DIGITAL ACCESS TO SCHOLARSHIP AT HARVARD
DASH.HARVARD.EDU

HARVARD LIBRARY

# Encountering Pacific Art

## Citation
Gaskell, Ivan. 2009. Encountering Pacific art. Journal of Museum Ethnography 21:202-210.

## Published version
http://www.jstor.org/stable/41505551

## Link
http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:10886826

## Terms of use
This article was downloaded from Harvard University's DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material (LAA), as set forth at
https://harvardwiki.atlassian.net/wiki/external/NGY5NDE4ZjgzNTc5NDQzMGIzZWZhMGFlOWI2M2EwYTg

## Accessibility
https://accessibility.huit.harvard.edu/digital-accessibility-policy

## Share Your Story
The Harvard community has made this article openly available.
Please share how this access benefits you. Submit a story

*Journal of Museum Ethnography* 21, 2009: 202-210

# ENCOUNTERING PACIFIC ART

Ivan Gaskell

In 2003-4, the Musée d'Orsay, Paris, and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston mounted an exhibition, *Gauguin Tahiti*, examining the French artist's career in Tahiti and the Marquesas between 1891 and his death in 1903. The organizers, George Shackelford and Claire Frèches-Thory, assembled paintings, drawings, prints, sculptures, and ceramics by Paul Gauguin around his celebrated monumental painting, *Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?* of 1897-98 (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston). A striking feature of the exhibition was the inclusion of a number of Tahitian, Marquesan, and other Polynesian objects. These were meant to lend context to Gauguin's works, and to exemplify the indigenous artefacts to which he was in part responding in his own. Yet these Polynesian objects turned out to have the disturbing capacity to command attention in their own right, even when pressed into the service of a purely Western art history concerned with Gauguin's artistic progress from Impressionism through Post-Impressionism to the beginnings of Modernism. They overshadowed Gauguin's own efforts at anything other than painting, drawing, and printmaking. A Maori carved wood canoe stern (Musée national de la Marine, Paris) clearly had a far more compelling aesthetic presence than anything that Gauguin himself fashioned in this medium. At the time I tried to imagine what the exhibition might look like were all the Gauguins to be removed, leaving only the Polynesian pieces presented as artworks. In the event, I had to wait just two years to see something of this kind, though on a far grander scale: Steven Hooper's *Pacific Encounters: Art and Divinity in Polynesia 1760-1860* at the Sainsbury Centre for the Visual Arts, University of East Anglia, Norwich, England (May-August, 2006).

*Pacific Encounters* comprised works acquired by Westerners between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries from throughout the vast swathe of the Polynesian Pacific, from Aotearoa (New Zealand) in the southwest, to the Hawaiian Islands in the north, to Rapa Nui (Easter Island) in the southeast. Hooper and his colleagues presented these objects not as anthropological specimens, as is so often the case in Western institutions, but uncompromisingly as artworks, an intention clearly signaled in the title of the exhibition itself. Further, Hooper and his colleagues presented these artworks without subordinating them to a Western art-historical narrative. In the process the exhibition raised a number of fundamental puzzles concerning artefacts and their uses.

Human beings' relationships with the things they make and use—artefacts—and the relationships among one another mediated by those things, are immensely varied, complex, and confusing.[1] *Pacific Encounters*, no less than *Gauguin Tahiti*, prompts us to ask to what legitimate uses people from hegemonic societies—Westerners (and some others)—can put things created and first used by people from subaltern societies.[2]

When an object moves from one society to another, one or more of three attitudes is in play: (1) the new users employ and interpret it solely on their own terms without

