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## **The Curious Case of Non-Western Objects – From “Artificial Curiosities” to Objects of Identity**

**A Discussion about Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin,  
Captain James Cook, and Museums**

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I still vividly remember how striking it was when I first walked into the Museum für Völkerkunde und Schweizerisches Museum für Volkskunde in 1984 and saw, in the midst of this august and medieval-feeling institution, the towering façade of a New Guinea spirit house (*haus tambaran* in Melanesian pidgin) replete with the original orange colored fruit and dramatic bark paintings used to decorate the exterior. It was Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin who, in the course of her study of these magnificent structures, arranged to have building materials for one shipped back to Basel for assembly and display in the museum.<sup>1</sup>

Like the iconic American anthropologist, Margaret Mead, Hauser-Schäublin first worked in New Guinea – in her case, first among the Iatmul (where Mead had worked with Gregory Bateson) and then among the Abelam, a people living in the Sepik Hills of Papua New Guinea, distant neighbors of the Mountain Arapesh, whom Mead had studied. Later, as had Mead and Bateson, Hauser-Schäublin also worked in the neighboring country of Indonesia, on the island of Bali.<sup>2</sup> Like Mead, her prolific and productive career includes extensive time conducting fieldwork and collecting ethnographic data as well as much time spent studying ethnographic artifacts and organizing exhibits that displayed them. Thus her career has entailed not just research, teaching and

scholarly writing, but also organizing ethnographic exhibits on the arts and cultures of South Pacific peoples as well as publications that reach out to a more general public.<sup>3</sup> In doing so, she, like Mead, has contributed to making anthropology relevant to audiences well beyond those a scholar usually encounters in the course of her academic career.

### **The Cook/Forster Collection of “Artificial Curiosities”**

In addition to the Balinese and the Abelam, there is another culture, another era, and another individual that have also been a focus of much of Prof. Dr. Hauser-Schäublin’s academic and curatorial attention: 18<sup>th</sup> century England, the three voyages to the South Pacific made by the British explorer, Captain James Cook, and the objects collected by Cook and others on these voyages (see Hauser-Schäublin and Gundolf Krüger 1998; Urban 1998).<sup>4</sup> Through a series of political and social connections – themselves historically indicative of the complex royal lineages that intertwined the ruling monarchies of England with many other aristocratic families throughout Europe, members of the Royal House of Hanover in Lower Saxony, where the University of Göttingen is located, were related to the King of England (King George II and his son, King George III). Because of this British-Hanover connection, a large number of objects – referred to at the time as “artificial curiosities” (in contrast to such “natural curiosities” as botanical specimens, dead birds, etc. that were also being collected) – that Cook and others who had accompanied him on voyages to the South Pacific between 1768 and Cook’s untimely death in 1779, came to reside in the Academic Museum at the University of Göttingen, from where they were later moved to the Ethnographic Collection at the Institute of Cultural and Social Anthropology at the same University. The collection is named the Cook/Forster Collection because it includes many objects collected by the German naturalist Johann Reinhold Forster and his son Georg who accompanied Cook on his second voyage to the South Pacific. Eventually, Hauser-Schäublin came to hold the chair of Cultural and Social Anthropology at Göttingen, where she was responsible for the Institute of Cultural and Social Anthropology and thus the Cook/Forster Collection.

### **“The Winding Paths of the Objects”: Ethnographic Objects as Items of Exchange**

From the beginning of her ethnographic research, Hauser-Schäublin has been interested in the study of objects and material culture, first in her fieldwork among the Iatmul and the Abelam and then in her fieldwork in Bali, but always within their larger cultural context as parts of ritual complexes and other social processes. In Hauser-Schäublin’s article in the journal *Oceania*, “The Thrill of the Line, the String and the Frond, or



Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin and Jörg Hauser in front of the *haus tambaran* at the Museum für Völkerkunde und Schweizerisches Museum für Volkskunde, Basel.

Photo: Jörg Hauser, 1981.



Lomeni, Ren, “Burre” (Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin), Tambanjoe and Waina in front of a container of building materials destined for the *haus tambaran* in Basel.

Photo: Jörg Hauser, Wewak, May 7, 1979.

Why the Abelam Are a Non-Cloth Culture,” we see the value of the German/Swiss academic tradition in anthropology whereby two different fieldwork sites and two distinct dissertations are required for the scholar to achieve the Habilitation degree (Hauser-Schäublin 1996:81). In this article, Hauser-Schäublin draws upon her extensive study of Balinese and other Indonesian textiles to discuss the contrasting culture of the Abelam, where cloth – or cloth-like substitutes such as barkcloth – is of little interest as a material for cultural and artistic elaboration (Hauser-Schäublin, Nabholz-Kartaschoff and Ramseyer 1991). Instead, twine used in knotting netbags (*bilums*) decorated with complex and dazzling geometric designs are the focus of cultural industry and aesthetic and symbolic elaboration, as well as bold paintings done on sago palm fronds.

