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*The Marquesan Collection at the British Museum, London:
Genesis, growth and stasis*

*A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of*

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Abstract

This thesis examines the formation of the collection from the Marquesas Islands, French Polynesia, at the British Museum in London. Specifically, it investigates the historical and museological factors which have influenced acquisition over time, and questions why the collection was not expanded in the second half of the twentieth century. Marquesan culture is outlined, in order to contextualise the circumstances in which objects were first collected, and to gain insight into both indigenous and outsider priorities in these exchanges. The dramatic impact of contact, and colonisation by the French, facilitates an understanding of the major changes in artistic production over the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which led to the cessation of certain art forms, the persistence of others, and the creation of completely new categories. This establishes, therefore, what was available for collection. Archival research served to trace objects to the moment of collection, and to reveal the main characters and transactions which led to their acquisition by the Museum. It emerges that individual collectors and curators played a central role in the growth and composition of the collection – attitudes of the latter being strongly influenced by contemporary anthropological theory.

The main factors which contributed to the stasis of the collection are the relatively limited availability of Marquesan objects in comparison to earlier periods, combined with the persistence of negative attitudes towards objects which demonstrated significant external influence. The manner in which the collection has been presented to the public via exhibitions is also studied, revealing the multiple redefinitions of the objects and their role within the Museum and scholarly discourse over the course of the collection's existence. A clear and persistent bias towards the earliest collected material becomes apparent throughout. The thesis argues that the composition of the collection has served to maintain this bias, and to restrict the development of new exhibition initiatives, which may have created the impetus for renewed collecting. A

reassessment is suggested, in light of changing museum practice and the contemporary relevance of the collection for Marquesans.

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Reader's note

British Museum registration numbers vary significantly in their format, and while they may appear inconsistent, care has been taken to reproduce them accurately throughout.

Where the word 'museum' appears with an upper case 'M', it is the British Museum which is being referred to.

Where the word 'Māori' appears without a macron on the 'a', this is a faithful reproduction of exhibition or publication titles.

Table of Contents

ABSTRACT	II
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	IV
READER'S NOTE	VI
LIST OF FIGURES.....	X
GLOSSARY	XIV

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION.....	1
<i>The Marquesan Collection at the British Museum, London: Genesis, growth and stasis</i>	1
<i>The research problem and the aim of this investigation</i>	1
<i>The structure of the thesis</i>	3
<i>Methodology</i>	5
<i>Conceptual framework</i>	7

CHAPTER TWO

THE MARQUESAS ISLANDS: PEOPLE, CULTURE AND HISTORY.....	10
<i>Introduction</i>	10
PART ONE: PREHISTORY	11
<i>Ancestors of the Polynesians</i>	11
<i>Creating and locating 'Polynesia'</i>	11
<i>Oceanic genetics, archaeology and linguistics: Eastward movement and entangled pathways</i>	12
<i>Settling the Marquesas</i>	13
<i>Cultural change in prehistory</i>	14
<i>Evidence from oral tradition</i>	16
<i>Marquesan socio-political structure</i>	17
<i>Tapu and hierarchy</i>	19
<i>Feasting and power</i>	20
<i>Artists and production</i>	20
<i>Art, Marquesan society and cultural change</i>	21
PART TWO: CONTACT HISTORY	23
<i>First contacts</i>	23
<i>Trade and exploration</i>	25
<i>The nineteenth century: Sustained intrusion</i>	26
<i>Missionary endeavours</i>	27

<i>French annexation</i>	29
<i>Disease and destruction</i>	30
<i>Colonial control and cultural change</i>	31
<i>Tourists and ethnologists</i>	32
<i>Twentieth century transitions</i>	33
<i>Conclusion</i>	35

CHAPTER THREE

THE GENESIS, GROWTH AND STASIS OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM’S MARQUESAN COLLECTION.....	37
<i>Introduction</i>	37
<i>The British Museum and the Pacific</i>	39
<i>The beginnings of the Marquesan collection</i>	40
<i>Marquesan politics and ‘trifling presents’: the first half of the nineteenth century</i>	43
<i>Collectors and curators: the second half of the nineteenth century</i>	46
<i>The problem of culture contact</i>	48
<i>Maintaining the collection</i>	51
<i>Marquesan innovations</i>	53
<i>The heights of the late nineteenth century</i>	55
<i>The twentieth century: seeking the Marquesan past</i>	58
<i>Mid-twentieth century: narrowing opportunities</i>	64
<i>The later twentieth century: approaching obscurity</i>	65
<i>Conclusion</i>	66

