Pitt Rivers
MUSEUM
Anthropology and World Archaeology

Discover...

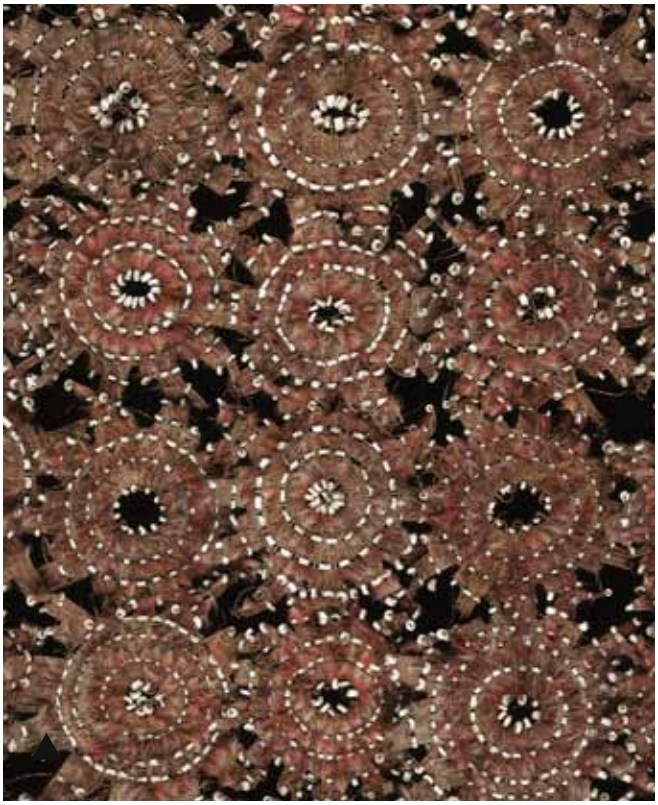
THE COOK COLLECTION

Introduction

The Pitt Rivers Museum was founded in 1884 when General Pitt Rivers gave a collection of more than 18,000 ethnographic and archaeological artefacts to the University of Oxford. Two years later the University's Ashmolean Museum transferred to the Pitt Rivers many of the objects in its collections that had come from Africa, the Americas and the Pacific. Among these were some 150 objects that had been collected in the South Pacific by Johann Reinhold Forster and his son George during Captain James Cook's second great voyage of discovery in 1772-75. The main purpose of the second voyage was to search for a southern continent but Cook was also required by the British Admiralty to make scientific observations and bring back collections from the islands he visited. To this end, the Forsters were employed as official scientists to the expedition.

The Forsters were Germans of Scottish descent. At the time of the voyage, the elder Forster had recently been elected a Fellow of the Royal Society and was well known in scientific circles as a natural historian. George was only 17 years old, but he was not just his father's assistant on the voyage, for he was himself a linguist, scientist and illustrator.

It seems that much, if not all, of the collection was obtained by the Forsters personally, for there are references to particular objects in their accounts of the voyage. For example, George writes of the Tongan apron: 'We likewise purchased of them an apron, consisting of many wheels or stars of



▲ **Detail of Tongan apron; 1886.1.1332**

plaited coco-nut fibres, about three or four inches in diameter, cohering together by the projecting points, and ornamented with small red feathers and beads cut out of shells.'

Such aprons (sisi fale in Tongan) were worn only by high-ranking chiefs as ceremonial dress or for dancing.

The Pacific Islands and Cook

Cook was not the first European to lead 'voyages of discovery' in the Pacific, but his were the most important in opening the area to European contact. It is clear now that this contact was of mixed benefit to the peoples of the Pacific Islands and their environment. Many indigenous populations were decimated by introduced diseases, and for most of them European 'discovery' was followed by a long colonial history. From the perspective of an anthropological museum, however, an important outcome of the voyages was the influx of objects into public collections in Europe. Cook and his colleagues also collected more detailed and accurate information than their predecessors had. Moreover, the questions they asked about the peoples of the Pacific and their history have proved to be those that are still being debated by researchers today.

▲ **Breast ornament from the Marquesas Islands; 1886.1.1269**

▲ **Wooden figures (ti'i) from Tahiti; 1886.1.1424, 1886.1.1423**

While important information was obtained by the Forsters and others, the methods for collecting reliable ethnographic data were not developed until some 150 years after the cultures of the Pacific had been changed irrevocably. Thus, although we now have a good idea of the material culture of the Pacific Islands at the time of European contact, our knowledge of the cultural context in which it was created and used is limited.

For example, little is known about the wooden breast ornament covered in seeds from the Marquesas Islands (see figure above). It was probably owned by a high-ranking person - that is, a chief or priest - and its form and colour were probably symbolically significant, though of what we do not know.

The Forsters collected in Rapa Nui (Easter Island), Vanuatu (New Hebrides), New Caledonia and Tierra del Fuego. Most of the objects in the collection, however, come from the Marquesas Islands, Tonga and, especially, Tahiti and New Zealand.

