



HOW TO READ
OCEANIC ART

HOW TO READ

OCEANIC ART

ERIC KJELLGREN



The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
Distributed by Yale University Press, New Haven and London

Published by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Mark Polizzotti, Publisher and Editor in Chief
Gwen Roginsky, Associate Publisher and
General Manager of Publications
Peter Antony, Chief Production Manager
Michael Sittenfeld, Managing Editor
Robert Weisberg, Senior Project Manager

Edited by Barbara Cavaliere
Designed by Rita Jules, Miko McGinty Inc.
Production by Peter Antony
Sources and suggested reading edited by Jean Wagner

The works of art illustrated in this publication are in the collection of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, unless otherwise indicated. Photographs of works of art are by Eileen Travell, The Photograph Studio, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, except for the following images made by other Photograph Studio staff members: Kathy Dahab: figs. 1, 2, 3, 4; Karin Willis: entry 17, figs. 23, 24, 25, 54, 71; Anna Kellen: entry 25; Peter Zeray: fig. 36; John Bigelow Taylor: fig. 60.

Typeset in Documenta and Ideal Sans
Printed on 150 gsm Galaxi Super Matt
Separations by Professional Graphics, Inc., Rockford, Illinois
Printed and bound by Elcograf in Verona, Italy

Cover illustrations: front, detail of Ceiling for a Ceremonial House, Papua New Guinea, mid-20th century (entry 2); back, detail of Ancestor Figure (*Yene*), Indonesia, 19th–early 20th century (entry 21)
Frontispieces: page 2, detail of Mask, Papua New Guinea, 1973 (entry 15); page 6, detail of Ritual Board, Papua New Guinea, ca. 1950 (entry 7); page 10, detail of Man's Comb, Papua New Guinea, late 19th century (entry 34); pages 22–23, detail of Ceiling for a Ceremonial House, Papua New Guinea, mid-20th century (entry 2); pages 62–63, detail of Shield, Australia, mid- to late 19th century (entry 13); pages 94–95, detail of Ceremonial Textile, Indonesia (entry 25); pages 126–27, detail of Bowl, Papua New Guinea, 19th–early 20th century (entry 33); pages 144–45, Dance Paddle (?), Austral Islands, ca. 1820–40 (entry 37)

The Metropolitan Museum of Art endeavors to respect copyright in a manner consistent with its nonprofit educational mission. If you believe any material has been included in this publication improperly, please contact the Editorial Department.

Copyright © 2014 by The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

First printing

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

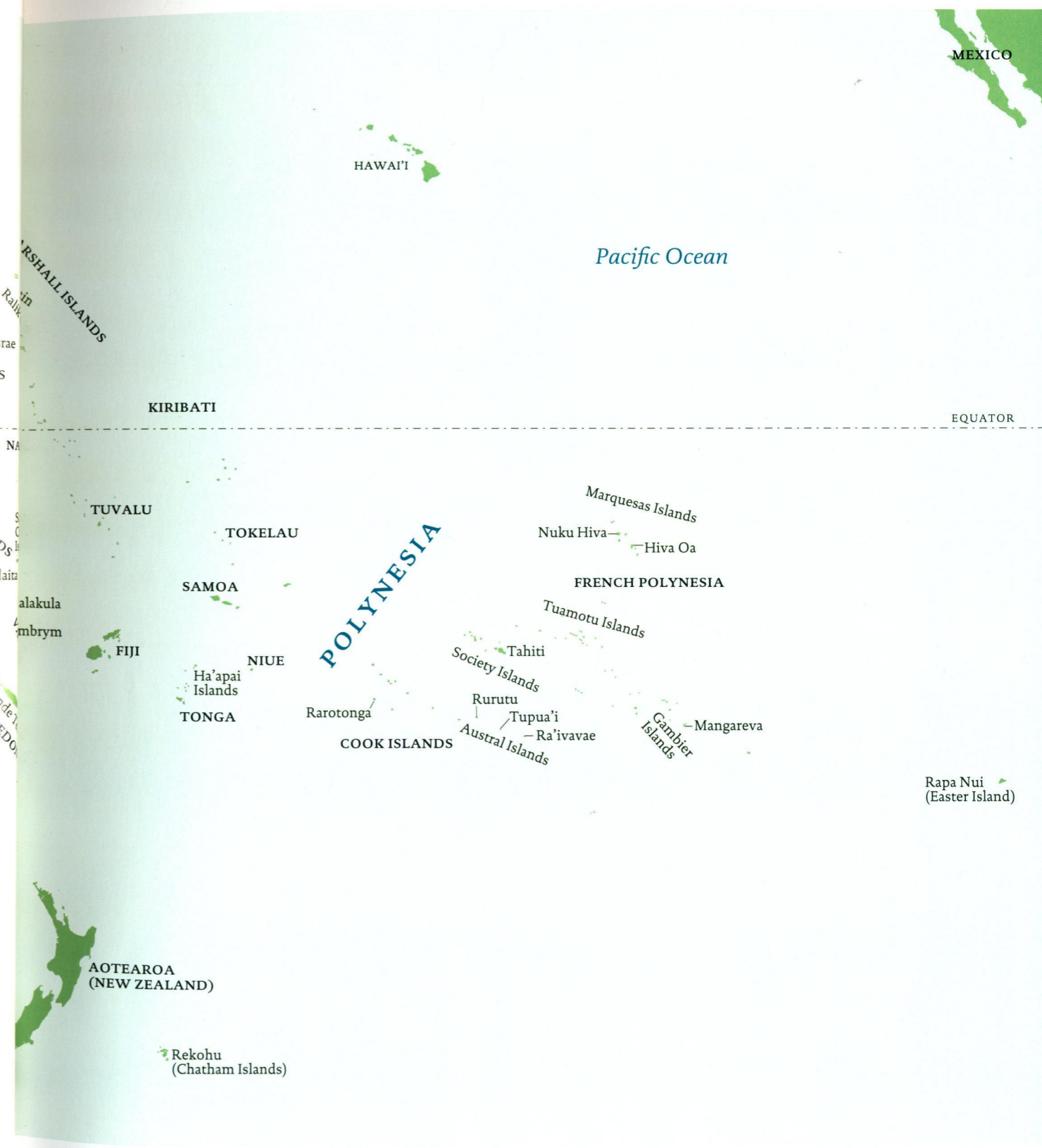
The Metropolitan Museum of Art
1000 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10028
metmuseum.org

