

Oceanic Art—Ozeanisch Kunst—Art Océanien, by Anthony J P Meyer. Cologne: Könemann, 1995. ISBN 3-89508-080-2, 640 pages (in 2 volumes), figures, maps, drawings, color plates, photographs, foldouts, glossary, reading list. A\$150.00; NZ\$189.00. Distributed by Edition Habit Press for New Zealand and the Pacific Islands.*

Oceanic Art, by Nicholas Thomas. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1995. ISBN 0-500-20281-8, 216 pages, figures, maps, color plates, photographs, index, references. Paper, £6.95; US\$14.95; NZ\$29.95.

Protection, Power and Display: Shields of Island Southeast Asia and Melanesia, edited by Andrew Tavarrelli. Chestnut Hill, MA: Boston College Museum of Art, 1995. ISBN 0-9640153-3-1, 108 pages, color plates, photographs, figures, maps, references. Paper, US\$12.95.

The publication of two books with the same title, in the same year, that are poles apart in their presentation, demonstrates some of the general conceptual issues in relating art and culture, and the problems of interpretation that trouble our understanding of the art of other cultural worlds. Both books are intended as broad regional surveys designed for very wide readerships. A third volume under review here is much more modest in its scope and audience, focusing on shields of island Southeast Asia and Melanesia, but the book amplifies some of the same general conceptual difficulties as the two overviews.

Anthony J P Meyer's *Oceanic Art* is a beautifully produced, hardbound, dust-jacketed and slipcased double volume, sumptuously illustrated with over seven hundred photographs, many full-page and mostly in color. Typical of many previous works that endeavor to survey the art of the Pacific, the author takes a culture-area approach that classifies Oceanic art into regional styles and describes distinctive aspects of each style. The book is organized in the manner of an ethnographic art gallery that simulates and encompasses the geographic breadth of the Pacific. Over seventy separate sections describe major culture areas (Polynesia, Melanesia, Micronesia) or particular regions (eg, Lake Sentani area, Astrolabe Bay, New Ireland, Austral Islands, Tuamotu Archipelago, Para-Micronesia).

Oceania is so vast and diverse a region, however, that it defies attempts to adequately catalog its art and cultures within a single publication, even one as voluminous (640 pages) as this. In addition, the trilingual text in English, German, and French consumes much page space. Consequently, treatment of each region is cursory, most often a single short paragraph that briefly locates the place and points out one or two distinctive aspects of the art, accompanied by several photographs of objects. More information often is presented in the captions to photographs than in the short descriptions of the art styles and cultures. Even the longer sections never exceed seven hundred fifty words, such as the section on the Solomon Islands that describes in very general terms the region's geography, prehistory, fauna,

horticulture, social and political organization, gender roles, religious beliefs, and artistic motifs. Supplementing the regional sections are over twenty short one-to-two page insets, explaining topics such as carbon-14 dating, thermoluminescence, betel-nut chewing, sago use, Pacific agricultural rituals, fishing techniques, tattoo, skull preservation and presentation, indigenous forms of currency, and the nature of art items made for tourist trade.

For general readers, this encyclopedic range—though abbreviated coverage—of topics offers a useful survey of Oceanic art styles and distinctive cultural features. Perhaps the book's main value is in its profusion of high quality photographs of superb art works, rather than its text. The visual impact of Meyer's *Oceanic Art* is undeniable. The blurb inside the dust jacket claims that "the majority [of art pieces] are shown here for the first time." The works photographed are from museum collections in eighteen countries; many are in the hands of private collectors or dealers.

Meyer himself is an art dealer and collector, who directs a family gallery in Paris. The book's text in many places appears to adopt a language of salesmanship in which art objects get valued in terms of their antiquity or their relationship (either exemplifying or contrasting) to stylistic canons. Thus a piece may be described as "a classic" (63), "one of the finest known examples of its type" (75); or alternatively, as "exceedingly rare" (57), or "very unusual" (61). From this dealer or collector perspective, objects' value also derives from a sort of pedigree of previous collectors: a Marque-

san headband is described with no contextual information other than "formerly in the collection of Sir Jacob Epstein" (504).

