

FUTURE DIRECTIONS IN THE STUDY OF THE ARTS OF OCEANIA

Book Review by Rod Ewins

In *Mankind*, December 1983, 14 (2):141-2

Though this review was written nearly twenty years ago, I find on re-reading it that while reviewing what the authors wrote I was also pleading a case for the consideration of some of the issues they *didn't* write about, which sadly are still relevant today. I present it in very slightly updated form here, in the hope that it may still stimulate thought on some of these issues. RE, Oct 2000.

Future Directions in the Study of the Arts of Oceania. Edited by Judith Huntsman. Reprinted from the Journal of the Polynesian Society Volume 90. No 2, June 1981. Polynesian Society. Department of Anthropology. University of Auckland. Auckland. 1981. Pp. 68. No price indicated. No ISBN indited.

This slim volume would benefit by having a subtitle: Symposium Papers from the 49th ANZAAS Conference. The ambitious title as it stands, while quite appropriate for a symposium, promises more than a collection of five disparate articles can hope to deliver. Taken for what they are, however, they possess considerable interest and justify this compilation. A regrettable (acknowledged) omission, evidently on the grounds of its publication elsewhere, is the sixth paper presented at that particular symposium. Regrettable not only because it was the sole paper by a Pacific Islander, but also because it addressed directly the paradox confronting today's Islanders — the pressure from within and without for development and change, with a simultaneous and apparently contradictory pressure for the preservation of cultural integrity. This would therefore have been an appropriate 'keynote' paper, setting the stage for the rather more specialized discussions presented by the five New Zealand University-based writers.

In the Postscript, the Symposium's organizer, Professor Sidney Mead, describes the papers as covering 'a wider range than at most previous conferences on the Pacific' — specifically, wood-carving (Bernard Kernot), music and dance (Peter Crowe, Allan Thomas and Jennifer Shennan) and oral narratives (Judith Huntsman). The emphasis on the performing as distinct from the plastic arts is probably fairly representative of the bias of scholarship in the art of Oceania at present, and this in itself is interesting. It is reflected in the priority given music and dance by the UNESCO Oceanic Cultures Project set up in the late 60s, which Crowe in his paper supposes 'were thought more vulnerable than others, such as handicrafts'.

It may just as possibly be that even those who should know better will persist in regarding the plastic arts of Island peoples as *handicraft* — an inherently patronizing and belittling term. Suffice it to say that all of the arts of Oceania are vulnerable. They are woven through the fabric

of these societies, both less isolated and less internally self-sufficient than the arts of Western society, and thus very sensitive to social change and upheaval.

By and large the papers are engagingly written. Perhaps because they were verbally presented, most of them avoid the ponderousness and obscurantist jargon that besets much writing in the relevant fields. Without prejudice to the others, I found Peter Crowe's paper in ethnomusicology had considerable relevance to study of the arts as a whole. In it is discernable the very familiar desperation of the field worker in a vast and complex field, where the information he seeks is slipping quietly into oblivion faster than he can hope to record it. At the same time he wrestles with the ethical problem that Meleisea (1980) in his paper summed up as 'who is preserving what? For whom? Why?' Crowe endorses the involvement of local communities in research and recording, while acknowledging discouraging experience to date. Which is not surprising given the lack of clear incentives, education, and self-confidence that exist in most communities. He speaks of the need for 'culture history' (I would prefer 'indigenous arts', stressing currency rather than history) in island school curricula, but while perceiving some pitfalls, he fails to note the need first to prepare knowledgeable, articulate and sensitive teachers for these curricula. Collection of data continues to be very important to what Crowe calls 'the salvage operation', but the preparation of arts educators and relevant course-content may be even more urgently needed, yet is sadly neglected by governments, universities, and researchers.

Each of the authors accepts the necessity for traditional arts to change if they are to persist. None, I feel, confronts the issue of how (or whether) the new work is to be evaluated. Fagg (1973) has persuasively argued that value judgements are a prerequisite of any study of art which hopes to go beyond mere taxonomy, and a taxonomic approach to art is certainly one which misses its essence. The excellence of any society's artistic achievement is as much a function of its selective judgement as of its skill. Traditional art forms, while certainly permitting personal style, were generally highly conventionalised, the conventions often embodying aesthetic criteria that were familiar to artist and audience alike. As the societies change, and conventional forms are modified or abandoned, the artist faces the problem of not merely producing art which is culturally distinctive, and which (if it adopts a Western view of art) should be individualistic, but also of developing and imposing new criteria of excellence. To applaud artists' performance merely because they are Islanders is the acme of patronism, and would condemn them to complacent mediocrity. Obviously it is unacceptable to impose value systems on the artists. Perhaps the answer is to seek these from the artists, discussing and debating them on their own terms. Any fear of intrusiveness or cultural insensitivity should be tempered with the memory that all artists function from a cultural background, perfectly or imperfectly perceived by them. It neither validates nor excuses their performances — though when accessed sensitively and intelligently, it may enrich them immeasurably.

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REFERENCES

1. MELEISEA, Malama 1980. We Want the Forest, Yet Fear the Spirits: Culture and Change in Western Samoa. *Pacific Perspective*. Vo1. 9, 21-29.
2. FAGG. William. 1973. In Search of Meaning in African Art. In Anthony Forge (ed.), *Primitive Art and Society*. Oxford University Press, London.

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