

# UC Santa Cruz

## Pacific Arts: The Journal of the Pacific Arts Association

### Title

Book Series Review: Pacific Presences, 9 vol., Nicholas Thomas (general editor)

### Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6db23955>

### Journal

Pacific Arts: The Journal of the Pacific Arts Association, 24(1)

### ISSN

1018-4252

### Author

Cockburn, Sylvia

### Publication Date

2024

### DOI

10.5070/PC224164371

### Copyright Information

Copyright 2024 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License, available at

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

**SYLVIA COCKBURN**

## **Book Series Review: *Pacific Presences*, 9 vol., Nicholas Thomas (general editor)**

### **Abstract**

*Book series review: Nicholas Thomas, general editor, Pacific Presences, 9 volumes, Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2018–2021.*

**Keywords:** *Oceanic art, material culture, museums, collections, European voyages, Pacific Presences, anthropology*

Alison Clark and Nicholas Thomas, eds., *Style and Meaning: Essays on the Anthropology of Art: Anthony Forge. Pacific Presences series, vol. 1.*, 2017. ISBN: 978-90-8890-446-2. 304 pages, color & b/w illustrations. Paperback £45.00, Digital £0.00.

Julie Adams, Polly Bence, and Alison Clark, eds., *Fighting Fibres: Kiribati Armour and Museum Collections. Pacific Presences series, vol. 2*, 2018. ISBN 978-90-8890-565-0. 202 pages, color & b/w illustrations. Paperback £45.00, Digital £0.00.

Bronwen Douglas, Fanny Wonu Veys, and Billie Lythberg, eds., *Collecting in the South Sea: The Voyage of Bruni d'Entrecasteaux, 1791–1794. Pacific Presences series, vol. 3*, 2018. ISBN 978-90-8890-574-2. 382 pages, color & b/w illustrations. Paperback £60.00, Digital £0.00.

Lucie Carreau, Alison Clark, Alana Jelinek, Erna Lilje, and Nicholas Thomas, eds., *Pacific Presences Volume One: Oceanic Art in European Museums. Pacific Presences series, vol. 4A*, 2018. ISBN 978-90-8890-589-6. 254 pages, color & b/w illustrations. Paperback £45.00, Digital £0.00.

Lucie Carreau, Alison Clark, Alana Jelinek, Erna Lilje, and Nicholas Thomas, eds., *Pacific Presences Volume Two: Oceanic Art in European Museums. Pacific Presences series, vol. 4B*, 2018. ISBN 978-90-8890-626-8. 512 pages, color & b/w illustrations. Paperback £85.00, Digital £0.00.

Elena Govor and Nicholas Thomas, eds., *Tiki: Marquesan Art and the Krusenstern Expedition. Pacific Presences series, vol. 5*, 2019. ISBN 978-90-8890-690-9. 250 pages, color & b/w illustrations. Paperback £60.00, Digital £0.00.

Alison Clark, with Eve Haddow and Christopher Wright, *Resonant Histories: Pacific Artefacts and the Voyages of HMS Royalist, 1890–1893*. *Pacific Presences* series, vol. 6, 2019. ISBN 978-90-8890-629-9. 272 pages, color & b/w illustrations. Paperback £55.00, Digital £0.00.

Mark Adams and Nicholas Thomas, *Photo-Museology: The Presence of Absence and the Absence of Presence*. *Pacific Presences* series, vol. 7, 2022. ISBN 978-90-8890-632-9. 480 pages, color & b/w illustrations. Paperback £85.00, Digital £0.00.

Julie Adams, *Museum, Magic, Memory: Curating Paul Denys Montague*. *Pacific Presences* series, vol. 8, 2021. ISBN 978-90-8890-635-0. 318 pages, color & b/w illustrations. Paperback £55.00, Digital £0.00.