regard to the uses and interpretations of its earlier users, either oblivious to those earlier uses, or purposefully to expunge them; (2) the new users discern familiar characteristics that they value, and that they assume earlier users also discerned and valued; (3) the new users attempt to learn the terms of use, interpretation and value of the earlier users by means of cultural acquisition and translation, acknowledging that these may differ from their own wholly or in part, but in the belief that their acquisition will bring them advantages. I shall term these three attitudes respectively *supersession*, *assumption*, and *translation*. Translation is especially complex, because in some instances new users wish to understand an object purely intellectually, and in others with emotional engagement. All three attitudes are legitimate, but this does not exempt their application from ethical scrutiny in individual cases, nor from acknowledgment of their shortcomings. Ethically flawed practices include depriving or withholding from subalterns artefacts that are properly their own, mistreating or unwarrantably exposing artefacts that have sacred significance, and using artefacts to promote or uncritically perpetuate asymmetrical power relationships. Furthermore, the application of each of these attitudes varies depending on the terms in which an object is considered. Westerners are more likely to accept subaltern aesthetic terms than they are to accept subaltern magical or religious terms within their own belief systems. Therefore translation by Westerners in the case of the magical, sacred and divine (henceforth sacred) is likely to be more reserved and cautious than in cases of aesthetic values. Further, there is likely to be greater scope for assumption—recognizing or ascribing characteristics ostensibly valued in common—in aesthetic than in sacred terms.

In their examinations of artefacts in both aesthetic and the sacred terms, Western scholars generally favour translation. They expect that through translation they can retrieve the original, hence ostensibly paramount, meaning of an object, thereby enhancing intellectual and aesthetic understanding. This is often a worthy aim, but, even if this were possible—if translation were not itself a species of new use—translation ignores both vital characteristics of objects and enduring human practice acknowledged by supersession and assumption. Supersession and assumption recognize that artefacts perdure and are physically and cognitively adaptable, and that human beings put artefacts to various uses over time. Furthermore, translation is as open to abuse as are supersession and assumption. Western (and some other) anthropologists have persistently used translation to promote colonialism and other forms of asymmetrical power relationship between hegemonic and subaltern peoples. Some of the drawbacks of supersession and assumption are more readily recognizable. Supersession—the uncompromising cognitive adaptation of an artefact regardless of its earlier use—can unjustly promote the suppression of cultural identity. Assumption can bolster hegemonism by fostering panculturalism, a belief that works from all cultures exhibit common aesthetic characteristics. The error of panculturalism is not that societies can produce, recognize, and value identical aesthetic characteristics, but that such common characteristics count for more than those that might be peculiar to a given society. Each attitude, therefore, has its drawbacks as well as its advantages.

Given that any exhibition is affected by the character of the institution in which it is held, we might ask how these three attitudes affect the presentation of the permanent collection of the Sainsbury Centre, and whether *Pacific Encounters* differed in any respect from the institutional norm represented by that permanent collection installation.

The Sainsbury Centre has a particularly conspicuous character, owing to being within a university, and to the nature of its permanent collection. That collection is based on the private collection of Sir Robert and Lady Sainsbury, which was begun in the 1930s. It comprises artefacts from a considerable number of societies throughout the world, and from many time periods encompassing European classical antiquity to the late twentieth century. Many of these objects have moved from one society to another, sometimes more than once. Beside the bronze portrait heads of the benefactors by Jacob Epstein that serve as surrogate hosts, an introductory text panel at the entrance to the principal exhibition area states,

> The Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection of world art is on permanent display in the Living Area. It was Sir Robert's intention that visitors should enjoy the objects very much as he and Lady Sainsbury had done in their own home. There are no lengthy text panels or extended labels, neither is there a "right" way of approaching the collection. Instead, you are invited to explore the Living Area guided by your own eye, your curiosity and the power of the objects themselves.

It would be a mistake to take this as an invitation to do no more than to acquiesce in homey dilettantism. There is a serious purpose in prompting visitors to guide themselves while trusting to their own powers of observation and curiosity, rather than relying on textual information and juxtapositions among artworks conforming to familiar art-historical patterns. In terms of the three attitudes defined above—supersession, assumption, and translation—the presentation of the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection is dominated by assumption with an admixture of supersession, with little room for translation. Further, these are confined to the aesthetic sphere. The cultural standard that allows the ideal visitor most successfully to "explore the Living Area guided by your own eye, your curiosity and the power of the objects themselves" is European Modernism.[3] As another text panel states, "Here, as nowhere else in Britain, you can see works by 20$^{th}$-century European artists together with those objects, from other times and cultures, which so inspired them."