In 1998, turning her attention to the Institute’s Cook/Forster Collection at the University of Göttingen, Hauser-Schäublin and her colleague Gundolf Krüger edited a volume in German and English about the objects in the collection titled *James Cook: Gifts and Treasures from the South Seas*. In her essay in the volume, “Exchanged Value: The Winding Paths of the Objects,” Hauser-Schäublin described how this collection of 18<sup>th</sup> century objects was made, focusing on the different types of exchanges of material goods that took place between the British and the Pacific Islanders they encountered

on their travels throughout the Pacific Ocean. The most important type of exchange that went on between the British and the Pacific Islanders was the exchange of manufactured goods, such as metal knives, axes, beads, and cloth, for food and water. The British were dependent upon the goodwill of the islanders to provide them with fresh food – fruit, coconuts, yams, and – most highly prized by both parties – pigs. However, many of the sailors and other men on board, including Johann and Georg Forster, were also interested in obtaining examples of local manufacture, items such as woven baskets, fans, conch shell trumpets, and tapa cloth. These items appealed to the British as souvenirs of their voyages or gifts to be brought back to family and friends. In some cases, the objects were sold to wealthy patrons back in England who desired them for their own “cabinets of curiosities,” a favorite pastime among aristocratic Europeans that developed during the 18<sup>th</sup> century as more and more voyages of discovery were being made. A third source of objects was as gifts. Cook and some of the other high-ranking men received gifts of local manufacture from indigenous rulers, the exchange of gifts between them being a means of creating an on-going social relationship between Cook and the various rulers (Hauser-Schäublin 1998:11–29; see also Thomas 1991).

Hauser-Schäublin points out the irony inherent in Cook’s death, which occurred on the big island of Hawaii in 1779, as Cook was fatally attacked by a Hawaiian who killed him with a knife that had been made by one of his own blacksmiths (Hauser-Schäublin 1998:26). In this article she also contributes her own thoughts to a famous debate in anthropology between two well-known American anthropologists, Marshall Sahlins (1995, 1981) and Gananath Obeyesekere (1992), about the meaning of Cook’s death. She suggests two ways, in addition to the manufactured knife, in which objects contributed to his death, both of which were overlooked or not mentioned by Sahlins or Obeyesekere. On the one hand, Sahlins justified the Hawaiians’ divine identification of Cook with their god of peace and fertility, Lono, on the basis of a report made by one of Cook’s own men in his journal. However, Sahlins failed to notice, or to mention, that there was other evidence reported in this same journal that Hauser-Schäublin interprets as indicating that the Hawaiians may have also associated Cook with their god of war, Ku. “In my opinion,” she says, “the feather portrait made of Cook [a gift to Cook from the Hawaiian king] strongly points to this. [...] Cook himself, however, had provided signs for identification not only with Lono, but with Ku as well.” (Hauser-Schäublin 1998:28).

When Cook was forced to return to the Big Island because of a broken foremast, his ship would no longer have been sailing into Kealakekua Bay with the same square white sail that it had originally had hoisted when it had first appeared to the Hawaiians in January 1779. Hauser-Schäublin notes how similar this square white sail would have been to the pictorial symbol of Lono, the god of peace – a square white banner hoisted on a standard (Hauser-Schäublin 1998:28). According to Hauser-Schäublin, since Lono’s emblem was now missing on Cook’s ship, and the peaceful ritual period of Lono had likewise ended for the Hawaiians, Cook now confronted the Hawaiians “as

an avenger and a warrior,” thus contributing to the Hawaiians fear of him and a motive for killing him (Hauser-Schäublin 1998:29).

There is another sense in which the objects in the Cook/Forster collection can be seen as items of exchange besides their origin. And that is in terms of how 350 items arrived at the Ethnographic Collection in Göttingen (then known as the Academic Museum) through the auspices of the Councillors of the Royal House of Hanover’s letter of request to the British king, George III. The king, in turn, made a gift of the items to the Göttingen Museum (Urban 1998:59). Thus, what had been true of those items given to Captain Cook by rulers of South Pacific societies, was likewise true of the Cook Collection (the Forster items in the collection were primarily acquired through purchase from Forster): they were gifts from one ruler (King George) to another (indirectly, to the Royal House of Hanover, via the University Museum); a token of friendship and a means of reinforcing an important social and political relationship.