In Mark Adams and Nicholas Thomas's book, *Photo-Museology: The Presence of Absence and the Absence of Presence* (2022), there is an image of the memorial to Captain James Cook at the site of his death at Kealahou Bay in Hawai'i. Presented in a panoramic triptych, the memorial is shown in three scenes that individually tell very different stories. On the left is the stark white obelisk that credits Cook with the "discovery" of the Hawaiian Islands and commemorates his death on February 14, 1779. The monument is fenced with metal chains; a red-lettered sign announces that the area is government property and that trespassers will be prosecuted. Panning to the right, a group of swimsuit-clad people, likely tourists, are lounging in the sun by the turquoise waters while recreational boats pass by. In the middle image, only the chained fence that marks the boundary of the monument are visible. In the rightmost image there is no indication of it at all. Assembled together, the triptych reveals multilayered entanglements of colonial histories and settler-colonial realities in the Pacific. Much like the extended photo essay that is *Photo-Museology* as a whole, each image here represents an incomplete part of a larger story. The book is an exploration of Mark Adams's photographic practice over more than three decades, and particularly his engagement with Pacific museum collections through his longstanding collaboration with the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge. The release of *Photo-Museology* marked the final volume of the nine-book series *Pacific Presences: Oceanic Art and European Museums*, published by Sidestone Press (2017–2022). In many ways, *Photo-Museology* is a fitting end to the series, offering readers a new lens through which to view Pacific collections in museums. Its exploration of Pacific and European landscapes, exhibition displays, and museum

storerooms visualizes the worlds inhabited by Pacific ancestral treasures and the expansive nature of the current and historical relationships that surround them.

*Pacific Presences* was a European Research Council–funded project that ran from 2013 to 2018. Its aim was to explore the collections of Pacific art and material culture held in anthropology and world culture museums across Europe in order to better understand what the collections are comprised of, how they came to be in Europe, and how their meanings and salience have evolved over time, both within their European institutional contexts and for the Pacific Islanders descended from those who first made, traded, or were forcibly separated from their ancestral treasures. Among the project’s key objectives was to show that these collections remain dynamic and alive rather than fixed and static within museum storerooms. To this end, *Pacific Presences* utilized a vast network of contributors, from a core team of researchers based at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge to collaborators from across Europe and the Pacific. The resulting nine books form a well-illustrated set that includes volumes on art and anthropology, European voyages of discovery, histories of collectors and collections, and the iconic body-armor suits from Kiribati. On the surface, these subjects are wide-ranging enough to feel like they don’t always belong to a cohesive set. At the same time, the histories of Pacific collections do not form a tidy narrative. Moving between the volumes becomes itself an exercise in tracing the threads of relationships—past, present, unfixed, and evolving—that surround the collections described within the texts.

The first book published in the series, *Style and Meaning: Essays on the Anthropology of Art: Anthony Forge* (2017), edited by Alison Clark and Nicholas Thomas, revisits the writings of the influential anthropologist. It is divided into two parts: the first compiles a series of Forge’s writings on art and anthropology in Papua New Guinea, published between 1960 and 1990, while the second features essays by contemporary scholars reflecting on the legacy of Forge’s research and its impact on their own thinking about the anthropology of art. Howard Morphy, for instance, relates Forge’s writings on Abelam painting to the interpretation of Yolŋu bark painting, while Lissant Bolton carries Forge’s discussions of artistic innovation in men’s ceremonial art into her analyses of women’s fiber arts from Vanuatu. Forge’s own thinking focused particularly on the art of the Abelam and other Sepik communities, but his questions of meaning and communication through art remain relevant to curatorial acts of translation around Pacific collections today, where museums are increasingly working to layer Indigenous knowledge and perspectives into their interpretations of art.

The subsequent books in the series focus more closely on Pacific collections, unpacking European holdings from different angles and across different scales of time, geography, and physical objects. The first in a pair of eponymous books from the series (*Pacific Presences: Oceanic Art and European Museums*, vols. 1–2, 2018) maps the histories, fates, and ongoing relationships of the Pacific collections in selected European countries: Britain, France, the Netherlands, Russia, and Germany. From competitive institutional and national agendas to colonial, scientific, and missionary interests, to the personalities of some of the key collectors and curators involved, the first volume highlights the related yet geographically specific pathways taken by Pacific collections to their current repositories, and the shifts in their reception and presentation over subsequent decades. As an overview, this book serves as a solid grounding point for the series, historically situating Pacific collections and documenting important provenance research undertaken by the project team and their networks of curators and researchers.

