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VOICES OF THE PACIFIC

INNOVATION AND TRADITION

EXHIBITION

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GALICIA CALIDADE

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The British Museum

Fundación "la Caixa"

Ango. Maqueta de *tomoko* (canoa bélica). Rovianna, Illas Salomón, 1900–1920. Madeira e cuncha. Oc1921, 1102.1. © The Trustees of the British Museum

VOICES OF THE PACIFIC

INNOVATION AND TRADITION

For millennia, people have explored the waters of the Pacific Ocean (known in the region as Oceania). Making homes in this sea of islands, Pacific Islanders were resourceful, resilient and highly skilled.

Islanders invest creative energy in a wealth of objects: from fans to fishhooks, from clubs to canoes, almost everything is beautifully made and invested with spiritual significance. In Oceania, art is integral to every aspect of life.

This exhibition focuses on the people of the Pacific Islands, celebrating their artistic genius. The displays showcase the British Museum's rich collections from the region, including contemporary artworks that reflect life in Oceania in the 21st century.

OCEANÍA

The Pacific Ocean is vast, covering almost one-third of the Earth's surface. From New Guinea and Palau in the west to Rapa Nui (Easter Island) in the east, and from Hawaii in the north to Aotearoa (New Zealand) in the south, Oceania is environmentally diverse. The region encompasses rainforests and kelp forests, mangrove swamps and coral reefs, snow-capped mountains and turquoise lagoons.

Alongside great diversity, there is also unity. Oceania has close to 1,800 different cultures and language groups, most of whom share common ancestries.

The first settlers arrived in the western Pacific around 60,000 years ago. Later settlers arrived by sailing canoe, with voyaging skills that enabled them to journey thousands of miles across the ocean, carrying with them what they needed to begin new lives and to flourish.

FACE TO FACE

Pacific Islanders have created some of the world's most striking art works in stone, wood, ivory, shell and cloth.

Contemporary Pacific artists connect to the work of their ancestors, sustaining and reviving traditional forms such as weaving and tattooing. Some use their art to draw attention to the challenges the region is facing from climate change. Although many Islanders now live in cities such as Auckland, or further afield in Los Angeles, most maintain strong connections back to their islands.

The arts of Oceania have been admired by Europeans since Spanish and Portuguese voyagers first crossed the northern Pacific Ocean in the 1500s. Encounters with Europeans brought increasingly significant changes to Islander ways of life.

This section introduces works from different islands across Oceania, showcasing the region's diverse creativity

INNOVATORS

WEAVERS

DANCERS

WARRIORS

CARVERS

VOYAGERS

INNOVATORS

Oceania has been described as a sea of islands, a dynamic space where people have always been on the move. In the past, contact between islands was frequent as people travelled to build networks of relationships and to source valuables and resources. Interaction inspired artists to experiment with new materials and techniques.

With the arrival of Europeans in the 1500s, Islanders incorporated exotic materials such as glass, wool and metal into traditional objects. From the early 1800s, European voyages of exploration to the Pacific were gradually replaced by whaling ships and vessels carrying missionaries and colonial officials. Access to new ideas, such as Christianity, transformed lives across the region.

INDIGENOUS INNOVATION

As Islanders explored and settled the Pacific, they encountered new environments that required them to adapt their artistic practices. Despite innovations in materials and art forms, core cultural beliefs and values were sustained across vast distances.

The honoring of ancestors and the wearing of prestigious garments by elite members of society are two examples of practices found across Oceania. While the materials and forms used in the production of these garments varied from place to place, their cultural significance was the same.

EMBRACING THE NEW

Following contact with Europeans, Islanders were quick to embrace exotic materials and incorporate them into existing objects, blending the unfamiliar with the traditional.

Today this tradition of innovation continues and contemporary Pacific artists work with new materials and techniques, while referencing objects from the past. Others are embracing new modes of making art and participating in the contemporary art world. Their works are exhibited all over the world, from the Venice Biennale to the New York gallery scene.