Distributed by
Yale University Press, New Haven and London
yalebooks.com/art
yalebooks.co.uk

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Kjellgren, Eric.
How to read Oceanic art / Eric P. Kjellgren.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references.
ISBN 978-1-58839-523-8 (Metropolitan Museum of Art) —
ISBN 978-0-300-20429-2 (Yale University Press) 1. Art, Pacific
Island. 2. Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, N.Y.)
I. Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York, N.Y.)
N7410.M45 2014
709.9'0747471—dc23

2014015133





INTRODUCTION

The art of the Pacific Islands is characterized by enormous diversity and complexity. Oceania, the collective term for the Pacific Islands, covers more than a third of the earth's surface. It is home to some 1,800 different peoples practicing hundreds of artistic traditions who live on nearly 10,000 islands and one continent. In the West, Oceanic artists are known mainly for their wood sculpture, but their works actually encompass a wide variety of forms, techniques, and mediums. These include durable materials such as wood, stone, and in Island Southeast Asia, metal as well as ephemeral substances such as flowers, leaves, and spider webs. Art forms range from sculpture and ornaments intended to endure for centuries to ephemeral creations, such as Asmat *bis* poles (entry 8) or New Ireland malagans (entry 16), produced for a single fleeting appearance after which they customarily are discarded or destroyed.

Oceania's earliest peoples arrived from Southeast Asia some 40,000 to 60,000 years ago, settling Island Southeast Asia, Australia, and New Guinea, and reaching the Solomon Islands by 30,000 years ago. A second great wave of migration began some 5,000 years ago as new peoples moved into the region from the Asian mainland, resettling much of Island Southeast Asia. About 3,500 years ago, their descendants developed a distinctive culture, known as Lapita, which expanded rapidly eastward, touching the north coast of New Guinea, reaching the Solomon Islands, and settling the previously uninhabited archipelagos of Vanuatu and New Caledonia, and later, eastern Micronesia. By 800 B.C., Lapita peoples reached the archipelagos of Fiji, Tonga, and Samoa, where they became the ancestors of the Polynesians. Around 1000 A.D., Polynesian voyagers began to explore the central and eastern Pacific, settling virtually every habitable island within the vast triangle formed by Hawai'i, Rapa Nui (Easter Island), and Aotearoa (New Zealand), reaching their final landfalls around 1300 A.D.



Figure 1. Aboriginal rock paintings depicting lightning beings, Australia, Northern Territory, Willeroo Station, Wardaman people. Photograph: Eric Kjellgren, 1993

Oceania's earliest inhabitants undoubtedly had fully developed art traditions. However, like artists in historic times, they almost certainly worked primarily in perishable mediums such as wood and fiber, which have not survived. But the rock art made on the walls of rockshelters and other stone outcrops by Australia's Aboriginal peoples endures (fig. 1); the earliest may be 50,000 years old, some 20,000 years older than the famous painted caves of Europe. Still practiced in some areas, Aboriginal rock art arguably is the longest continuous art tradition on earth (entry 11). By 1500 B.C., sculptors in the mountainous highlands of Central New Guinea began to carve

