

**OCEANIA**  
**Art of the Pacific Islands in The Metropolitan Museum of Art.**  
**By Eric Kjellgren.**

*New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art; New Haven and London: Yale University Press. 2007. xi, 354 pp. (maps, coloured photos, B&W photos, illus.) US\$45.00, cloth. ISBN 978-0-300-12030-1.*

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'You can't judge a book by its cover' goes the old saw. But without arresting covers books may languish on shelves, seldom opened, especially art books with a visually-oriented target readership. Happily, here the cover is both interesting and elegantly understated, and *does* foreshadow the book's high design standards. On the front, well over actual size, a little Tongan whale-tooth ivory female figure becomes heroic against a plain background, while on the back is a superb mother-of-pearl decorated fibre shield from the Solomon Islands. Both objects display considerable aesthetic 'presence', both are rare, and both were produced by small specialist groups sometimes containing identifiable 'masters,' so they fit the Western proclivity for treating the material productions of other cultures as though they were produced within the same overarching rubric as Western art, which of course most were not.

Museums struggle with this issue and often duck it, displaying objects exactly as they would Western art. So do many books on the art of other cultures, where the way of photographing the objects, undeniably beautiful, generally isolates and decontextualises them completely. The section on Pacific aesthetics (6) shows Kjellgren's nuanced understanding of the issue, and the strategies he employs are that while each object is indeed highlighted as a masterpiece in the familiar 'ethnographic treasures' mode, he does much to re-contextualise them in both text and supporting illustrations. The Introduction is a very readable overview of the nature of and concerns addressed by Pacific art through pre-history and history to the present. Then come substantial one to two page essays on each of the items illustrated, and here the author is to be commended for having scoured the ethnographic literature for both physical details of the items in question, and most importantly, their historic, and where applicable current, roles in their parent societies. These are enhanced by the second strategy, which is to provide, in many cases, black and white archival images of the objects being either made or used. They are often treasures in themselves.

Such devices are not novel, of course. Museum labels and ethnographic publications have been employing them for decades. Which actually makes the author's task more demanding; really the only way for his book to move beyond the familiar is through its quality, by locating the best sources currently available for both essays and illustrations. I think he has succeeded, and it is this which makes this considerably more than just another coffee-table book of lovely pictures with trite captions.

The nature of the enterprise, though, does lead one to ruminate on the value museum catalogues can have in advancing scholarship. For decades, museums have been publishing large-format, sumptuously-illustrated didactic works, often accompanying painstakingly assembled and curated exhibitions. Some have become key, even definitive, works on their specific topics — generally, the narrower the focus and more specialist the topic, the more likely this is to happen, particularly when essays are by noted specialists. The broad lens and more diffused focus of volumes like this one, provide limited prospect of adding new knowledge, and no single author could be expected to be at the cutting edge across such a diverse field. Nor could their scholarship hope to draw even primarily

on their own original fieldwork across such a span, nor even on incredibly time-consuming research into primary sources; rather, as discussed above, it has to rely on a careful distillation of many secondary published sources. That is certainly a worthy enterprise in its own right, but compendia are seldom where specialist researchers seek, or find, new information.

Finally, no single collection, even one of the Metropolitan's almost unbelievable wealth, can ever represent all of Oceania's many cultures equally. Kjellgren points out (20) that their greatest strength lies in Melanesian sculpture, and the book reflects that, New Guinea alone having 123 pages devoted to 85 objects, while the whole of Polynesia (including Aotearoa/New Zealand) has only 44 pages and 20 objects. The large section Island Southeast Asia here (68 pages, 42 objects) also apparently has more to do with collection strength than Oceanian cultural continuity.

As pointed out (21), this publication is not intended as a complete survey. It is aimed to entice a general readership, and they will find much reliably-sourced information, presented in a readable and visually appealing manner. Even though specialists may find little of direct relevance to their particular fields, many do use such easy-access works to note cross-cultural similarities and differences. As one of that group, I find much of interest here and do not anticipate that it will languish on the shelf unused. I compliment the author, photographer(s), book designer and publishers on a fine production.

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