THE BRITISH MUSEUM AS INSPIRATION

The British Museum's Oceania collections are a source of inspiration for contemporary artists. Some investigate objects made by previous generations to better understand lost techniques. Others make new pieces that directly respond to specific historic artefacts. Artists sometimes work within the galleries or storage facilities, turning the Museum itself into a site of innovation.

Curators continue to commission and acquire new artworks, adding to the collection to ensure it stays relevant and can inspire artists in the future.

WEAVERS

Across Oceania, textiles are high- status objects presented to mark significant moments in life, such as births, deaths and marriages. The most valuable become heirlooms that are handed down through generations. Traditionally, it was women who were responsible for making textiles and also for teaching the girls of the family the arts of weaving and plaiting. Passing on those skills was a way of ensuring textiles could be made by the next generation.

As European clothing and fabrics were introduced to the region, the role of indigenous textiles declined. However, in many islands weaving traditions have been revived. Today, hats, fans, baskets and mats are popular tourist items and weaving allows some women to generate an income to support themselves and their family.

MATERIALS AND TECHNIQUES

Oceanic textiles are made from fibres such us pandanus, hibiscus, coconut or flax. In the past, women would have spent a large part of each day on fibre work: harvesting leaves and stripping, softening and pounding them in readiness for weaving, all of which took time and effort.

A great range of techniques exist, including finger and loom weaving, plaiting, looping and beating barkcloth.

CHANGING FASHIONS

Fashion is an important aspect of textile making, and the creation of new styles and designs is a feature of Pacific Island weaving. Freed from traditional pressures to reproduce certain styles, textile makers today are constantly innovating and incorporating new materials and techniques into their art.

Women create items specifically to gift to friends and family who are determined to keep up with thelatest trend. In some islands, tourism has transformed the opportunities available and some weavers are able to make a living from their work.

DANCERS

Dance is the most celebrated Pacific Island art form. The graceful Hawaiian hula, the vigorous *'ori Tahiti* or the rhythmic Fijian meke are appreciated around the world and taught in dance schools in London, New York and Tokyo. Islanders living in the diaspora use dance as a means of connecting with a 'traditional' island culture that they are geographically separated from.

Annual competitions, such as the Merrie Monarch Festival in Hawaii, attract thousands of dancers and huge audiences. For some young Islanders, hip-hop has become a new mode of expressing a connection to their traditional culture.

SOUND AND VISION

Across Oceania, a dancer's appearance is important. The shine of coconut oil rubbed onto a dancer's skin adds to their beauty. The swish of a skirt emphasises hip movements. The plumes of a feather headdress exaggerate a dancer's grace.

Ornaments worn around the ankles rattle and create percussion. Drummers provide the beat so the dancers can keep time. In the Islands of western Oceania, drums are also thought of as the voices of spirits and supernatural beings.

WARRIORS

Across Oceania, Islanders fought frequent battles for control over land and resources. In parts of the region, such as New Guinea, fighting was conducted in set-piece battles where wrongs were redressed by causing injury or death to the opposing group. Disputes could last for years, with every attack resulting in the need for revenge.

During the period of colonisation, many Islanders resisted the seizing of land, and warriors, like Māori chief Hone Heke, became famous for their refusal to submit.

In the 20th century, the Pacific and its peoples became embroiled in global conflicts and the Second World War saw the region become a major combat zone. After the War, Great Britain, the United States and France tested nuclear weapons in the region, causing huge and lasting damage to people and the environment.

Today, Islanders are fighting challenges such as climate change, population growth, the continued impact of colonisation and the aftermath of nuclear testing.

DAZZLING THE ENEMY

Traditionally, Pacific Island warriors dressed to impress. Everything about their appearance was designed to dazzle and intimidate the enemy.

What warriors wore offered more than just physical protection. Garments made using materials that were considered sacred, or tattoos covering a warrior's body, offered spiritual protection.