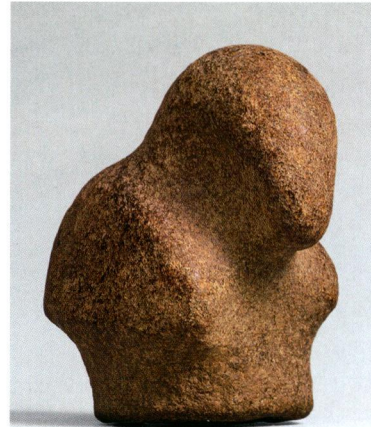


Figure 2. Bird Figure, Papua New Guinea, Western Highlands, Mount Hagen region, date unknown. Stone, height: 4½ in. (11.4 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Discovery Communications Inc. Gift, 1996 (1996.373.2)

figures and other objects in stone, the oldest known works of Oceanic sculpture (fig. 2). With a handful of exceptions, Pacific peoples had no written languages before Western contact. Virtually all cultural and art traditions were, and in some places still are, preserved and perpetuated through the collective memories of individuals within the community who passed them down orally, or through formal or informal apprenticeship, from generation to generation.

To help Western audiences to more easily comprehend—to read—Oceania's diverse art traditions, the Pacific Islands typically are divided into six major geographic and cultural regions. These consist of the three primary divisions of the Pacific Islands proper—Melanesia (the islands of the southwest Pacific, often subdivided, as in this book, into the subregions of New Guinea and Island Melanesia), Micronesia (the islands of the tropical north Pacific), and Polynesia (the islands of the central and eastern Pacific) along with the two neighboring regions of Island Southeast Asia and Australia, whose indigenous peoples share a common ancestry with the Pacific Islanders. Because these divisions were devised by Westerners, they often obscure the many shared ancestral, cultural, and aesthetic connections between the different regions. However, while the boundaries between these regions are largely arbitrary and highly permeable, the peoples and arts within each tend to share a series of broad cultural,

religious, and aesthetic themes that unite them and distinguish them from those of adjoining regions. Some of the most iconic art forms from all six regions of Oceania are discussed in the chapters that follow. But before examining individual works, it is essential to outline some of the major themes, subjects, and issues of interpretation that recur throughout the region.

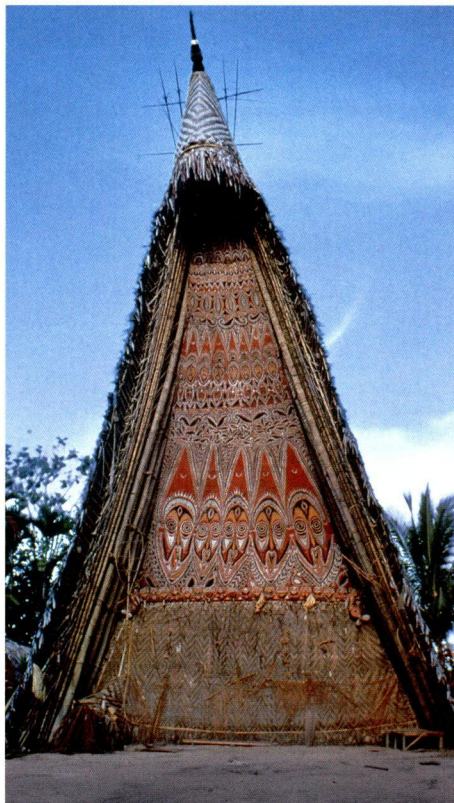
To read any work of art from Oceania, one must know the meanings that its form and imagery have, or had, in the specific culture that produced it. Knowing the meaning of a particular motif in one culture does not mean that the same type of image has the same significance in another. The interpretation of a particular subject can differ radically between even closely related cultures and art traditions. For example, depending on the local context, a human image in Oceania might represent a deity, ancestor, spirit, legendary hero, animal in human form, recently deceased member of the community, or other entity. Further, the meanings of images can differ within a single culture, particularly in New Guinea and Australia, where in many societies, secret religious knowledge is passed on to adolescents when they are initiated into adulthood and in some areas also revealed in rites later in life so that multiple levels of meaning and readings can exist for the imagery of the same object depending on the observer's initiatory status (entry 5). But, while it is impossible to make broad generalizations about the meanings of specific motifs, there are a number of major themes surrounding the contexts, forms, and subject matter of Oceanic art that appear throughout the region.

Originally, all Oceanic objects were functional, and those that Westerners now consider to be Oceanic art were created to fulfill specific roles within their own cultures and were perceived and classified very differently by the peoples who created them. For Pacific peoples, past and present, the supernatural world is considered an integral element of daily life, and objects that can be used to request, or provide, supernatural assistance are considered as essential to performing a given task as the practical implements employed to do it. Objects are integral parts of broader cultural and religious practices and are

inseparably connected with other forms of cultural expression, such as ceremonies, chant, dance, oral traditions, marking social status, ceremonial exchanges, warfare, hunting, and many other activities. It is through their cultural contexts that Oceanic objects derive their meaning and their imagery can be read.