Meyer takes a culture-area approach to Oceanic art that is mainly descriptive, emphasizing regional styles, materials, appearance, and form. His vocabulary is manifestly impressionistic, and is infused with culture-area notions of the origins, diffusion, evolution, and decline of art styles. For example, Gogodala carving "is extremely refined and 'smooth', softer than elsewhere in New Guinea and with a pronounced Oriental or Asiatic feel" (105). Bamu art "may not seem as refined or highly developed as that of the more eastern . . . groups, but it has a distinctly old and archaic feel to it" (109). New Caledonian carving is "cruder and more naïve than that of other Melanesian groups [and is] a strong art, powerful and expressive . . . made with the intention of squarely facing the elements, just as the great chief faces the enemy. [The art] was never tainted by the decadence or the superfluosity that touched many areas of Melanesia and Polynesia" (437).

Meyer frequently couches explanations of art features in terms of origins rather than contextualized cultural meanings. For example, "the use of the hook as a symbolic and decorative element in the art of New Guinea stems from an archaic source, and is probably related to the Bronze Age cultures of South-East Asia and the Indonesian Islands from whence the early migrations came" (267). In places Meyer's impressionistic tone turns facetious, as in his description of the Asmat, who,

he says, “live in what might well be described as the worst place on Earth. . . indeed, it has even been suggested that their seemingly compulsive preoccupation with warfare and art was a direct result of their desire to contain, subdue, or simply forget their environment” (81).

Meyer seeks to contextualize Oceanic art works within local cultural practices: secret societies, mortuary ceremonies, initiation ceremonies, warfare, cannibalism, trade systems, chieftainship. This effort is hampered in many instances, however, by a lack of ethnographic information; owing to collecting practices, it is impossible to reconstruct the cultural context of the object. In his explanations of the cultural significance of the art works, Meyer proffers stereotypic versions of Oceanic cultural practices. He refers to “soul boats” (75), “the primordial couple” (69, 169, 217, 612), or “the primordial female” (207, 477) as if these are generic cultural archetypes. This universalizing perspective is especially prominent in his ubiquitous description of anthropomorphic sculpture throughout Oceania as “representing an ancestor.” By claiming that “ancestor worship follows similar practices the world over” (66), he evades issues of specific cultural context and local interpretation.

The final brief section of the book raises the question “Oceanic art: Is it art?” Meyer’s verdict is couched in broad social evolutionary terms: “Oceanic art is no different from the early art of Greece, China, or Europe” (630). In this regard, Meyer’s intellectual forebears are nineteenth-century ethnographers such as A C Haddon,

who held that the study of the arts of the “laggard people” such as Melaneseans is instructive for understanding “civilized art” (quoted by O’Hanlon in Tavarelli 1995, 78). Although critical readers will find much of Meyer’s text outmoded and flawed by stereotypic western understandings, connoisseurs of Oceanic art will nevertheless appreciate his collector’s eye for the visual power and beauty of the pieces themselves. The book is a pleasure to look at, if a disappointment to read.

In many ways, Nicholas Thomas’s *Oceanic Art* is written precisely to caution against the kinds of western stereotypes of Pacific art and culture that abound in Meyer’s same-titled work. As a volume in the Thames and Hudson “World of Art Paperbacks” (over 130 titles in print, ranging from *Aboriginal Art* to *Victorian Architecture*), Thomas’s *Oceanic Art* also is addressed to a very broad readership.

The organization of the book departs radically from the typical approach that partitions the text into separate treatments of culture areas and regions. Indeed, Thomas so thoroughly discounts the earlier culture-area paradigm and its diffusionist corollary that, when he finds genuine evidence of the borrowing of patterns or techniques from one island group to another (eg, Marshall Islands plaitwork patterns showing up in Futuna barkcloth designs), he needs to remind readers “that cross-cultural stimulation is not necessarily a matter of European influence, but has proceeded just as significantly through contact between indigenous cultures” (144–146). Only the first two chapters focus on a particular regional art—Sepik and

Māori. The other seven chapters, plus an introduction, deal with topics that crosscut regional and culture-area boundaries: The Art of War; The Art of the Body; Maternal Symbolism and Male Cults; Barkcloth, Exchange and Sanctity; Feathers, Divinity, and Chiefly Power; Narrative Art and Tourism; National Independence, Indigenous Minorities, and Migrants.