## **The Transformation of Ethnographic Objects into Objects of Identity**

For many years the items in the Cook-Forster collection remained housed at the Institute of Cultural and Social Anthropology at Göttingen, surviving such cataclysmic events as World War II.

Sometimes the items were used in teaching. Early in the 19<sup>th</sup> century individuals such as Goethe learned of them from friends who were students at the university. More recently they have been studied by scholars of Pacific cultures, such as Adrienne Kaeppler, who has documented the whereabouts of other items collected on Cook’s voyages (see Kaeppler 1978). Both Kaeppler and Hauser-Schäublin have participated in the transformation of these and other objects from Oceania from their origin 18<sup>th</sup> century status as “artificial curiosities” – things that provoked wonder, derision, or disgust, depending upon whether one saw them as tokens from an earthly Paradise, examples of a barbarian stage of development, or pagan idols that needed to be destroyed – to ethnographic artifacts – the subject of anthropological inquiry – to their acceptance as objects of art by some of the world’s most highly esteemed museums of fine art such as the Louvre, the National Gallery in Washington D.C., and the Metropolitan Museum of Art (see Kaeppler, Kaufmann and Newton 1997).

Most recently, Hauser-Schäublin has facilitated the loan of the Cook/Forster collection for two international exhibits in 2006 – one at the Honolulu Academy of Arts, titled “Life in the Pacific of the 1700s: The Cook/Forster Collection of the Georg August University of Göttingen,” and the other at the National Museum of Australia in Canberra titled “Cook’s Pacific Encounters: The Cook/Forster Collection of the Georg August University of Göttingen”. These exhibits represent the first time that the collection has traveled outside of Göttingen since its arrival there in 1783.



The objects selected for display at the Honolulu Academy of Arts were blessed at the University of Göttingen's Institute of Cultural and Social Anthropology prior to embarking on their long journey (from left to right: La'akea Suganuma, Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin, and Jackie Kaho'okele Burke).  
Photo: Wolfgang Kempf, January 23, 2006.

It is not a coincidence that these two exhibits took place in Hawaii and Australia, two of the most significant regions in the Pacific that Cook encountered on his voyages. On the one hand, Cook is credited with having discovered the Hawaiian Islands in 1778, while on the other, even though he was not the first European to discover Australia, he did claim the continent for Great Britain and the time he and his men spent there paved the way for the British to colonize the continent. In both cases, the exhibits represented the first time that present-day Hawaiians and Australians had seen the objects Cook had collected more than two hundred years earlier back in their places of origin, as the Göttingen collection had never traveled abroad before.

As text for the exhibit at the National Museum of Australia stated: "When we look at the beautifully preserved artifacts in 'Cook's Pacific Encounters,' we can ponder the changes that have taken place in the world over the past two centuries. The seemingly unchanging character of the artifacts suggests a journey back in time" (Hauser-Schäublin and Krüger 2006:15).

For people in both Pacific locations, the focus of the exhibits was on the artifacts as objects of Pacific cultural heritage and thus as expressions of Pacific Islanders' and Aus-

tralian Aborigines' cultural identities. Because the objects had been collected at a time when Cook and his men were the first Europeans to have contact with these Pacific peoples, the items represent these cultures as they were prior to the introduction of Western goods, such as metal knives and axes, buttons and medals and cloth – all types of Western things that gradually were introduced into the production of indigenous objects. Thus, because of the objects' autochthonous origins they have come to symbolize the cultural continuity between the Hawaiians and Aborigines of today (and that of other contemporary Pacific Islanders, such as Tahitians, Tongans and New Zealanders, from whose ancestors Cook collected artifacts) with the Pacific Islanders of Cook's time.

In Hawaii the exhibit was held at the Honolulu Academy of Arts rather than at the Bishop Museum, the prestigious natural history museum in Honolulu that has an extensive collection of Pacific artifacts. The choice of venue for the exhibit in Hawaii represents a new international recognition by museums of fine art, those traditional arbiters of "high" or "elite" culture, that objects that used to be considered as merely



The opening of the exhibition "Life in the Pacific of the 1700s" at the Honolulu Academy of Arts: Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin, Stephen Little, Her Royal Highness Abigail Kekaulike Kinoiki Kawananakoa, Her Royal Highness Princess Pilolevu of Tonga, and Elfriede Hermann.