CHAPTER FOUR

THE PRESENTATION OF THE COLLECTION.....	69
<i>Introduction</i>	69
<i>Pacific exploration and exotic curiosities</i>	70
<i>Expansion and neglect</i>	73
<i>A new era: ethnography and science</i>	74
<i>Ethnography and empire: the 20th century</i>	76
<i>Opportunity for change: the Museum of Mankind</i>	78
<i>Universality and fine art</i>	81
<i>The twenty-first century: looking back and moving forward</i>	83
<i>Conclusion</i>	87

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS OF THE COLLECTION.....	90
<i>Introduction</i>	90
PART ONE: THEORY AND MUSEUM PRACTICE.....	91

<i>The ongoing problematization of culture contact</i>	91
<i>Locating meaning</i>	92
<i>The collection as an embodiment of indigenous agency</i>	93
PART TWO: MARQUESAN ARTISTIC CHANGE AND REVIVAL	97
<i>Reviewing cultural change and hybridity</i>	97
<i>Halted trajectories and the existing collection</i>	97
<i>Artistic revival: carving in contemporary practice</i>	99
<i>The maintenance of tradition</i>	102
PART THREE: RECONFIGURING THE COLLECTION	103
<i>Decentralising authority and achieving authenticity</i>	103
<i>Towards a reassessment of the collection</i>	104
<i>Raising awareness</i>	105
<i>Marquesan approaches to heritage preservation</i>	106
<i>Contemporary collecting</i>	107
<i>Exhibitions</i>	109
<i>Preserving the potential for new narratives</i>	110
CHAPTER SIX	
CONCLUSION	112
APPENDIX A	
SELECTED CATALOGUE	117
APPENDIX B	
LISTING OF THE COLLECTION	154
APPENDIX C	
INTERVIEW NOTES: KAHEE TAUPOTINI AND ANIHOKA TEPEA	169
APPENDIX D	
FIELD COLLECTION	173
APPENDIX E	
ETHICS DOCUMENTATION	184
BIBLIOGRAPHY	

List of figures

Chapter One

Figure 1 Map of the Marquesas Islands

Chapter Two

Figure 2 Cultural regions of Oceania

Figure 3 Lapita pottery fragment

Figure 4 Polynesian linguistic family tree

Figure 5 Feather headdress, *ta'avaha*

Figure 6 Human hair garment, *ouoho*

Figure 7 *Me'ae* in Hatiheu

Figure 8 Chief Honu depicted by William Hodges

Figure 9 Taipu Valley, Nuku Hiva

Figure 10 Cathedral at Vaitahu, Tahuata

Figure 11 French residence at Taioha'e, Nuku Hiva

Chapter Three

Figure 12 Acquisitions by decade column chart

Figure 13 Composition of collection by object category pie chart

Figure 14 Object categories by acquisition year bubble chart

Figure 15 Canoe from Nukutavake, Tuamotu Archipelago

Figure 16 Club collected on Cook's second voyage

- Figure 17* Sling collected on Cook's second voyage
- Figure 18* 'Ornaments and weapons at the Marquesas', Cook atlas
- Figure 19* Comptroller's Bay, Nuku Hiva
- Figure 20* *Parahua* collected by Belcher
- Figure 21* *Tokotoko pio'o* collected by Belcher
- Figure 22* *Pu taiana* collected by Belcher
- Figure 23* Pair of seed leg ornaments collected by Belcher
- Figure 24* Pair of human hair anklets collected by Belcher
- Figure 25* *Vaeake*, stilt, Christy Collection
- Figure 26* Pair of reconstructed *vaeake*, Musée de Tahiti et des Îles
- Figure 27* 'U'uhe, porpoise tooth ear ornaments, from Alfred Hirt
- Figure 28* *Tokotoko pio'o*, chief's staff, from Reverend Sparrow Simpson
- Figure 29* Tattooing powder, donated by Linton Palmer
- Figure 30* *Tiki ivi po'o*, bone cylinder ornament, donated by Linton Palmer
- Figure 31* *Epaepa*, tobacco pipe, Bragge collection
- Figure 32* Second *epaepa*, tobacco pipe, Bragge collection
- Figure 33* 'Village de la baie de la Madre de Dios (Iles Marquises)', Du Petit-Thouars atlas
- Figure 34* *Uhikana*, head-ornament, Vancouver collection
- Figure 35* *Ta'a puaika*, ear piercer, Vancouver collection
- Figure 36* Shell pendant, Vancouver collection
- Figure 37* Tobacco container, purchased from Christian