In a short review such as this, one cannot adequately treat the wealth of ideas that Thomas's book conveys. *Oceanic Art* provides a much-distilled discussion of a complex and heterogeneous region, informed by contemporary theoretical writings on exchange, gender, personhood, ritual, aesthetics, symbolism, tradition, and other topics. Here I can only select several of the more interesting conceptual themes that unify Thomas's text and make it an important contribution to understanding Oceanic art.

Thomas's treatment of the idea of *context* is especially instructive. By considering cultural systems of logic, metaphysics, and symbolic practices, he complexifies and expands our understandings of the cultural and historical contexts within which Oceanic art acquires its significance. Thomas explains at the outset that an understanding of Oceanic art requires "looking into contexts" and that Oceanic art carries different "premises about what art is, how it is produced, or what its effects are [and] thus challenges a whole range of Western expectations concerning knowledge and social relationships as well as art" (9). Thomas emphasizes that art inheres not only in objects but also in performances and practices that incorporate music,

dance, self-decoration, oratory, and elements of buildings or larger sacred grounds that all contribute to the overall esthetic effect and context (29–30). He also reminds readers that the "most rewarding understanding of the meanings of Oceanic art frequently depends upon rich contextual knowledge [that] is often . . . not available" because museum pieces have been "abstracted from their context" (35).

Thomas points out that although "the understanding of context is crucial, the questions of what counts as a context, and how it relates to the art objects, are not always simple" (36), and he proposes "a deeper understanding of ideas about knowledge, work, art, and the elements that constitute the individual" (36). For example, he prefaces his explanation of Marquesan tattooing with a digression into Oceanic ideas of the person as a divisible entity incorporating attributes from various sources; the Polynesian dualistic worldview that juxtaposes a realm of death and darkness with a world of light and living; and beliefs in the dangerous instability and "problematic permeability" of bodies (106–107). Tattooing thus serves to reinforce the body by wrapping it in images. Thomas similarly couches his explanation of tapa in the context of its religious function, wrapping the individual and containing or dispelling personal sanctity; or its use as long strips carried by people in ceremonial procession, invoking the metaphor of the path as a way of imagining "relations of alliance and affinity" (143). He discusses the religious and mythological contexts of featherwork in eastern Polynesia and its associa-

tions with divine origins and fecundity; Ta'aroa created the other gods, and shed his body-covering of red and yellow feathers, which then transmuted into plant life (155). He also relates the featherwork—an onerously demanding labor—to its political context of exploitative and overbearing chiefs. Objects such as the Tahitian feather girdle “did not just reflect or express a wider political and social context, but embodied that context of political power in both generalized and specific ways” (159).

Closely associated with the idea of context in Thomas's discussion is that of *meaning*. He reiterates the point that the meaning of Oceanic art works lies more in the presentation and effects of the objects, within their social contexts, than in the visual imagery and design elements themselves. “While Western art might be seen primarily as a system of meaningful codes, Pacific art suggests that efficacious presentation is generally more important” (35). For example, in his discussion of the arts of war such as decorated weapons, canoes, the heads of slain enemies, or the bodies of warriors, he stresses that “art in this context is likely to be part of an experienced process, rather than an ‘image’ that we might productively understand as part of a system of collective representation. . . . the meanings that Western viewers look for, and take to be integrally important in works of art, are less important than those works’ effectiveness” (79). Similarly, in his discussion of barkcloth he reiterates that “the meanings of the cloth arise, most importantly, from the way the material is used” (140) and that

“meanings arise from these relationships and transactions, rather than from symbolic content that designs incorporating abstract forms, plants, clocks or comets may or may not possess” (141).