The first objects one encounters on entering the Living Area are two wood sculptures: to the right, a male figure called a "fisherman's god" from Rarotonga in the Cook Islands, and to the left, a reliquary head from the Fang people of Gabon. On the wall, beside the reliquary head, is a drawing made in about 1913 by Amadeo Modigliani, *Caryatid*. Near the Rarotongan figure hangs an oil on canvas *Sketch for a Portrait of Lisa* (1955) by Francis Bacon. The focal point ahead is Alberto Giacometti's bronze *Standing Woman* (1958-59). The European artefacts are not explicitly accorded greater prominence than those from other societies. The labels are even-handed. All the artefacts are presented as artworks, regardless of place or time of origin. None the less, however arresting individual non-European artefacts may be, the effect is to subordinate the non-European to the European artefacts. There would seem to be two reasons. Because the makers of the European artefacts were inspired by non-European artefacts, the success of the former confers status on the latter. The non-European artefacts inevitably play a subordinate, supporting role, however sincerely those European makers admired the non-European sources of their inspiration, and however respectfully the non-European works are installed. Second, and more insidiously, the invitation to discern aesthetic characteristics

in non-European artefacts that European makers adopted discourages translation—attempts to discern aesthetic characteristics as understood and valued by the makers and initial users of the objects concerned. The presentation of the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection gives viewers little incentive to acknowledge that non-Europeans have their own distinctive aesthetic systems, let alone to learn what those might be, and how they might relate to the objects from such societies on display. The installation can therefore be described as characteristic of assumption slanting towards supersession. All the works, whenever and by whomsoever they were made, are subordinated to European values—exclusively aesthetic values—so as to become, in effect, both European and entirely secular.

*Pacific Encounters*, which might have been overwhelmed by its proximity to the Living Area, succeeded in resisting it—at least in the aesthetic realm—while still presenting all of its more than 250 artefacts uncompromisingly as artworks. *Pacific Encounters* functioned in terms of assumption—inviting attention to aesthetic characteristics also found in European artworks accessible to Western viewers without special knowledge—slanted towards translation, for the labels and the catalogue acknowledged and explained aspects of the cultural peculiarity of the artworks and their aesthetic, and, in some instances, their sacred characteristics (Hooper 2006). The most important factor of all was that very few European objects were exhibited in *Pacific Encounters*. In consequence, even in the Western setting of the Sainsbury Centre, what appeared peculiarly Polynesian, as well as what might be common to Polynesian and European artefacts as artworks, could clearly emerge. For example, a "fisherman's god" markedly similar to the Rarotongan figure displayed with Francis Bacon's *Sketch for a Portrait of Lisa* in the Living Area, was shown in *Pacific Encounters* with other Rarotongan standing figures, staff gods, and a sheet of barkcloth. The opportunity to compare these works brought out the characteristics that they share, and that a viewer might assume to be distinctively Rarotongan. The consequences were quite different from the display of the similar figure beside the Bacon in the Living Area. The latter is a perfectly legitimate juxtaposition, but exemplifies assumption slanting towards supersession, rather than assumption slanting towards translation seen in the *Pacific Encounters* grouping. Similarly, a Maori wood canoe prow (British Museum) resembles the canoe stern included in *Gauguin Tahiti*. Yet in *Pacific Encounters*, instead of being subordinated to the art of Gauguin (or another Westerner), this equally intricately fretted and carved piece was shown with other Maori wood carvings, bringing out their peculiar yet shared aesthetic characteristics. *Pacific Encounters* prompted the viewer to concentrate on the specific aesthetic characteristics of the Polynesian artworks, in particular on the intellectual ingenuity and manual skill involved in their fabrication. The positive aspect of assumption—what Europeans might appreciate about Polynesian art without special knowledge—was fully in play.