Examples from Kiribati, Hawaii and the Marquesas Islands displayed here, showcase the extraordinary efforts that went into ensuring a warrior was protected in battle.

CLUBS

Clubs performed multiple roles in Oceania. They could be manipulated in dances, held as signs of status during speech-making and wielded throughout military parades. Clubs involved in famous exploits could have personal names and biographies.

In early encounters, Europeans frequently misunderstood clubs simply as weapons. This misconception helped reinforce the idea that Islanders were 'war-like'.

SHIELDS

A huge variety of clubs and shields are found across Oceania. As the beautiful examples shown here illustrate, clubs and shields are works of art and symbols of Islander skill and creativity.

Weapons were highly desirable to early European collectors, so many examples of clubs and shields survive in museums.

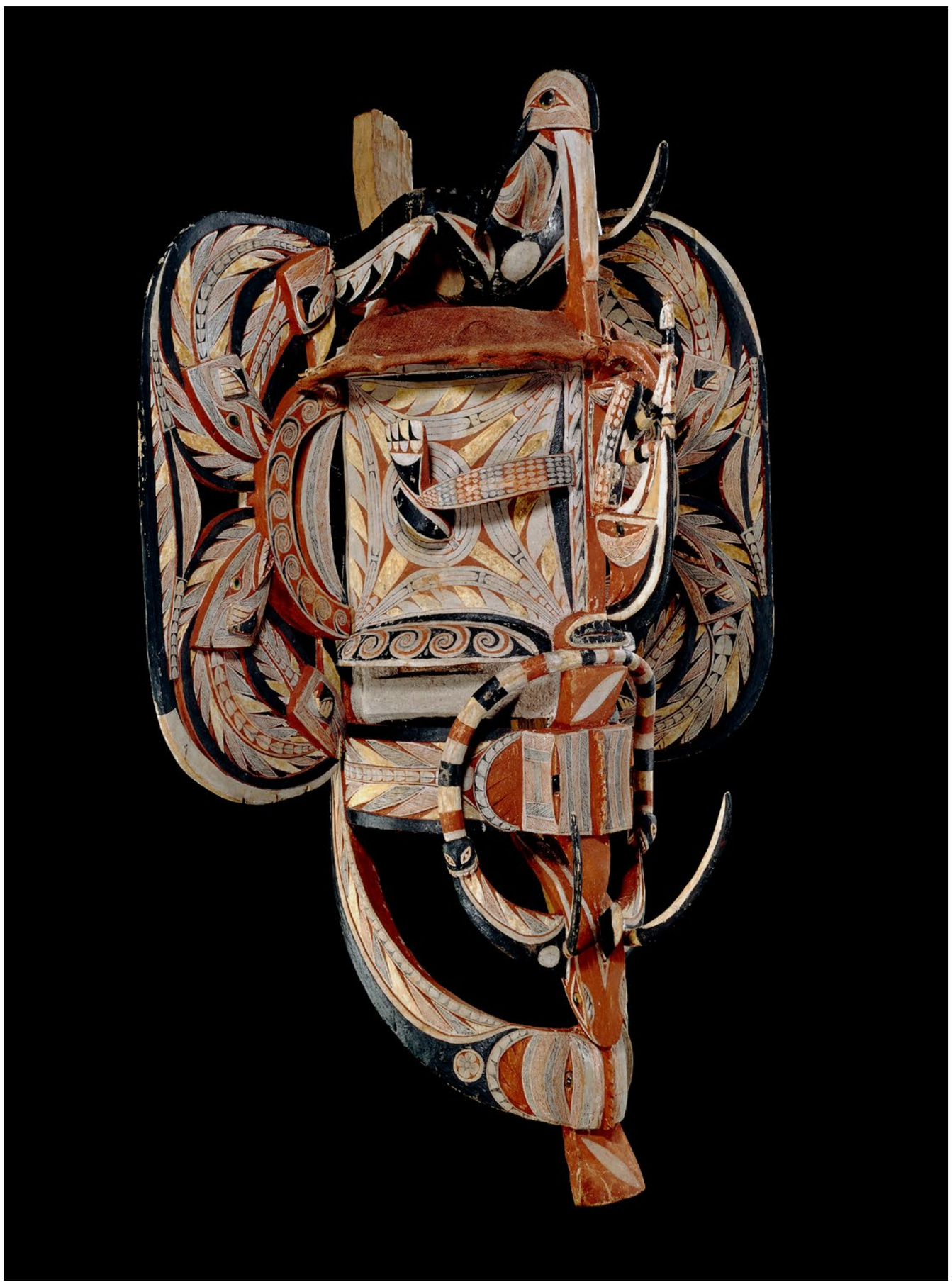
PRIDE AND RESISTANCE

European settler colonialism has affected the lives of nearly all Pacific Islanders. In some places, Islanders mounted fierce resistance to the seizure of their ancestral lands.

In the 20th century, Islanders supported the Allied forces and fought in both World Wars. Some formed special military units, such as the Māori battalion, which gained a formidable reputation.

Today, Islanders are at the forefront of battling global issues such as climate change. As an example, 350 Pacific is a youth-led network whose slogan is 'We are not drowning, we are fighting'.

CARVERS



Carvers play an important role in society, making items that are essential to daily life, as well as those used in rituals and ceremonies. In the past, men did the carving, and knowledge was passed down through the generations. Today, people of all genders create works that reflect their changing and complex worlds.

Traditional Pacific tattooing involves the use of sharp combs that are dipped in ink and tapped onto the body with a small mallet. Tattooing has been described as 'carving' on the skin because of this technique. Contemporary tattoo artists work with traditional and modern tools. The most talented artists are in demand and work internationally, tattooing a range of people including sports stars and celebrities.

SHAPING RELATIONSHIPS

Many carvings were made to honour the relationships between Islanders and their gods and ancestors. Offerings were made before starting work, and the success of a piece was considered as much about divine blessings as the skill of a carver.