Of course, provenance research that focuses largely on the European agents who transported cultural objects from the Pacific risks privileging a narrative of extraction above that of the complex webs of Indigenous agency and interaction that are behind all these collections. This is one of the points addressed in the second volume of *Pacific Presences*, which expands the focus on the history of collections to look at the kinds of contemporary collaborations taking place in museums. This book is divided loosely into four sections that view collections through their materialities, collection and exhibition histories, legacies of empire, and contemporary activations by artists and Pacific communities. While working with contemporary Indigenous artists has become almost standard practice in anthropology museums, little has been published on such collaborations from the perspectives of both the artists and museum staff involved. The later chapters of this book, therefore, make important contributions in documenting how artists, curators, and wider Pacific communities are working together to address collection histories and many of the questions facing the role and future of anthropology museums. As the artist Rosanna Raymond argues in her chapter, “Backhand and Full Tusks: Museology and the Mused,” “There is still enormous work to be done if we are to add new vital strands to the frozen narratives, attitudes, and practices embedded in most museum practice” (407).

Some of the material in *Pacific Presences*, vol. 2 is expanded in greater detail in other volumes of the series. A chapter by Kaetaeta Watson, Chris Charteris, Lizzy Leckie, and Alison Clark on a project to create a new suit of Kiribati body armor based on museum examples is elaborated into its own volume in *Fighting Fibres* (2018). That book’s close look at the materiality and collection histories of

the suits of armor that are a familiar sight in Pacific exhibitions includes reflections from conservators tasked with preserving museum pieces alongside those of the artists and makers working to recreate the techniques no longer in common use on the islands, despite the suits themselves taking on the status of national cultural symbol. In my own conversations with Charteris regarding this project and the team's subsequent work creating another suit at the Asia-Pacific Triennial of Art in Brisbane in 2018-19, he reflected on the importance of this collaborative museum work as a form of intergenerational knowledge sharing, reforging links between museum collections and contemporary practice for future generations.

One of the central methodological themes of the project is that of reassemblage—the act of reuniting collections, and the archival fragments relating to them, that have been scattered across countries and institutions since they were first formed. Three of the books in the series tackle this act of reassembly around collections from European voyages that brought treasures back from the Pacific, which were then dispersed throughout Europe and beyond. Edited by Bronwen Douglas, Fanny Wonu Veys, and Billie Lythberg, *Collecting in the South Sea: The Voyage of Bruni d'Entrecasteaux, 1791–1794* (2018) presents efforts to reassemble the now-scattered collections made by Joseph Antoine Bruni d'Entrecasteaux and his shipmates on their ill-fated Pacific voyage. *Tiki: Marquesan Art and the Krusenstern Expedition* (2019), edited by Elena Govor and Nicholas Thomas, discusses the collections made during twelve days on Nuku Hiva by Ivan Fedorovich Krusenstern (commander of the *Nadezhda*), Urey Lisiansky (commander of the *Neva*), and the crew of the first Russian circumnavigation of the world between 1803 and 1806. Lastly, *Resonant Histories: Pacific Artefacts and the Voyages of HMS Royalist, 1890–1893* (2019), by Alison Clark with Eve Haddow and Christopher Wright, discusses the collections made by Captain Edward Henry Meggs Davis during the three voyages of the HMS *Royalist* in Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, and Kiribati between 1890 and 1892.

Each of the above expeditions set out to the Pacific under the flag of a different nation and with different instructions relating to the colonial, scientific, and political environments in which they were operating. Bruni d'Entrecasteaux's mission was influenced both by political and scientific movements in France. Its purpose was to find the ships of La Pérouse, his compatriot who had vanished some three years prior, and to collect natural history specimens amidst the Enlightenment and Romantic fever for scientific research and collecting. However, following the death of Bruni d'Entrecasteaux and many of his crew in 1793, the voyage's collections arrived in Java before being dispersed across Europe. The book dedicated to this topic presents a full catalogue of the works believed to

have been gathered on the voyage—some confirmed, others speculative—alongside reflections from curators working in the museums that house elements of Bruni d'Entrecasteaux's collection on the processes through which they have been able to attribute works despite a particularly fragmentary archival record. Interjections by artists and scholars throughout the text offer contemporary responses to key works identified from within the collection.

Krusenstern did not have specific instructions to collect objects or make scientific observations during the voyage of the *Nadezhda* and *Neva*. As a result, the collections gathered on this journey reflect snapshots of encounters, trade, and relationships that took place between the Russian sailors and Marquesan people over the twelve days spent in Nuku Hiva. Govor presents a catalogue of the documented collection, and discusses the history of the voyage and how the pieces came to be distributed across different institutions. These chapters are accompanied by contributions that place the collection in the context of the Marquesan environment, other European collections of Marquesan art, and art historical framing of the development of Marquesan visual culture in the period surrounding early European encounters.