Religious Images: Deities, Ancestors, and Spirits

Like European art in the Middle Ages, the vast majority of Oceanic art was, and in some places remains, religious in its inspiration, function, and imagery. But unlike the religious art of Europe, which derives almost exclusively from the Judeo-Christian tradition, Oceanic sculpture and painting emerged from hundreds of separate religions, each with its own distinct iconography and supernatural beings. The arts of Oceania portray an endless variety of supernatural entities, potent and weak, omnipresent and local, ancestral and non-ancestral, benevolent, neutral, or malign. Each Pacific religion has, or had, its own names, distinctions, and classifications for its particular beings. However, in broad terms, it is possible to divide the beings that appear in Oceanic art into three major, and not mutually exclusive, categories: deities, ancestors, and spirits. Deities range from powerful primordial beings who created the cosmos or hold authority over great domains of it, such as the sea or agriculture, to more minor entities responsible for specific natural phenomena or human activities. Nonhuman in origin and sometimes in form in some cultures, especially in Polynesia, deities are believed to be the direct ancestors of humanity, or of particular families and clans. Generally, ancestors once were living people and range from the remote progenitors of humankind to individuals who have died recently. They remain an active part of the community and usually are benevolent, keeping watch over their descendants, assuring the safety and fertility of people, crops, and livestock, and assisting with important undertakings such as trade or warfare and in times of hardship. However, if not honored and respected through the appropriate rites and offerings, they can also cause sickness or misfortune. The category of spirits covers a



Far left: Figure 3. Men's ceremonial house in Papua New Guinea, Sepik region, Prince Alexander Mountains, Kalabu village, Abelam people. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Visual Resource Archive, Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. Photograph: Anthony Forge, 1957–63

Left: Figure 4. Men's house (*bai*) with gable figure similar to that in entry 29, Koror Island, Belau. Photo: "25. Palau-Inseln. Insel Korror, Rathaus," ca. 1905–20, detail of a stereopticon card by NPG (Neue Photographische Gesellschaft), Berlin, Germany. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Visual Resource Archive, Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, PSC 2007.8.1

broad and heterogeneous group of non-ancestral beings, who in some cases take the form of real or fantastic creatures and often are associated with specific places or natural phenomena, whirlpools, for example. Some spirits, such as the one-legged *yipwon* of the Yimam and Alambak peoples of New Guinea, can assist in human endeavors like hunting and war (entry 4). Others remain dangerous and unpredictable. In addition to deities, ancestors, and spirits, other divine or quasi-supernatural beings, such as legendary culture heroes from oral tradition—analogue to the giant lumberjack Paul Bunyan of American folklore—who helped shape the landscape or establish the rules of society but are not explicitly venerated, occasionally appear in Oceanic art.

Sculpted and painted images of these divine beings mediated between the human and supernatural worlds. When activated through the appropriate ritual protocols, such as chants, most Oceanic sculptures served as vessels in which the power of the beings they represented resided, either temporarily or semi-permanently, and

through which those beings could be contacted, consulted, and venerated through ritual performances and the presentation of offerings. Some sacred images were kept by individuals or families in ordinary dwellings (entry 21), but most were housed within specially built religious edifices. In New Guinea and many areas of Island Melanesia, these consist, or consisted, of the imposing men's ceremonial houses, whose towering roofs dominate the skyline of the village (fig. 3). Both the exteriors and interiors of these imposing structures often are richly adorned with paintings and architectural carvings (entries 2 and 5). The center of male religious and social life, ceremonial houses serve as the venues for many religious rites as well as the primary location where sculptures, paintings, and other sacred objects are created, used, and preserved. Many ceremonial houses also serve as formal or informal gathering places and, in some cultures, as dwellings for village men. They also occur in many parts of Micronesia, where they are used primarily for social rather than religious activities (fig. 4). Women in Melanesia and throughout the Pacific

also lead rich, but often largely separate, religious lives. However, their ceremonial activities rarely involve the creation of sculpture or permanent religious structures.

In Polynesia, sacred sculpture and other religious paraphernalia were kept primarily at sacred sites consisting of open-air compounds, frequently surrounded by fences, within whose confines a variety of platforms, altars, and other religious structures were built. For many Polynesian peoples, access to these sacred precincts was restricted to religious specialists and to high-ranking chiefs, whose personal supernatural power (*mana*) enabled them safely to come into contact with the powers of the deities, ancestors, and other beings whose images were kept within them. Most of these sites were abandoned when Polynesian peoples converted to Christianity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, many, including the huge temple platforms of Rapa Nui with their rows of massive *moai* (stone figures), have been restored in recent decades (fig. 5), and the splendid meeting houses and other structures that stand on the sacred *marae* (plazas) of the Māori people of Aotearoa (New Zealand) have remained in uninterrupted use despite more than two centuries of intensive Western contact and settlement.

In Island Southeast Asia, some groups constructed separate buildings or shrines to house religious images and other sacred objects, but others kept such objects in secular structures such as dwellings or granaries, for which some images served as supernatural guardians (entry 23). Australia's Aboriginal peoples had virtually no permanent forms of architecture. Instead, they painted or carved representations of their powerful ancestral beings directly on the landscape as rock art and in some cases, created more ephemeral sculptures and paintings for use in ceremonies.