If the aesthetic field was well served by *Pacific Encounters*, what of the sacred? The treatment of sacred artefacts is particularly vexed. Steven Hooper and his colleagues specifically invited consideration of this issue in *Pacific Encounters* by choosing the subtitle *Art and Divinity in Polynesia 1760-1860*. Text panels in the exhibition discreetly pointed out the sacred status of certain items, and at least one artist participating in the Polynesian artists' residency programme associated with the exhibition raised the issue. The puzzle of the treatment of the sacred is exemplified by the well-known standing

casket figure associated with the deity A'a from Rurutu in the Austral Islands, which has been in the British Museum since 1890, and which was included in the exhibition. The *Pacific Encounters* catalogue states that Rurutuans converted to Christianity following a visit in 1821 by some of their number to Ra'iatea in the Society Islands where the London Missionary Society, one of the principal agencies of Christian evangelization in Polynesia, had established a mission. A group of Rurutuan converts returned to Ra'iatea in August of that year, and presented the figure to the Rev. John Williams. It became the "prize trophy of the London Missionary Society," which by 1826 had established its own museum in London. In 1890, the figure was lent by the Society to the British Museum, which purchased it in 1911. In *Pacific Encounters*, a text panel beside this figure enjoined visitors to "enter respectfully the exhibition space, which contains things of great historical and religious importance for contemporary Polynesians." During his residency, the Maori artist George Nuku made a work inspired by A'a, titled *Niu Atua* ("new god"), which was displayed in the resource room. Yet in the catalogue, although he described the change in use of this figure by those Rurutuans who took it to the mission, and by the missionaries themselves, Hooper did not comment on any sacred status it might currently have.[4] After *Pacific Encounters* closed in August, 2006, the many things that had been borrowed from the British Museum were shown there in a differently conceived exhibition, *Power and Taboo: Sacred Objects from the Pacific* (September, 2006-January, 2007). The label accompanying the Rurutuan figure on that occasion stated,

> *A'a* is one of the most famous objects in the British Museum's collections, celebrated by Pacific islanders and Europeans alike. It has influenced both sculptors and poets. The figure continues to be considered important in Rurutu today. Several Rurutuans have visited the Museum to pay homage to *A'a* in recent years.

What are we to understand from this equivocal statement? The term "homage" hardly discloses the character of the attention paid to it by recent Rurutuan visitors, yet it obliquely implies the possibility of a revived sacred status. To suggest that people might hold apparently contradictory beliefs simultaneously—that some Polynesians might be both Christian and traditionalist—requires tact of the kind attempted in a text panel in the same exhibition:

> *Becoming Christians*… Today, many Polynesians are committed Christians. Despite conversion, many aspects of Polynesian cosmology have been sustained through the last two centuries. In Hawai'i and Aotearoa (New Zealand) especially, people are identifying more closely with the traditional rituals and practices that have been passed down to them.

Whereas Rurutu is one of the 130 islands that constitute French Polynesia, Hawaii is a state of the USA. Unlike Rurutuans, Native Hawaiians have benefited from powerful federal legislation designed to protect the traditional religious beliefs and practices of indigenous peoples. These are the American Indian Religious Freedom Act of 1978 (AIRFA), and the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act of 1990 (NAGPRA). Numerous artefacts from American museum collections have been claimed by and returned to federally recognized Indian nations and Native Hawaiian

organizations. In addition, the Association of Art Museum Directors posted the *Report of the AAMD Subcommittee on the Stewardship of Sacred Objects* on its website in August, 2006, which describes museums' obligations to indigenous sacred objects, including their ritual servicing.[5] Museums generally do not disclose details of such practices, but speculation in the press has focused on the spectacular Hawaiian *heiau* (temple) figure of Kuka'ilimoku in the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts (Eakins 2006). The museum has acknowledged that "groups have made planned offerings at PEM."[6] Only two other similar figures are known to survive, one of which (in the British Museum since 1839) was included in *Pacific Encounters*.[7] As in the case of the figure of A'a, the exhibition catalogue gives no hint of any sacred associations that the figure of Kuka'ilimoku might currently have. If such things exist in an acknowledged ambiguous state in American museums—no longer either simply anthropological specimens or artworks, but also sacred objects—in Britain, where no legislation comparable to NAGPRA exists, equivocation appears to be more pronounced.