As captain of the HMS *Royalist*, Davis commanded three voyages to the Pacific, each linked to different British interests in the region. The official aims of the *Royalist* were to police the region and regulate the labor trade that forcibly removed Pacific Islanders from their homelands to work sugar plantations in Queensland and New South Wales in Australia. In an environment of intense colonial contact and outbreaks of violence, Davis's second voyage was a punitive mission to Solomon Islands and New Guinea in response to crimes committed against British expatriates. His third voyage was intended to declare a British protectorate over the Gilbert Islands (present-day Kiribati). On these missions, Davis made extensive collections of objects and photographs. These collections are steeped in imperialism and colonial violence, yet their contemporary resonances are complex and nuanced. The final three chapters of *Resonant Histories* each present a case study of how the histories of the *Royalist* have been remembered and repurposed in different ways in the islands that were impacted by its visit. Eve Haddow, for instance, presents the history of a pig-killing hammer from Vanuatu now held at the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum in Cologne as one example of an act of violent justice by Davis. Christopher Wright discusses how communities in western Solomon Islands use oral histories of the punitive missions of the HMS *Royalist* to explain more recent ethnic tensions. And Alison Clark relates the seemingly paradoxical celebration of the raising the Union Jack flag by a community in Kiribati as an exercise in cultural survival.

The three volumes *Collecting in the South Sea*, *Tiki*, and *Resonant Histories* all feature impressively detailed provenance and archival work that reassembles the available information about their respective collections, and places them within the historical specificity of their times, both in the islands and in the European nations that sponsored the respective missions. Significantly, these texts point to the importance of reassembly as a path to eventual community connection and engagement.

The threads that tie people, objects, places, and histories together on very intimate and personal scales are further untangled in Julie Adams's *Museum, Magic, Memory: Curating Paul Denys Montague* (2021), which traces the life and collecting of the zoologist and anthropologist who contributed important New Caledonian collections to the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology before his premature death in the First World War. Adams's book is an intimate and moving portrait of one man—not just as a collector and natural historian, but as a brother, son, student, and friend. The research that formed the book was itself a kind of pilgrimage, retracing Montague's steps from his family home in Devon to Cambridge University, to the Houailou Valley in New Caledonia, and to the battlefield in Greece where he lost his life. Adams's research connects stories of loss over generations and vast geographies. Montague's collection was formed, and for many years forgotten, in the wake of the loss of a generation of young men in the First World War. But the collection embodies absence and loss in other ways too, which Adams movingly articulates when describing an encounter between a group of magic stones collected by Montague and Kanak archaeologist François Wadra; the latter recorded and photographed each stone, including how the pieces were expressing their own desire to return home (227).

In *Photo-Museology*, Nicholas Thomas reflects that both the process and outcomes of *Pacific Presences* were more open and ambiguous than is typical of research projects (9). This is true also of the complete set of publications which, in its multivocal and interdisciplinary framings, can be difficult to connect to overarching narrative threads. That said, as a series, *Pacific Presences* is a monumental achievement that gives extensive insight not only into the histories and distribution of Pacific collections in museums but also the many ways curators, researchers, artists, communities, and cultural practitioners are connecting and engaging with the collections today. Each book is richly illustrated and published with open access through Sidestone Press, which will expand the project's outreach and accessibility. Taken together, they offer a definitive account of Pacific collecting in Europe, as well as of the processes that the core project team and their collaborators undertook in their research. In the context of broader discussions currently



taking place about the histories and futures of museum collections, the books highlight that provenance cannot, nor should not, be separated from the personal, nor academic research from community engagement. As a curator raised in Australia and currently working with Pacific collections in the United States, I am struck by the fact that this depth of historical research and interconnected network of practice and research is yet to be achieved in these countries, whose own collections and colonial histories of the Pacific demand ongoing and critical investigation. While the final publication of the *Pacific Presences* series marks an end to the research project, hopefully it is also a starting point for further engagement, research, and connection around the Pacific collections in museums that still have many more stories to tell.

*Dr. Sylvia Cockburn is a curator and art historian specializing in contemporary Pacific art, community engagement, and collaborative practice in museums. In 2020, she completed her PhD at the University of East Anglia, where her research focused on collaborations between contemporary Pacific artists and ethnographic museums in Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. She has held curatorial roles at Queensland Museum, Museums Victoria, and the Australian War Memorial. She is currently senior research associate at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, where she is working on the redevelopment of the Oceania galleries in the Michael C. Rockefeller Wing.*