

# **SAMOAN ART & ARTISTS: O Measina a Samoa.**

**By Sean Mallon.**

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press. 2002. 224 pp. (Coloured photos, maps, illustrations.) US\$19.95, paper. ISBN 0-8248-2675-2.

This book review was published in *Pacific Affairs* 77(2) July 2004

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One's first impression when opening this book is its high quality, with clean functional design, good paper and production, and a plethora of beautiful photographs. That said, it is immediately obvious that this is no mere coffee-table book, but a serious work of painstaking scholarship, in which photographs are not mere "eye candy" but essential components of the exegesis. And what an ambitious project! It sets out to document "the creativity of Samoan artists over the last 200 years" and to do this looks not only to Samoa but also to New Zealand and "other places where Samoan communities are well established" (p.9). It is a truly formidable task to cover, in 224 pages, an historical horizon from the Lapita culture to the present, and to do this across a range of artforms that spans the whole range of plastic arts up to the most contemporary, and includes also the performing arts.

Given this, what is surprising is just how much information the author has managed to pack in. He has the enormous advantage over predecessors like Te Rangi Hiroa of being able to use both archival and contemporary images from many sources, to

visualize, contextualize and enliven the text. Its carefully-assembled data and images are the book's great strengths. Social anthropologists may find less original analysis and theory than they would wish, but to write a book about art that is both technically and historically compendious, and at the same time speculative, is probably almost impossible, and the author was probably wise not to try.

Nonetheless, he does note the debates surrounding issues of change and sustained agency, tradition and innovation, and authenticity, and indeed his stance on these informs the entire text. Scanning documented history, he points out that the changes frequently modified and redirected Samoans' arts just as other aspects of their lives, but seldom stifled them. What persists is distinctively Samoan, even in the selectively maintained traditional customs and practices, and appropriation of the most contemporary idioms, that exist within Samoan diasporas.

The chapters deal with the different artforms individually, from ancient ceramic and stone remains, through tapa- and mat-making and other ancient media, right through to photography and film-making and contemporary music. The author has had to make a strategic decision about how to organise his information, and like most before him has opted for the "categories familiar to the outsider". This despite acknowledging Neich's perceptive statement that "the focus of most aesthetic effort in Samoa is not on the objects themselves but on the way they are used, worn and exchanged ...", and Kaepler's pithy "artistic and aesthetic structures are social structures". (All quotes p.25). One might wish that he had adopted the brave, if difficult and perhaps precarious,

attempt to organise his information along those lines rather than the easier typological classification. The danger of which approach, manifest here, is that the artforms remain discrete, with too little of the interweaving and integration that occurs in the arts and other social lives of all Pacific societies.

There is not space in this short review to attempt to detail each of the chapters and their artforms, suffice to say that each displays a high standard of research and thoroughness, engagingly written, and as a non-Samoa specialist I found them all, without exception, fascinating reading. Notwithstanding my few quibbles above, I think this is a fine book, and an eminently worthwhile addition to the corpus of Pacific material culture publication. It presents not mere history nor taxonomy, but a picture of their enormous creativity, and also their resilience, as Samoans continually treat change as stimulus rather than threat.

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