In this regard, he generally departs from the symbolic-structuralist approach to art, which seeks to decode the symbolism of design elements, or to find structural analogies between art forms and social forms. Yet elsewhere in his text, he entertains this sort of interpretation of meaning. In his discussion of Asmat shields and wood carvings, he shows how the “seemingly abstract patterns” (82) in fact create a profuse iconography of heads and headhunting that plays on Asmat symbolic associations between men and trees, fruits and heads, and the charged symbolism of animals like the flying fox, which eats fruit, or the praying mantis, which decapitates its mate. In a discussion of the use of shell inlay in Solomon Islands art, he conjectures, with good structuralist logic, that the powerful contrast between the brilliant shell inlay and the blackened wood background exemplifies the contrast between the ceremonial “expressions of brilliance” such as ritual feasting and head-hunting, and the ordinary routines of daily activities (94).

In addition to an emphasis on context and meaning, Thomas gives special consideration to the idea of *representation* in Oceania art. He pursues a more complex understanding of the relationship of sign to significance, in particular questioning what carvings and masks that commemorate ancestors or represent spirits really “stand

for" (165). An anthropomorphic carving might appear to represent a human being or ancestor, but would be better understood as an "embodiment of that ancestor, as one expression of that ancestor, or it may be a physical container that an ancestor or spirit can be induced to inhabit at certain times" (9). Rather than assuming that anthropomorphic carvings *represent* ancestors or gods, Thomas suggests that "art may be more productively seen to create presences than to imitate or image something that exists elsewhere" (34). Indeed in some contexts a figural carving, rather than serving to commemorate, "may in fact be produced specifically in order to be destroyed, as a way . . . to forget rather than to remember" (34). Thomas's distinction between seeing a figural carving as *image* or as *embodiment* may seem elusive, especially in such a compressed treatment as he provides, and a full understanding of this distinction may be unreachable without the missing ethnographic information on how anthropomorphic sculpture functioned in local contexts. (Meyer seems to be proposing a similar distinction when he writes that the pictorial and sculptural forms in European Christian art are "*images* of the divine" while in Oceania "art works in most cases become actual *personifications* of the gods, spirits, and ancestors they represent" [630, emphasis in original].)

One other issue in Thomas's *Oceanic Art* deserves praise, and this is the way he has succeeded in historicizing his discussion of art. Most regional surveys of Oceanic art, in which "traditional" pieces from museum collections monopolize attention,

presume that tribal art styles were perpetuated unvaryingly from artist to artist—until western contact brought new materials and methods that inevitably led to "decadent forms and to a decline in quality" (Meyer 1995, 22). Thomas cautions against this "most regrettable stereotype . . . that would deny the interpretation and innovation always present in Pacific cultures" (36). He points out that "Traditional art was always evolving and could change rapidly and drastically if a new cult arose with distinct iconography . . . or if exchange relations with other groups created new contacts or introduced new materials" (12). In several places in his text he focuses on examples of change, while emphasizing that such changes "do not signify a lack of continuity with tradition" (13), such as recent changes in the forms and use of string bags in the New Guinea Highlands that accompanied shifts in male-female relations (124–125); or the transformation of Palauan house paintings into carved storyboards (177–180).

Pursuing this theme of historical continuities, Thomas's final chapter discusses the work of several contemporary urban Pacific artists. He asserts that this new art "is taken to express the cultural vitality of a 'new nation' [and] is not so different to the evocation of collectivities of men, which was arguably at the centre of much of the art discussed earlier" (184).

Nicholas Thomas has given us a very thoughtful and fresh treatment of a wide range of topics in Oceanic art. One only wishes the book were larger, and space limitations did not require him to be so selective of particular cul-

tural examples and areas. Some regional specialists may discover omissions and occasional errors in Thomas's highly condensed survey. Micronesianists, for example, will be disappointed to find that Thomas generally overlooks the area. He could well have broadened the focus of his chapter "Barkcloth, Exchange and Sanctity," to include a discussion of cloth in Micronesia (including plait-work, hand-loom-woven cloth, and introduced western cloth) and its relations to social exchange, political hierarchy, and gender relations; and especially the significance of highly elaborated loom-woven cloth from the Caroline Islands (which he mistakenly attributes to the Marshall Islands [167]) for chiefly investiture and notions of sanctity. Similarly, his discussion of tattooing centralizes the Polynesian male perspective and the ethos of warrior protection, while seeming to disregard Polynesian female tattooing, or the extraordinary full-body tattooing of both men and women that was practiced in parts of Micronesia. Yet these are minor issues of selection and focus that do not seriously detract from this revelatory book.