- Figure 38* *Umete*, wooden bowl, purchased from Christian
- Figure 39* *Pa'e kaha*, headdress, purchased from Nordmann
- Figure 40* Engraved celluloid plate for *pa'e kaha*, Musée de l'Homme
- Figure 41* Bone pendant by Ronald Rootuehine

Chapter Four

- Figure 42* *Tahi poniu*, neck ornament
- Figure 43* *Tahi poniu*, reverse of neck ornament
- Figure 44* Cook collection labels
- Figure 45* First section of the exhibition *Power and Taboo*
- Figure 46* Marquesan objects on display in *Power and Taboo*
- Figure 47* Marquesan objects on display in *Power and Taboo*
- Figure 48* Final section of *Power and Taboo*

Chapter Five

- Figure 49* *Pa'e kaha*, headdress at Vaipa'e'e Museum
- Figure 50* Contemporary *tiki* figures at Tohua Hikokua
- Figure 51* Mary and baby Jesus, Cathedral at Taioha'e
- Figure 52* Cathedral doors and carvings by Frère Gerard and Damien Hatarau
- Figure 53* Cathedral carvings showing head of *tiki*
- Figure 54* Kahee Taupotini in his studio, Taioha'e
- Figure 55* Replica of 'Tiki Moke' on display in Vaipa'e'e Museum
- Figure 56* *Tiki Moke* by Anihoka Tepea
- Figure 57* Marquesan objects at the Marchè de Pape'ete

- Figure 58* Replicas of Polynesian deity figures, Centre de Métiers d'Art
- Figure 59* A'a, from Rurutu in the Austral Islands
- Figure 60* The museum at Vaipa'e'e, Ua Huka
- Figure 61* Inside the museum at Vaipa'e'e
- Figure 62* *Tohua* at Hohoi, Ua Pou
- Figure 63* Marquesan delegation at the opening of *Adorning the World*
- Figure 64* Centre for Anthropology display case, British Museum

Glossary

'akatia – land/property owner

aoa - banyan tree

etua – a god

haka'iki – chief

hakakai - large ear ornaments made of ivory

heana - commemorative human sacrifice

hue ehi – bowl of carved coconut shell (*hue* is gourd, *ehi* is coconut)

ipu ehi – bowl of carved coconut shell

ke'a tuki popoi - stone *popoi* pounder

ko'ina - feast

ko'oka – round wooden bowl

ma – fermented breadfruit paste

mata'eina'a – kin group

me'ae – sacred ceremonial place

mió – *Thespesia populnea*

ouoho - garment made of human hair

pa'e kaha – head ornament made of curved plates

paepae – house platform

parahua – long paddle-ended club

pareo – dyed garment made of cloth

popoi – breadfruit preparation

pu ihu – nose flute

pu taiana/taiata – bone ear ornament

ta'a puaika/puaina – ear piercer

ta'avaha - headdress of black cockerel plumes

tahi poniu – abrus seed neck ornament

tamanu – species *Calophyllum inophyllum*

tapa - barkcloth

tapu – divine/sacred power

tapuvae – stilt step

tau'a – shamanistic priest

tiki – human image

tiki ivi po'o – bone ornament

toa – warrior

tohua - ceremonial plaza

tokotoko pio'o/to'oto'o pio'o – chief's staff

tou – species *Cordia subcordata*

tuhuka (*tuhuna* in the south) – craft or religious specialist

tuhuka/tuhuna o'ono – religious specialist/hereditary priest

uhikana – pearl and turtleshell head ornament

umete - decorated wooden bowl, lidded

‘u’uhe – turtleshell ear ornament

vaeake – stilt

vaka - canoe

Sources: Kjellgren (2005); Thomas (1990); Dordillon (1931 [1904])