Decorative Arts

In addition to sacred sculpture and painting, the decorative arts of the Pacific are highly developed. Like elegant clothing and jewelry in our society, many of the most refined types are reserved for use on important occasions,



Figure 5. Temple platform with stone figures (*moai*) representing ancestral chiefs at Ahu Naunau, Anakena, Rapa Nui (Easter Island). Photograph: Eric Kjellgren, 1992

such as marriages, funerals, or other religious rites, or are restricted to the social elite. In all regions of the Pacific, the human body is a central focus for visual expression. From the radiant gold jewelry of Indonesia (entry 26), to the spectacular dance regalia of the New Guinea Highlands and the sumptuous ornaments and accessories of Polynesian chiefs, Oceania's peoples adorn their bodies in countless ways with materials ranging from body paint, leaves, and flowers to whale ivory, pearlshell, turtleshell, and precious metals. One of the most widespread forms of body art is tattooing (fig. 6), which is, or was, practiced in every cultural region of the Pacific except Australia. Some forms of personal adornment serve purely to enhance the wearer's appearance. However, many types are also symbols of social status, restricted exclusively to individuals who have been born with, or achieved, the right to wear them (entry 39).

Many objects created by Pacific peoples are undecorated. However, even the most mundane utilitarian items (entries 12 and 33) are often superbly crafted and adorned far beyond any practical necessity. Canoes, essential to both local and long distance travel, are, or were, an important locus for visual expression. Many of the activities undertaken in canoes—such as open ocean voyages, trade, and formerly, warfare—were extremely dangerous,



Figure 6. A lavishly tattooed man from the Island of Nuku Hiva, Marquesas Islands. Detail of copperplate engraving, *An Inhabitant of the Island of Nukahiva*, by Wilhelm Gottlieb Tilesius von Tilenau, German (1769–1857), engraved by J. Storer, 1813

and the carvings and objects associated with them often had protective functions (entries 17 and 31). In former times, warfare was connected with a great diversity of art forms, including shields (entry 13), clubs (entry 36), personal ornaments, and charms, some of which were believed to protect a warrior from harm or magically hinder his enemies (fig. 8 in entry 4).

Oceania is also remarkable for the richness of its fiber arts, which range from sacred ceremonial textiles to prosaic items such as everyday garments. The peoples of Island Southeast Asia are renowned for the scale, variety, and refinement of their loom-woven textiles in cotton, silk, and other materials (entries 24, 25, and 27). While a handful of loom weaving traditions exist in other parts of the Pacific, the primary textile forms elsewhere in Oceania are barkcloth and plaitwork. A paper-like material manufactured from the inner bark of certain species

of trees, barkcloth is especially prominent in western Polynesia, where enormous and beautifully decorated panels (fig. 71 in entry 36) are displayed and exchanged as ceremonial gifts. It is also used by the Baining people of New Britain in Island Melanesia in the construction of spectacular ceremonial masks and effigies (entry 15). Plaitwork, a technique in which the fibers are interwoven by hand without a loom, is practiced across the Pacific to create an almost endless variety of practical items like sleeping mats as well as ceremonial and luxury objects, such as ornately woven fans.

The Human Figure

As exemplified by many of the works in this book, the human figure is among the most prominent and widespread motifs in Oceanic art. Depictions range from comparatively naturalistic (entry 1 and fig. 73 in entry 40) to highly abstract (entries 7, 9 and 41) and represent a vast diversity of supernatural beings. Certain ways of representing the human form occur widely throughout the Pacific. The most widespread is the hocker figure (entry 6), which is essentially a formal two-dimensional convention for representing a human seated or crouching with legs splayed and bent at the knees resembling the letter M and arms bent at the elbows with hands upraised resembling the letter W. The bodies of hocker figures range from single lines to ovals and more detailed depictions of the torso, while the form of the head is highly variable. Variations appear in art traditions from places as widely separated as New Guinea (entries 6 and 7), the Austral Islands in central Polynesia (entry 37), and Rekohu (the Chatham Islands) east of Aotearoa (New Zealand).

In three-dimensional sculpture, human figures are usually strictly symmetrical, shown in a static frontal stance with head facing forward and limbs in identical positions. While this strict symmetry occasionally is broken by a slightly tilted head, upraised arm (fig. 74 in entry 41), or other subtle variation, as a general rule, three-dimensional human images in Oceanic art are not shown in dynamic positions that indicate walking, running, hunting, or other activities.

While these broad means of portraying the human figure occur across much of the Pacific, most conventions are specific to particular cultural regions. Expressions vary both within and between individual art traditions, but human images from each major cultural region tend to share certain fundamental aspects of their poses, proportions, and other stylistic features that distinguish them from those of neighboring areas. In New Guinea and Island Melanesia, human figures typically are shown standing with knees slightly bent and arms hanging freely down at the sides or with hands resting on the hips or abdomen (entries 1 and 5). Occasionally, however, the arms are shown, as in hocker figures, with elbows bent and hands upraised.

