

Illuminating Pacific Perspectives

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Nicholas Thomas *Oceanic Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995). ISBN 0-500-20281-8

Anybody brave enough to attempt a general comprehensive book covering the huge field of Pacific art is immediately faced with a major dilemma; how to deal with the dazzling diversity of Pacific arts and cultures in one volume. In the past, some writers have opted for a generalised synthesizing approach which emphasises the similarities and common themes but then has to wrestle with all the exceptions and variations encountered in this vast area. Others have taken the more common but more pedestrian approach of a descriptive survey moving across the Pacific culture by culture or area by area. This approach has resulted in some huge books on Pacific art which usually become more appreciated for their illustrations than their text. Both approaches have their advantages and disadvantages, either becoming so general that the special characteristics of each art in its cultural context are lost, or so detailed that the important common themes and connections across the Pacific are overwhelmed by a welter of culturally-specific variations.

In this book, Nicholas Thomas has taken the bold step of combining these two approaches by looking at a series of major Pacific themes and artforms distributed widely across a carefully selected range of cultural areas. With little concern for artistic, archaeological or historical connections, Thomas discusses in turn, Sepik art especially in relation to initiation, Maori carving especially architectural, Asmat carvings and shields in relation to warfare, Solomon Island canoes, Tahitian, Maori, Marquesan and Samoan tattooing, New Guinea string bags, Vanuatu mat weaving, Melanesian and Polynesian tapa cloth, Eastern Polynesian tivaevae quilts, Tahitian and Hawaiian featherwork cloaks, sashes and other chiefly insignia in relation to divinity and rank, narrative paintings on Micronesian Palauan clubhouses in relation to the development of Pacific "tourist art," and finally contemporary Pacific art in relation to national independence and indigenous minorities. This last chapter, which is strongly focussed on Papua New Guinea and New Zealand, includes valuable discussion of both Maori and

immigrant Polynesian contemporary art and individual artists. With his serious and thoughtful attention to contemporary Pacific arts as part of the continuous spectrum of Pacific art, Thomas' study represents a great advance on previous Pacific art books which have either ignored the present living arts or relegated them to a final patronising paragraph.

This wide variety of objects and activities that can legitimately be included under the rubric of "art" in the Pacific emphasizes the point made by Thomas in his introduction. Here, he notes how Oceanic art challenges a whole range of Western expectations concerning knowledge and social relationships, as well as art itself. Art in the Pacific can be as much an experienced process as a fixed "image." Thus he maintains that Pacific art can only be truly understood within its own cultural context which includes indigenous ideas of what art is and how it operates.

An important observation made by Thomas corrects the Western expectation that art should have a discursive meaning or external referent such as an ancestor. In fact, much Pacific art is rather intended to arouse an immediate affective response in the viewer, perhaps one of awe or terror in the face of supernatural power, or humility in the face of political authority, or comforting maternal feelings in the presence of New Guinea women's string bags. This approach has also freed Thomas from the old museum-oriented perspective on Pacific art with its usual concentration on carvings and "ancestor figures."

Within his separate discussions, Thomas has incorporated and helpfully summarised valuable new understandings of traditional and contemporary Pacific artforms, derived from recent studies such as that by Gell on tattoo, McKenzie on Papua New Guinea string bags, Hammond on tivaevae, Bolton on Vanuatu mats, and O'Hanlon on New Guinea Highland tribal warfare. These are effectively used by Thomas to demonstrate that in the Pacific the diversity of art processes and the diversity of views on the nature and purpose of art is more

fundamental than the sheer visual diversity of art objects.

There is virtually no discussion of the role of the individual named artist in traditional Pacific societies. Except for the named artists in the contemporary arts section, readers will not find anything here about famous traditional artists of the past, even in the Maori section where many individual artists of the nineteenth century are well-known and celebrated. This absence may give the questionable impression that the artist as an individual was not particularly important in the Pacific. Similarly, there is very little on indigenous aesthetics and art criticism, again perhaps emphasizing the collectivity over the initiative and genius of the individual.

Inevitably, this book suffers from some of the disadvantages of both the generalising and the survey approaches. The mental gymnastics required for making generalisations about Pacific arts lead to a few sudden unattached comparisons and some convoluted language that requires careful unravelling. Nevertheless this effort is well repaid by the insights provided.

However, although this book is probably intended by the publisher as an introductory text, full appreciation of these insights requires some prior knowledge and experience of the full range of Pacific art forms. Beginners will therefore need to read this book in association with older Pacific art survey books or visits to a good comprehensive museum display. The quality of illustrations here is very high and the subjects well-chosen, but the range is limited by space allocation. For example, all of Sepik art is represented by only eighteen illustrations, Maori art early and modern by twenty-five, and Hawaiian art by just ten. Several other Pacific cultures warrant only one or two illustrations.

New Zealanders will find the section on traditional Maori carving a bit thin, with some awkward photo captions. Some mention is made of the current controversies about meaning in Maori art, but because of the loose referencing system beginners will not find it easy to follow up on particular topics such as this. Thomas' thematic approach does provide some opportunities for in-depth analyses of particular arts in their cultural context, especially Sepik art and Palauan clubhouse decoration, but the treatment of other arts such as tattooing and tapa suffer from the old generalising syndrome. I would also have appreciated some more critical assessment of Gell's interpretations of Pacific tattooing.

Modern understanding of traditional Pacific arts now realises how much these arts were always changing, both in pre-European and post-European times. In his introduction, Thomas briefly sketches in the prehistory of this region and summarises the colonial and post-colonial experiences. When discussing each art form he is always mindful of their situation in time, with special attention given to post-European changes.

Overall, this book is successful in terms of its stated purpose, with some penetrating observations especially on art in the modern world. It will not become a major reference work for the range of Pacific artforms, but is valuable for the ideas and themes that can then be explored further elsewhere. The understanding gained from a careful reading of this text will illuminate other Pacific art forms.