The third book under review here is quite different in several respects from the previous two. *Protection, Power and Display* is a catalog accompanying an exhibition of fifty-four shields from island Southeast Asia and Melanesia. Rather than attempting a broad survey of the region from the perspective of a single author, the catalog focuses on a single class of artifact, from the perspective of five separate contributors with expertise and emphases on differ-

ent parts of the region. Exhibition catalogs also differ from art survey books because they lack the quality of self-containment. If the reader did not see the exhibition (which I did not), it feels a bit like reading a theatre review and looking at the photographs after missing the performance. The eight color plates and seventy-four black-and-white photographs are well produced (although the numbering and placement of the figures require the reader to continually thumb back and forth); the catalog illustrations, however, do not make up for not seeing the real objects.

This is especially so here because the exhibition aimed to "focus, for the first time, on the aesthetic value of objects that have been previously relegated to the status of ethnographic evidence" (Tavarelli 1995, 7). Andrew Tavarelli, who teaches painting at Boston College, conceived of the exhibition, chose the shields, and edited the catalog. In reading the catalog essays, one senses their paradoxical relationship to the exhibition itself. The intent of the exhibition was to allow "the power of the objects to speak for themselves . . . in a universal visual language" (9). If one accepts this premise, then the catalog essays are superfluous. Steven Alpert's essay puts this paradox in more local terms. Although the shields in the exhibition were chosen for their aesthetic content, "in the western sense, shields were never perceived by their makers as being beautiful works of art" (21). What was praiseworthy was rather the shield's usefulness.

The catalog essays in fact say very little about aesthetics. The editor's aim rather is "connecting the shields to the

larger visual and cultural traditions of the societies in which they were made” (7), and the essays focus generally on issues of context and meaning, resonating with a number of themes of Thomas’s book. Tavarelli examines various “references to the body expressed through the shield form” (12), and how the form of the shield is closely related to its defensive function. He describes how Asmat shields are believed to be empowered with the spirit of an ancestor, and how the spiritual power and visual power of the shields are related. Alpert’s essay concentrates on Dayak shields and proposes that the painted imagery “was meant to psychologically confuse and repel an enemy” (23). He points out similar patterns and functions on ritual textiles.

Susan Rodgers’ essay offers a complex interpretation of Indonesian shields in relation to “a whole panoply of protective art forms [that] worked together as a system, in a single culture” (43) to fortify the human body against supernatural harm. Indonesian art participates in an entangled network of gift exchange that not only underpins economic and political alliances, but also links people to ancestors, and provides “entry points into a sacred realm” (38). Understanding the meaning of these protective arts, she explains, requires that we “reconstruct some of the essentially religious systems of thought [and] large aesthetic themes” (37).

Florina H Capistrano-Baker’s essay mainly addresses the symbolic meaning of the hourglass motif in Philippine shields, which she sees as related to other spirit-laden or supernaturally

charged objects, to local concepts of divine protection, and to archetypal notions of the “center” that bridges human and spiritual realms.

Michael O’Hanlon’s essay deals with the complexity of design “meaning” in Melanesia. To illustrate problems of interpretation, he describes Leach’s and Berndt’s conflicting readings of a Trobriand shield design. He also warns against the western tendency to “over-interrogate Melanesian forms for their ‘meaning’ ” (82). Dazzling appearance may be more important than iconographic meaning in giving visual impact to a shield or other artistic object. O’Hanlon also questions whether particular motifs may be inherently visually disorienting and disturbing, the way that “eye spots” on some butterflies may disorient predators. He suggests that, more likely, cultural beliefs will mediate the perception of form, line, and color (83).

Thus a line of thought, running through the catalog’s essays, challenges the exhibition’s intent to let the objects speak for themselves. Rather than communicating to us directly, the objects speak to us through webs of cultural meanings and through local systems of action. As these three very dissimilar books show, with varying degrees of success, our ability to “look *into*” rather than simply “look *at*” (Thomas 1995, 9, his emphasis) Oceanic art rests on our fuller understanding of the different cultural worlds, histories, and practices that produced (and continue to produce) these art forms.

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