Tahiti

The arts of 18th-century Tahiti are represented in the Museum's collection by barkcloths, musical instruments, tools, weapons and utensils. Many of the objects are of fine workmanship, but from a Western perspective perhaps the easiest to appreciate are the two wooden figures illustrated above. Such images in human form were known as ti'i. These were probably made to be mounted (like figureheads) on the bow or stern of a canoe. The most spectacular item in the collection is the mourning dress (1886.1.1637; illustrated right). Such costumes were worn by the chief mourner at the funerary rituals held for very high-ranking men and women. After the body had been exposed on a bier for some time, his or her bones were removed for burial or to be preserved as relics. At the time of the ceremony the official mourner paraded through the district carrying a weapon edged with shark teeth, which he used against anyone who got in his way.

Our understanding of this ritual, and of the costume itself, is limited. It seems that the mask and breastplate were considered the most sacred part of the costume. This has lead to the suggestion that together they may represent a version of the 'ship of the dead' motif found in the arts of parts of Southeast Asia, from where the ancestors of the Tahitians originally came. This motif depicts the soul of the deceased sailing to the spirit world. Here the curved breastplate may represent the ship, while the vertical shell mask may represent an abstract human figure surrounded by a 'halo'. Whatever the validity of this suggestion, the dress clearly

incorporates many valuable materials. For example, the type of large pearl shells that form the mask and decorate the breastplate were exchanged as gifts between high-ranking people, and were also valued as trade-goods. The use of turtle-shell plaques may reflect in some way the value of the turtle itself, which was eaten only by high-ranking members of the society and was considered an offering suitable for the gods. The dress also includes a chest apron of tiny slips of mother-of-pearl, feather tassels and a feathered cloak, a barkcloth apron with coconut-shell disks, and three other pieces of barkcloth.

Maori (New Zealand)

The Maori are renowned for the richness and elaboration of their visual arts, particularly in wood and fibre. One of the main fibres used was New Zealand flax (Phormium tenax). There are a number of skirts made of this material in the Court of the Museum, including one collected by the Forsters, and there are folded cloaks of the same material in the Cook display.

Maori woodcarving skills were applied to a range of objects, from house boards to canoes. They were also applied to such smaller items as weapons and tools. Like other treasured objects, or taonga, weapons were precious heirlooms and highly sacred, or tapu. The heavy wooden club, or wahaika, (illustrated above) was probably such an heirloom. As such, it would have been passed down the generations along with its personal name. It is adorned with a three-dimensional representation of an ancestor. The knife, or mira tuatini, (also shown below) is designed for cutting meat but was probably used for ceremonial purposes by a person of high status. It is set with shark-teeth bound with gum and fibre, the eyes are inlaid with iridescent haliotis shell and it bears the traces of having been painted with red ochre.

Maori hand club (wahaika) and knife (mira tuatini) from New Zealand; 1886.1.1151, 1886.1.1161 ▶

One of the best-known types of Maori object is the pendant or hei tiki (illustrated right). These stylized human figures are carved of New Zealand nephrite and were hung from the neck on fibre strings. The eyes of the figure are inlaid with haliotis shell. It is uncertain what hei tiki represent. They have been said to represent the first man, a human embryo, or Hine-te-Iwaiwa (the Maori birthing goddess) in the birthing position. Among the Maori, stories are told of previously barren women who conceived after being given hei tiki by their husbands or other relatives, so it seems that there may well have been a strong association between hei tiki and fertility.

In 1970 the objects that comprise the Museum's 'Cook Collection' were brought together in a single display for the first time. Later, this Special Exhibition became one of the Museum's permanent displays. A small booklet was produced to accompany the Special Exhibition (see Further Reading), but this is no longer available. In 1996 work was begun on producing a definitive illustrated catalogue of the 'Cook Collection'.

▲ **Maori pendant (hei tiki) from New Zealand; 1886.1.1167**

Further Information

Since this guide was written further research has taken place into these collections. Additional digital information can be found at this virtual collection page: http://projects.prm.ox.ac.uk/forster/home.html

New conservation research along with access to a blog charting the progress of the project: http://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/conservation.html

Further Reading

Johann Reinhold Forster, *Observations Made during a Voyage round the World,* Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press (1996; first published 1778).

George Forster, *Voyage round the World in His Britannic Majesty's Sloop Resolution*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press (1998; first published 1777).

Peter Gathercole, *'From the Islands of the South Seas 1773-4: An Exhibition of a Collection Made on Capn Cook's Second Voyage of Discovery by J. R. Forster - A Short Guide'*, Oxford: Pitt Rivers Museum (no date [1970]).

Peter Gathercole, Adrienne L. Kaeppler and Douglas Newton, *The Art of the Pacific Islands*, Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art (1979).

Adrienne L. Kaeppler, *'Artifical Curiosities': An Exposition of Native Manufactures Collected on the Three Pacific Voyages of Captain James Cook, R.N.*, Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press (1978).

D. C. Starzecka (ed.), *Maori Art and Culture*, London: British Museum Press (1996).

Nicholas Thomas, *Oceanic Art*, London: Thames and Hudson (1995).

The objects featured in this Introductory guide can be found at the following locations:

Lower Gallery (first floor)

Case no. 27A - The Cook Collection

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