Photo: Wolfgang Kempf, February 22, 2006.



of “ethnographic interest” are worthy of the same respect and admiration as Western paintings and sculpture.<sup>5</sup> As Stephen Little, the director of the Honolulu Academy of Arts stated, the purpose of the exhibit was “to celebrate the brilliant cultural and spiritual lives of the indigenous people of the Pacific as they existed prior to first contact with Westerners” (Little in Bernardo 2006). So honored was the museum to have the opportunity to exhibit these “rare, powerful objects,” that Little enlisted the aid of several cultural experts, including La‘akea Sukanuma, president of the Royal Hawaiian Academy of Traditional Arts, to get their advice on how best to recognize and respect the sacred nature of the artifacts (Little in Bernardo 2006). Sukanuma then traveled to Göttingen along with other members of the Royal Hawaiian Academy to bless and escort the collection to Hawaii.

In addition to the exhibit itself there was also a scholarly symposium held in conjunction with the opening of the exhibit on February 23, 2006 that highlighted aspects of Pacific Island cultures today and the heritage of their past. Prof. Dr. Hauser-Schäublin gave the keynote address at the public lecture that opened the symposium. She spoke about “Changing Contexts – Shifting Meanings: The Göttingen Cook/Forster Collection, For Example.”<sup>6</sup>

## Conclusion

From the beginning of her academic career, Hauser-Schäublin has been associated with museums and with the study of material culture, first at Basel, then at Göttingen. In the United States she has spent time at Dartmouth College at the Hood Museum, assessing their collection of Melanesian artifacts, and at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, where the Rockefeller Wing of the museum now displays a spectacular collection of art from Oceania, including many bark paintings from the Middle Sepik region of Papua New Guinea where she first carried out ethnographic research on art, architecture and ritual. Hauser-Schäublin’s career as a curator has both contributed to and is reflective of the transformation of “artificial curiosities” from exotic tokens from far-off, primitive cultures to our modern appreciation of them as *objects d’art*.

In facilitating the loan of the University of Göttingen’s Cook-Forster Collection for exhibition in Hawaii and Australia, Hauser-Schäublin enacted yet another exchange in the life of these objects, bringing them full-circle back to the places where many of them originated. As significant as this exchange was, which allowed younger generations of Pacific Islanders and other multicultural inhabitants of these post-colonial states to see first hand the beauty and power and creativity inherent in these objects from the past, even more significant was the “shifting contexts and changing meanings,” Hauser-Schäublin referred to in the title of her public lecture at the Honolulu Academy of Arts. For the idea of changing meanings is true not only of the artifacts in the Cook-Forster collection, but also of the meanings many Westerners’ now attribute to non-Western

objects in general as well as their significance to Pacific Islanders today as talismen of their cultural heritage and identity.

## Notes

- 1 For a photograph of this spirit house see Hauser-Schäublin (1989a:132). Hauser-Schäublin has written extensively about these spirit houses in her volume *Kulthäuser in Nordneuguinea* (1989b) and the decorated objects that adorn their exterior and interior in *Leben in Linie, Muster und Farbe: Einführung in die Betrachtung aussereuropäischer Kunst* (1989a). See also Hauser-Schäublin (1990:470–479).
- 2 There is an interesting German-American connection here in that Mead's mentor at Columbia University was the German anthropologist, Franz Boas. Boas is often credited with having developed the science of anthropology in the United States through his work first at the American Museum of Natural History, and later through the establishment of the Department of Anthropology at Columbia. See Lutkehaus (2008).
- 3 Mead oversaw the installation of the Hall of the South Pacific at the American Museum of Natural History, where she was Curator of Pacific Cultures.
- 4 Hauser-Schäublin has also written about the work of another early explorer named Georg Thomas von Asch, but I am not going to deal with that subject here. It has parallels with the work of Cook in that it is the work of an 18<sup>th</sup> century explorer who was interested in non-western cultures, in this case, those of the Transsiberian area, whose collections and journals also ended up in the Göttingen Institute of Cultural and Social Anthropology.
- 5 See for example Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (1989). See also *Paris Primitive* (2007), Price's discussion of the controversy surrounding former French President Chirac's decision to create the Musée du Quai Branly, a new museum dedicated to the art of Oceania, Africa and the Americas that opened in Paris in 2006. See also Nancy Lutkehaus, *From Ethnographic Artifact to Object d'Art: Nelson Rockefeller and the Transformation of Non-Western Objects into Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (Unpublished Manuscript).
- 6 The proceedings from the symposium will be published in a volume titled *Changing Contexts – Shifting Meanings: Transformations of Cultural Traditions in Oceania*, edited by Elfriede Hermann (in press, University of Hawai'i Press).

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