

***Melanesia: Art and Encounter.* Lissant Bolton, Nicholas Thomas, Elizabeth Bonshek, Julie Adams, and Ben Burt, eds. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013.\***

Reviewed by Robert L. Welsch

Since 1946, with the Museum of Modern Art's release of *Art of the South Seas* (Linton and Wingert 1946), the exhibition catalog that accompanied the first major exhibition of Oceanic art in the United States at the Museum, every decade or two has seen a new catalog or richly illustrated book on Pacific art that stands as a statement and perhaps a weighty outline of where the study of Oceanic art currently is and the current questions anthropologists, archaeologists, and art historians are asking. *Melanesia: Art and Encounter*, edited by Lissant Bolton, Nicholas Thomas, Elizabeth Bonshek, Julie Adams, and Ben Burt is one of those books.

In thumbing through *Melanesia: Art and Encounter*, as one does with a heavy and beautifully illustrated book like this one, I noticed a profusion of rather short chapters by most of the names I have come to associate with active research on Melanesian art. These 52 scholars (by my count) include a few names we would expect to see in any serious collected work on Melanesian art, including archaeologists Pamela Swadling and Matthew Spriggs; curators (or directors) of the three great museum collections in the UK, Lissant Bolton (British Museum), Michael O'Hanlon (formerly of the British Museum but now with the Pitt Rivers Museum), and Nicholas Thomas (Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology); and senior scholars like David Aiken, Harry Beran, Eric Hirsch, Kirk Hoffman, Karen Jacobs, James Leach, Diane Losche, Nicholas Stanley, and Deborah Waite, each of whom is associated with the art of a particular region within Melanesia. But while it is delightful to see each of these senior scholars still at work, presenting newer projects and ideas they have been working on over the last decade, the real excitement for me was seeing the writings of Melanesian scholars and younger scholars, some of whom I know well but most of whom I was introduced to in this volume.

One complacently pages through this book moving from region to region within Melanesia from one group of regional essays to another, much as one could find in almost any Melanesian catalog. But let me assure you, this is not your grandfather's Melanesian art catalog. The beautiful images centerpiece objects in the British Museum's collections, but the point is never to view art and material culture as objects detached from their history, their original context, and the social life they have passed through getting into the storerooms in London. Thomas's excellent introduction to the volume lays out the goal that Bolton and her core colleagues have been working on for some years now trying to breathe life and humanity back into the British Museum's collections, largely unseen for two decades since the reorganization that moved the material to their current site. All of the insights about what objects can teach us about Melanesian societies are represented here. No two essays use precisely the same methodologies, and yet all have tried to blend knowledge of field settings in Melanesia with objects in the

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collection that have particular histories that can only be accessed from understanding how they got to London in the first place.

Of the Melanesian authors, Ralph Regenvanu is one of the senior figures and he does not fail to delight in his contribution that shows how he and other Vanuatuans are incorporating traditional art in their contemporary explorations of identity. The list of younger or less well-known Melanesians includes Erna Lilje, Peter Solo Kinjap, Peter Nombo, Pinbin Sisau, Paraka, Jean Tarisesei, Evelyn Tetehu, François Wadra, Ben Wate, Benny Wenda, Claytus Yambon, and Fidel Yoringmal. Each of these authors represents their respective regions as well as innovative ways of thinking about and studying objects. Collectively, they help put the Melanesians back into the objects that Melanesians once made and used.

The outline and shape of current scholarship in the art of Melanesia can best be judged from the series of essays that really hint at what we shall see emerging from a new generation of scholars over the coming decades. Some of the highlights include Tate LeFevre's discussion of fiber skirts from New Caledonia, Hannah Ivory's discussion of the Hadfield collection, Julie Adams's analysis of Erromango barkcloth, John Taylor's analysis of a club, Carlos Mondragon's discussion of power objects in the Torres Islands, Tim Curtis's essay on Southern Malakula, Michael Scott analysis of Solomon dance clubs, Ben Burt's interest in objects from the Melanesian Mission, Mary Chamber on the spirits of Ranongga, Aoife O'Brian on the Woodward collection, Tim Thomas's contribution on sensory efficacy in New Georgia, Jennifer Newell on the Asmat body mask, Devorah Romanek's contribution on West Papua photos, Anna-Karina Hermkens's essay on Sentani and Humboldt Bay barkcloth, Rebecca Jewell's perusing of charms from the HMS *Challenger* of 1875, Vicky Barnecutt's reflections on Romilly's malangans, Graeme Were's analysis of *kapkap*, Chantal Knowles's discussion of changing designs in West New Britain, Elizabeth Bonshek's discussion of objects and the early encounters along the south coast of New Guinea, Jude Philp's discussion of trade and collecting with the crew of HMS *Rattlesnake*, Melissa Demian's history of contact on the Suau coast, Alison Clark's reflections on a photograph album, and Joshua Bell's analysis of the London Missionary Society collections from Papua.

Each of these essays hint at where studies of Melanesian art is going in the future because each was asked to work up something more substantive than what was already known about a set of objects at the British Museum. While several of these essays by younger scholars, as well as some work by the senior scholars, touch on what each has done for graduate theses or other early research, what they all share is the challenge of confronting real objects with particular but largely unexamined histories. This clash between the known and the little known is what makes this volume a treat for anyone who has been studying Melanesia or its arts for any time at all. I have never seen a collection that works so effectively at pushing the envelope in so many different directions. I attribute this success and its rendering of where we are in the second decade of the 21st century to Bolton herself, whose strong and wise hand seems to have guided senior and junior scholars alike throughout. Bolton and her colleagues have laid down a challenge for the rest of us and it is up to all of us interested in Pacific art to keep up with the methodological and intellectual innovations they have set before us in this wonderful work that has moved the goal posts far down the field.

## Reference Cited

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