Standing figures in similar poses appear in Island Southeast Asia. However, the hallmark of that region's art are its distinctive seated figures (entry 21), shown with knees bent double and legs drawn in toward the body with calves either perpendicular to the ground or crossed. The arms are sharply bent with elbows, hands, or both resting on the knees or with elbows touching the knees and hands raised to the chin. Many of Island Southeast Asia's indigenous peoples live in isolated enclaves, separated by hundreds of miles, but seated figures of this type recur throughout the region, strongly suggesting that they represent local variants arising from a shared ancestral tradition.

In Micronesia, human figures of any type are rare, but where they do occur, show the blending of severe angular elements and curving lines characteristic of the region's art as a whole. This aesthetic is particularly prominent in human images from the Caroline Islands (entries 29 and 30), which often have flat faces with curved brows, thin ridge-like noses, downturned angular mouths, and sharp jaw lines that merge seamlessly into subtly curved crania. The bodies typically are formed from robust angular solids, giving Micronesian figures a blocky appearance.

The shared ancestry of Polynesian peoples is readily apparent in their conventions for representing the human figure, which is seen on islands as widely dispersed as Tonga, Hawai'i, and Rapa Nui (entry 35 and fig. 73 in entry

40). In nearly all Polynesian images, the head, considered the most supernaturally powerful part of the body, is significantly enlarged, occupying anything from about a quarter to more than half the total height. Usually strictly symmetrical and frontal in orientation, the bodies of Polynesian figures are typically robust, with rounded stomachs and prominent buttocks. The arms typically hang down at the sides or are shown with elbows flexed and hands resting on the stomach. The knees are markedly flexed, giving Polynesian images an animated quality, as if poised to spring into action.

Confined primarily to the continent's diverse rock art traditions and other two-dimensional art forms such as bark painting that draw on the same aesthetic conventions, human images in Australian Aboriginal art show little uniformity, instead reflecting differing regional styles. Some, such as the lithe *mimih* spirit figures of Arnhem Land, appear in lively animated compositions, while others, such as the looming lightning beings of the Wardaman people (fig. 1) are comparatively static.

Animals as Subjects

In addition to human figures, both wild and domestic animals appear widely in Oceanic art, and their images virtually always have cultural significance. Many represent creatures, actual or supernatural, which play important roles in local religious beliefs and oral traditions. Some are totemic species that serve as symbols of identity for clans or other groups. Others, such as pigs in Melanesia or water buffalo in Island Southeast Asia, often represent marks of wealth and status and are prized for exchange or sacrifice at important rituals. Species shown vary by region. The arts of Island Southeast Asia, with its dense, biologically diverse rainforests, and of Australia, with its rich marsupial fauna, contain a greater profusion of species than those of neighboring regions. Crocodiles, found in Island Southeast Asia, northern Australia, New Guinea, and eastward to the Solomon Islands, are widely regarded as dangerous and supernaturally powerful and appear frequently in art throughout their range (entries 5 and 24). Other commonly depicted wild animals include

hornbills (entry 22), cockatoos, birds of prey, frigate birds (entry 10), flying foxes (entry 2), lizards (entry 40), sea turtles (entry 24), and a variety of fish, nearly all of which, like animals in European heraldry, are thought to embody desirable human qualities such as strength, bravery, fertility, or martial prowess.

Except for Australian Aboriginals, formerly hunter-gatherers whose only domestic animal was the dog, virtually all Pacific peoples are agriculturalists who keep a number of types of livestock. Many Island Southeast Asian groups also raise water buffalo and horses, but before Western contact, the peoples of Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia had only four domestic animals: pigs, dogs, chickens, and rats. The pig was by far the most important, especially in New Guinea and Island Melanesia. A form of living wealth and the pre-eminent sacred animal for sacrifice or exchange in virtually all major rituals, pigs, or certain parts of them such as tusks, heads, or bones, appear widely in Oceanic art (entries 3, 15, 16, and 18). Chickens are also shown with some frequency (entry 27). Depictions of dogs are rare, while rats, which sometimes were introduced intentionally but often arrived as stow-aways on canoes, are almost never represented.

The Role of the Artist

Perceptions of the role and nature of the artist in Oceanic societies differ markedly from those in the West. Throughout Oceania, men and women with exceptional talent in the visual and performing arts are recognized and sought out within, and frequently beyond, their home communities. In most cultures, almost any person may create practical and in some cases, religious items for personal use. However, for the creation of the most ceremonially important or prominent works, such as religious images and paraphernalia or certain types of ornaments and accessories, individuals or communities typically commission those men and women who are recognized as masters of the appropriate art form.

The creation of art in Oceania, was, and to a large extent still remains, divided by gender. Male and female artists practice separate, although often mutually inter-

dependent, art forms and employ different mediums. Men work almost exclusively in harder materials such as wood, shell, stone, and metal, and create virtually all Oceanic sculpture and other forms of carving. Women work in softer materials and excel in the fiber arts, producing an astonishing variety of works in mediums including barkcloth, pandanus leaves, cotton, and silk.