In some islands, carvings of ancestors were treated as living beings. InNew Guinea, elaborate objects were created specifically for ceremonies, such as funerals. Once the carving's role in the ceremony had been fulfilled, it was no longer needed and was left to rot in the forest.

TOOLS AND MATERIALS

Pacific Island carvers built monumental architecture and ocean- going canoes, but they also produced works of great delicacy such as shell ornaments. Prior to the arrival of metal, Islanders relied on stone tools for large work and bone or shark's teeth for finer work.

In parts of the region, the expertise of a master carver was likened to that of a priest or ritual expert. Their work could only commence once appropriate ceremonies had been performed and offerings made to the gods.

FOOD AND FEASTING

In many islands, everyday meals are served on leaf platters that are quickly woven and used immediately. In some places, to cater for the vast numbers of people who assemble at weddings and funerals, carvers create large wooden feast bowls.

In parts of Oceania, people drink kava, an intoxicating substance made from the roots and stems of the shrub Piper methysticum. When kava is served at formal ceremonies, it is often presented in beautifully carved containers.

CARVING ON THE SKIN

Traditional tattooing methods in Oceania have been likened to carving because of the tools used. Combs, with serrated plates made from bone or turtle shell, are dipped in dye and then placed on the skin and struck rapidly and repeatedly with a long- handled mallet.

A European fascination with Islander tattooing began during first encounters. Sailors were so keen to be tattooed that Islanders boarded ships and worked day and night to keep up with demand.

VOYAGERS

Pacific Islanders are some of the most skilled voyagers to have travelled the world's oceans, exploring and settling an area more than one third of the Earth's surface. Islanders developed sophisticated voyaging technologies that drew on an in-depth knowledge of the environment. Navigators could read the seas and skies, by day and by night, tracing and retracing their way across the ocean.

The first Pacific settlement was on the island of New Guinea, when it was part of a larger continent known as Sahul. Voyagers reached Sahul over 60,000 years ago from islands to the west.

Aotearoa (New Zealand) was the last major land mass to be settled, around 800 years ago.

