds.), *Artefacts of encounter*.

27 Rosanna Raymond and Amiria Salmond (eds.), *Pasifika styles: artists inside the museum* (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2008). Note that the project preceded my own appointment as director of MAA.

28 Carol Ann Duffy (curator), *Ten: ten poems by ten poets at ten University of Cambridge museums and collections* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Museums, 2013).

29 Brian Boucher, 'Anish Kapoor dances Gangnam style for liberty', *Art in America*, 21 November 2012.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This essay draws on many dialogues with colleagues and friends, but most particularly on the work of two research groups supported by grants from the Economic and Social Research Council ('Artefacts of encounter', 2010–13) and the European Research Council ('Pacific Presences: Oceanic art and European museums', 2013–18), especially Julie Adams, Mark Adams, Lucie Carreau, Alison Clark, Alana Jelinek, Maia Nuku and Amiria Salmond. Warmest thanks also to Professor Geoffrey Batchen, for the invitation to present the 2014 Gordon H. Brown lecture.

Victoria
University of
Wellington

GORDON
H. BROWN
LECTURE

13
2015

A Critique of the Natural Artefact, by Nicholas Thomas, addresses a key vehicle for the practice of art history: the museum. Thomas argues that a museum is a far more complex entity than a mere collectivity of objects. Looking in particular at museums devoted to artefacts gathered from the Pacific, he proposes that we need to appreciate them as 'systems', as living assemblies of relationships rather than as static depositories. And we need to move beyond an unhelpful field of understandings that includes what he calls a 'naturalism of the collection'. His essay offers some vivid examples of other ways of thinking about collections and the way they might be engaged in a museum setting.

A renowned scholar of Pacific art, Dr Nicholas Thomas is Director of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at Cambridge University in the United Kingdom.