Artists in Oceania should be recognized on equal terms with those from elsewhere. Most, however were not full-time specialists. When not creating works of art, for which they were customarily compensated with food, goods, or services, Pacific artists engaged in all the tasks of daily life, such as hunting, fishing, and tending gardens. However, in rare cases, artists such as master practitioners of tattooing in some Polynesian societies and metal-smiths in parts of Island Southeast Asia, were essentially full-time professionals. In most instances, the names of the artists whose works now grace Western museums and private collections were not recorded when the objects were collected and have been lost. However, within their own societies, artists were far from anonymous. Among many Oceanic peoples, individuals with exceptional talents in the visual and performing arts are honored with specific names and titles, which often denote proficiency in particular art forms, such as carving, oratory, or dance. In some cases, the names and achievements of prominent artists were preserved and passed down for generations. But conceptions about the authorship of works of art in Oceania often differ from those in the West. In some cultures, the person or persons who commission an artwork, or sponsor the ceremony in which it is employed, are considered its creators rather than the individual or individuals who make it (entry 18). When creating large-scale works such as Asmat *bis* poles (entry 8), a number of individuals often work together under the direction of a master artist, who is recognized as its creator.

The Arrival of the West

It was this rich and varied realm of unique cultures and art traditions that Western explorers encountered when they first ventured into the Pacific. These initial explorations

and the intensive colonialism and missionary activities that followed them had a profound but by no means fatal impact on the peoples and arts of Oceania. The early exploration of the Pacific was driven by two primary obsessions—the search for the best route to the fabled spice islands of Maluku (the Moluccas) in what is now eastern Indonesia and the mistaken theory that, to counterbalance the great landmass of the continents in the northern hemisphere, a vast undiscovered continent must lie somewhere in the south Pacific. The earliest European explorers were the Spanish and Portuguese. By the late 1500s, the Spanish, sailing westward from their colonies in the Americas, had colonized and sent missionaries to the Philippines and the Mariana Islands and briefly visited parts of the Caroline Islands, the Solomon Islands, and the Marquesas Islands. Portuguese vessels explored eastern Indonesia and sporadically encountered New Guinea. In the early 1600s, the Dutch wrested control of the Moluccas from the Portuguese, and, through intentional expeditions and chance encounters by spice ships blown off course, began to explore and chart the northern and western coasts of Australia. In 1642–43, Dutch explorer Abel Tasman journeyed to Tasmania, Aotearoa (New Zealand), Tonga, and Fiji, along with New Ireland and other parts of Island Melanesia.

The exploration of the Pacific intensified in the eighteenth century, dominated by Britain and France. In the mid-1700s, these rival nations began to send scientific expeditions to explore and chart the Pacific Islands. By far the most wide-ranging of these explorers was British navigator Captain James Cook, whose three voyages to the Pacific between 1768 and 1779 saw the first encounter between Europeans and many Pacific peoples. Cook and other expedition members brought the first substantial collections of Oceanic objects to Europe. Following Cook's initial reconnaissance, the first British convicts and settlers arrived in Australia in 1788. During the closing years of the eighteenth century, Christian missionaries first arrived in Tahiti and some other areas of Polynesia.

The nineteenth century witnessed the conclusion of the initial Western exploration of the Pacific and the

annexation and division of its islands among European and American colonial powers. In the early 1800s, through official expeditions and chance discoveries by whalers and merchant vessels, European and American ships explored and surveyed the region's remaining uncharted islands. In the first half of the nineteenth century, missionary activity in Polynesia increased dramatically and the first missionaries arrived in Micronesia and Melanesia by the mid-1800s. In the second half of the nineteenth century, European and American nations partitioned and laid claim to virtually the whole of Oceania. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, colonial authority over many of its islands and archipelagos shifted repeatedly. In the decades after the Second World War, most Pacific peoples began to regain political autonomy as many former colonies became independent nations. However, many islands and archipelagos, such as Rapa Nui (Chile), Hawai'i (the United States), and New Caledonia (France), were incorporated into or remain under the political authority of Western nations.

The arrival of Western explorers, colonists, and missionaries had devastating and far-reaching consequences for the peoples and arts of Oceania. In addition to manufactured goods such as cloth, metal, boats, and containers, which often quickly supplanted earlier indigenous art forms, the crews of European and American vessels introduced previously unknown diseases, which in some places killed as much as ninety percent of the population. As virtually all cultural knowledge in Oceanic societies at that time was transmitted orally, the massive depopulation of many areas of the Pacific threatened or interrupted the continuity of many art traditions. The conversion of nearly all Oceania's peoples to Christianity resulted in a widespread and, in some areas, continuing iconoclasm in which countless sacred images and objects were destroyed. Ironically, many of Polynesia's finest works of sculpture were preserved by the same missionaries responsible for their destruction or who brought them back to Europe as evidence of their evangelical success. The active pacification of all areas of the region under the various colonial regimes eventually ended customary warfare and



