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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.
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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 puika/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
ʻu’uhe – turtleshell ear ornament

va eake – stilt

vaka - canoe

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