Long before Europeans arrived in the region, the people of Oceania were leading cosmopolitan lives. For Islanders, the sea was a highway connecting them across space and language to relatives, friends and neighbours, as well as to strangers and enemies.

‘THE OCEAN IN US’

Living with water has shaped Islanders’ ways of life. For many, that water is the sea, but in New Guinea the great Fly and Sepik rivers are its highways.

This intimate relationship with water meant that when Islanders set sail in voyaging canoes, they carried with them expertise about how to survive. Knowledge about tides, currents, winds and the stars were used for navigation. The flight paths of birds and habits of marine animals were also used for wayfinding.

THE TECHNOLOGY OF VOYAGING

Voyaging required more than expert navigational and sailing skills. Islanders devised a range of equipment that enabled them to travel huge distances in sometimes challenging conditions.

A range of paddles for different types of canoes were made and often decorated or intricately carved. Large steering paddles were operated by someone standing at the back of the vessel. Sails, some up to 10 metres (33 feet) in length, were woven from plant fibres. Tools and implements for catching and storing the food and water required for a long journey were taken on canoes.

DIVINE BLESSINGS

Across the region, many people trace their ancestors back to divine beings who inhabited the ocean. On many islands, the blessings of the gods were a crucial element of voyaging.

Some canoes had images of gods carved on to their prows and sterns. Before setting out on a journey or fishing expedition, people made offerings to these gods.

MEETING THE GAZE

Early European voyages to Oceania often included trained draftsmen and artists. Who were employed to record precise details about landscapes, flora and fauna, as well as to document information about the people they encountered. The images they produced were published in the official accounts of voyages and became popular with European audiences keen to learn about unfamiliar places and peoples.

In recent years, contemporary Pacific artists have been critically engaging with these types of images. They challenge the way Islanders were exoticised or reduced to physical specimens and their art highlights Islander's agency in early encounters with Europeans.

THE EXTRAORDINARY LIFE OF A'A

The figure of the god A'a is one of the most famous works of Oceanic art.

Made on the island of Rurutu, A'a was probably created to hold the bones of a chief. He is covered with 30 small figures, suggesting fertility and the god's ability to create life.

Islanders surrendered A'a to missionaries in 1821, as a symbol of their conversion to Christianity. A'a was sent to London and he later entered the collections of the British Museum. In 2023, he returned to Oceania and is now on display at Te Fare Iamanaha, the Museum of Tahiti and the Islands.

Today, A'a is celebrated as a voyager who travelled to London and became famous. Many Islanders consider him an ambassador for their culture.

A'A: A CELEBRITY AND AN ICON

For over 200 years, A'a has inspired many different people, including artists and poets.
In the early 20th century, the British Museum created a mould of A'a from which casts could be made. Picasso ordered a cast and British sculptor Henry Moore owned two bronzes of the figure. Moore described A'a as 'a remarkable technical achievement'.

On Rurutu, A'a has never been forgotten and his image appears on everything from t-shirts and stamps to police force badges. New technology means that the figure can now be 3D printed.

When A'a returned to Oceania in 2023 and went on display in the Museum of Tahiti, large groups of visitors came to pay their respects.

CONCLUSION: FUTURE FACING

Pacific Islanders have experienced vast challenges to their traditional ways of life. Today, climate change, rising sea levels and ocean pollution are threatening their islands' very existence.

In some low-lying nations, people are facing the prospect of having to emigrate. Artists, scholars, poets and authors are raising awareness of the region's vulnerability to climate change but are also facing the future with strength and creativity.

George Nuku is known internationally for creating art installations using plastic bottles. Set in the 22nd century, Bottled Ocean 2125 is his vision of what could happen to our planet. Sea creatures such as turtles, rays, sharks and jellyfish inhabit an oceanic world that has been inundated with plastic. Rather than seeing only evidence of environmental destruction, Nuku offers a transformative vision of waste that forces visitors to rethink their relationship to plastic.

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