

***Pacific Pattern.* Susanne Küchler and Graeme Were. London: Thames and Hudson, 2005. 208 pp.\***

Reviewed by Roderick Ewins

This coffee-table book is sumptuous, printed in full color of exceptional richness. New Zealand photographer Glen Jowitt's pictures are a dazzling feast of images taken throughout central and western Polynesia, with a handful from Fiji, Vanuatu, and New Caledonia, and of artifacts from various places including the Solomon Islands. Some Tahitians, Papua New Guineans, and Fijians were photographed at Pacific festivals. They range from the warm intimacy of women weaving, sewing, and crocheting (and a great image of a Mount Hagen performer admiring his makeup in a mirror [p.150-151]), to the truly iconic, such as three Samoan men, seemingly carved out of stone, displaying waist-to-knee *tatau* (pp. 140-141).

There is a heavy price for using edge-to-edge color pages in the diminished legibility of the text. The handsome sans serif typeface is light-faced and mostly small (about 10 point), seldom holding its own against the often quite dark background color. Picture captions, even smaller, are often very hard to read. Further, most of the wonderful archival images are overprinted on the strong colored backgrounds, often with so little tonal change between image and background color that they become little more than visual texture (e.g. pp.15, 30-31, 39, 110-111, 128-129, etc.). Happily, the small insets of artifacts (e.g. pp. 34-35, 38, 48, etc.) *are* printed against white and cut into the colored background, but are too small for clarity. All of which poses important questions about designers' responsibility to not only produce visual attractiveness, but also to make words and images easily legible.

It is curious, given that the book and chapter titles all including the word "pattern," that, although in describing processes makers' adroitness at *creating* pattern is noted, for much of the book pattern actually figures little in the analysis. Patterns *per se* are nowhere identified or categorized, though they leap from the photographs, starting with the flower-chains that march down the front of the dust jacket. Only in the final chapter is it defined as "a repetitive, rhythmic and highly ordered activity" and "the symmetrical transformation of a unit motif along a surface" (p. 172). Even those design elements and motifs that *do* recur across the Pacific and in different media are only mentioned in passing. Nor are belief systems often actually related to pattern. The way many motifs and patterns can carry meaning in Pacific, as well as other cultures, has been discussed in many of the works cited in the bibliography (Washburn and Crowe [2004] to cite just one example), yet the authors seldom discuss or analyze pattern as either an aesthetic concern or a symbol in its own right.

West-central Polynesia dominates the modern photographs, giving limited support to the authors' very ambitious stated aim of embracing the entirety of what they rightly stress is a vast ocean covering over a third of the earth's surface. The scores of Pacific cultures had numerous origins, and evolved separately or with limited intercourse over centuries. Trying to span this and somehow cohere it, the authors often employ a sort of shorthand writing to compress their very

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extensive research. It becomes so densely packed that it is hard to absorb or to tease out. One wonders how lay-readers, the commonest purchasers of coffee-table books, would cope.

The text starts well with the history of European contact and mutual influences, with a definition of the main groups of fiber articles, and with a description of islanders' adoption of introduced materials and forms to their existing material and spiritual lives, sometimes sustaining continuity, sometimes evolving new forms.

Chapter 4 introduces hypothetical elements that move outside empiricism, often uncomfortably. Claims that the elements of architecture intentionally epitomize ideas about social structure, and even more tenuously, "the control and flow of life-giving forces, such as light" (p. 112), would require a lot of instantiation that is simply not provided. In the absence of direct quotation or empirical evidence, interpretations must always be admitted as being highly speculative. To present such speculation as uncontested fact and without supporting evidence is questionable. In fact, there are very few demonstrably belief systems *universally* held pan-Pacific beyond, perhaps, the agency of ancestors in the spirit world. Regrettably, such flights detract from worthwhile analyses of form and function in the same chapter.

In chapter 5, "Patterns of the Body" the detached hypotheses are extended: "the house is a scaled version of the body and, like a second skin, serves to harness, transform and release life-giving forces [what *are* those?]. . . patterns woven into the fibres enveloping both the house and the body" (p. 142). The authors attempt to validate this idea-stream with a claim that "In fact, across the Pacific the word commonly used for body is 'skin'" (p. 142). That would indeed be very remarkable, if it were true. But a check of a dictionary of about forty Oceanic languages (Tryon 1995), shows only two (both in Papua New Guinea) that use the same word for body and skin. The assertion is wrong, yet it is an important building block in the writers' unstable construction.

Again this diminishes valuable material that follows: the role of the skin in mortuary ceremonies in the Marquesas and the discussion of the relationship between the ephemeral figuration of the body via the media of painting and barkcloth figuration are fascinating and well-anchored with specific localized examples. Though not analyzed for itself, at last *pattern* is discussed for its implications for the wearers.

The final chapter, "Patterns of the Mind," finally addresses pattern as such. It examines two female art forms: first, Tongan open-work designs in fiber arts (from *ngatu* barkcloth figuration to woven *sisi fale* aprons, story-telling "cat's cradle" string figures, and Western-introduced crochet work); and second, the floral imagery as epitomized in Cook Island *tivaivai*, the sewn patchwork (or piecework) cutout and appliqué objects generally called quilts.

In conclusion, I genuinely wish I had fewer criticisms of this book, but in many ways it epitomizes the problems met when attempting to marry a scholarly text with a beautiful picture-book. The superb photography and overall attractiveness of the book will, no doubt, justify its purchase to many with a casual interest in the Pacific. Unfortunately, the breadth and depth of research that the two respected authors clearly undertook often does not relate well to the visual structure. They appear to have had more difficulty than the photographer in identifying their target readership. Perhaps attempting to not bore their anticipated lay readers, they omitted much

empirical evidence. An alternative reading might be that such evidence is lacking, in which case at least some of their propositions might fail. They could not resist making a great number of theoretical and speculative statements that, if they are to be made, demand the support of both evidence and rigorous debate. Without it, the discourse often remains arcane but, lacking exegesis, is also incomprehensible, particularly to a non-specialist. I am sure that this is the exact opposite of what they hoped to achieve, but the end result of those passages is not really satisfying to either a specialist reader or a casual lay reader. Given their difficulties combining the book's components, I think it may have been better had the two enterprises been separated, with simple descriptive captions provided for the photographs in the large book, and a second book aimed at an academic audience using selected and directly relevant photographs to exemplify the developed argument.

### **References Cited**

Tryon, Darrell

1995 *Comparative Austronesian Dictionary*. New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

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2004 *Symmetry Comes of Age: The Role of Pattern in Culture*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

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