Figure 7. The contemporary Aboriginal artists Rover Thomas (ca. 1925–1998) and Paddy Carlton (ca. 1925–2006) painting in Kununurra, Western Australia, in 1996. Photograph: Eric Kjellgren

practices such as headhunting, resulting in the decline or disappearance of their associated ceremonies and art forms. Due to these and other factors, by the mid-twentieth century, many Oceanic art traditions had been abandoned or neglected, although some, especially the fiber arts, continued. Since the 1970s, however, there has been a profound and far-reaching renaissance of Oceanic art and culture. Many art forms and cultural practices that were repressed under Western colonialism have been revived, becoming powerful symbols of ethnic and national identity. For Pacific peoples who live amid majority settler societies, such as the Māori, Hawaiians, and Aboriginal Australians, this cultural renaissance bears witness to their enduring identity as Pacific peoples and ongoing resistance to assimilation. Today, artists across the Pacific continue to perpetuate many of their customary art forms. In addition, the 1970s saw the beginning of Australia's thriving contemporary Aboriginal painting movement (fig. 7), and Polynesia is home to a growing number of contemporary artists, including members of the Māori and Polynesian diaspora communities in Aotearoa, and the Hawaiians, whose artists are gaining increasing recognition in the global art world.

Oceania and Western Culture

Ever since the first European explorers reached home with reports of the lands and peoples they encountered,

the Pacific has held an enduring place in the Western imagination and has left an indelible mark on Western art and culture. In addition to influencing philosophy, fine art, and literature, the arts and cultures of the Pacific gave rise to many aspects of popular culture, including surfing, tattooing, bungee jumping, and the ubiquitous tiki bars of the 1950s and 1960s.

In the 1770s, explorers' accounts of Tahiti had a profound influence on Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the philosophers of the Romantic movement, who idealized the Tahitians and other Pacific peoples as Noble Savages, living unfettered by the conventions of Western society. This conception of Pacific peoples as the inhabitants of an earthly paradise of languid sensual pleasures still endures, perpetuated by Western escapist fantasies and travel brochures. But it is countered by a second and far more negative view of Pacific Islanders, often used to characterize the peoples of New Guinea and Island Melanesia, which portrays them as violent and cruel, obsessed with activities such as warfare, headhunting, and cannibalism. These stereotypes are false and demeaning, denying the essential humanity of Pacific peoples and obscuring the true complexity and sophistication of their cultures and art traditions.

Romanticized conceptions of Pacific peoples have lured a succession of Western writers and artists to Oceania, beginning in 1842, when Herman Melville jumped

ship from a whaling vessel in the Marquesas Islands and later traveled to Tahiti. Back home, Melville wrote a succession of widely popular fictionalized accounts of his experiences in his novels *Typee*, *Omoo*, and *Mardi*. Melville was followed by a long line of authors, including Pierre Loti (the nom de plume of French writer and artist Louis-Marie-Julien Viaud), Robert Louis Stevenson, Mark Twain, Jack London, James Michener, Thor Heyerdahl, and others. The Pacific's most famous expatriate artist, Paul Gauguin, who arguably did more than any other figure to establish the idyllic vision of the Pacific in the Western imagination, arrived in Tahiti in 1891, later settling in the Marquesas Islands, where he died and was buried in 1903.

In the early twentieth century, Oceanic works were part of the broader group of African, Native American, Precolumbian, and Pacific objects that served as sources of visual inspiration for Pablo Picasso and other European modernist artists. Many of the German Expressionists, including Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Erich Heckel, Emil Nolde, and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, also admired Oceanic works, occasionally including examples of Pacific sculpture in their still lifes and integrating elements inspired by Oceanic imagery into their visual vocabulary. However,

Oceanic art had its most profound impact on the Surrealists. In the fanciful geography of the renowned 1929 Surrealist Map of the World (fig. 8), the greatly enlarged archipelagos of the Pacific occupy a central position and many prominent Surrealists, including André Breton, Max Ernst, Matta (Roberto Matta Echaurren), and Wolfgang Paalen, owned Oceanic works, from which they drew both philosophical and visual inspiration.

Today, the extraordinary accomplishments of Pacific artists have been recognized, and Oceanic art has taken its rightful place among the world's great art traditions. Given the region's astounding diversity and complexity, to encompass all Oceania's hundreds of art traditions within the scope of this volume would be impossible. Thus, as a guide to reading Oceanic art, this book should be seen not as an encyclopedia but an anthology. It is a selection of readings intended as an introduction both to the enormous diversity of Pacific art traditions and to the fundamental themes that repeatedly unite them despite the vast cultural, religious, and physical distances by which they often are separated. It is in this ocean of creativity that I invite the reader to become immersed.

Figure 8. The Surrealist Map of the World, published in the journal *Variétés* in 1929. From *Le Surréalisme en 1929*, special issue of *Variétés*, June 1929, reproduced in Maurer 1984, vol. 2, p. 556