Of the two terms—art and divinity—encompassing the objects in *Pacific Encounters*, the use of art was clearly vindicated by a presentation that encouraged viewers to attend to readily discernable aesthetic characteristics (assumption) in conjunction with invitations to consider aspects of their cultural specificity with which most viewers would not previously have been familiar (translation). The sacred or divine status of various objects, on the other hand, was the subject of honest equivocation, perhaps in the face of ambivalence on the part of many Polynesians, the consequence of widespread and often long-established Christianization. Supersession prevailed. The issues for British collecting institutions regarding the care of sacred objects differ from those that predominate in the USA. In both instances, though, there is no substitute for establishing and sustaining long-term, good faith relationships of mutual trust with the descendents of those who made and first used the artefacts, and who retain an interest in them, however difficult to understand that interest may be for Westerners. Steven Hooper and his colleagues could not work in the way they do without a commitment to such relationships. *Pacific Encounters*, by demonstrating the aesthetic vigour and approachability of a wide range of Polynesian artworks, independent of European emulations, contributed significantly—even magnificently—to fostering intercultural understanding.

*Acknowledgments*

I should like to thank Steven Hooper and Karen Jacobs for the opportunity to reflect on *Pacific Encounters*, Nicola Johnson for discussing the Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection with me during my two visits to the University of East Anglia, and John Onians for the invitation to participate in the conference *World Art: Ways Forward* at the Sainsbury Centre in September, 2007.

*Notes*

[1] I use the term *artefact* in a non-evaluative sense to refer to any human-made tangible object. I acknowledge that certain objects can be conceived as being imbued with personhood or the capacity for agency. I repeat this definition and observation from my article (2007: 97 n.1).

[2] By *hegemonism* and *hegemonic* I refer to the values of predominantly Western societies that sustain their dominance by placing other societies at a disadvantage. By *subaltern* I refer to groups at a disadvantage to hegemonic societies, including many indigenous peoples. For further discussion of this choice of terms, see Eaton and Gaskell (forthcoming).

[3] I use the term European in the broadest sense, that is, to refer to things and people of European origin or descent wherever they may be or have been in the world.

[4] Hooper (2006: 65-66, 192-193, 194-195, cat. 156); for the London Missionary Society in the Society and Austral Islands, and its museum in London, see Nicholas Thomas (1991: 153-155).

[5] See http://www.aamd.org/papers/documents/SacredObjectsReleaseandGuidelinesCombined8.9.06-dated.pdf.

[6] See Edgers (2006) in *Boston Globe*, quoting a museum spokesperson.

[7] See Hooper (2006: 58, 95) and cat. 20 *Large standing male figure*.

*References*

Eakins, Hugh 2006. 'Museums Establish Guidelines for Treatment of Sacred Objects', *New York Times*, August 10, 2006.

Eaton, A.W., and Ivan Gaskell [forthcoming]. 'Do Subaltern Artifacts Belong in Art Museums?', in eds. Conrad Brunk and James O. Young, *The Ethics of Cultural Appropriation*. Oxford and Malden, MA: Blackwell.

Edgers, Geoff 2006. 'Ritual Offerings, Peabody Essex Museum', *Boston Globe*, August 10, 2006.

Gaskell, Ivan 2007. 'Rembrandt's Genius, Wittgenstein's Warning', *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 52, 2007, pp. 97-106.

Hooper, Steven 2006. *Pacific Encounters: Art and Divinity in Polynesia 1760-1860*. London: The British Museum Press.

Thomas, Nicholas 1991. *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

*About the author*

Ivan Gaskell is Margaret S. Winthrop Curator at the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, where his faculty appointment is in the History Department. Among his publications are *Vermeer's Wager: Speculations on Art History, Theory, and Art Museums* (2000), and six books edited with the late Salim Kemal in the Cambridge University Press series of which they were joint general editors, *Cambridge Studies in Philosophy and the Arts*, beginning with *The Language of Art History* (1991), and concluding with *Politics and Aesthetics in the Arts* (2000).

*Address for correspondence*

Ivan Gaskell, Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, 32 Quincy Street, Cambridge, MA 02138. Ivan_Gaskell@harvard.edu.
From January 1, 2012: Bard Graduate Center, 38 West 86th Street, New York, NY 10024. gaskell@bgc.bard.edu.