

Review Essay

Pacific Hall: The Bishop Museum's Renovation of a Permanent Exhibit*

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The dramatic eight year, US\$8.5 million dollar renovation of the Bishop Museum's Pacific Hall—its permanent exhibition of material culture from Micronesia, Melanesia, and Polynesia—merits review because of the choices that the curators made in order to create an exhibition that speaks to contemporary museum goers, many of whom are themselves Pacific Islanders. As one of the oldest and most prominent museums in the Pacific, decisions made at the Bishop have special relevance for Pacific museums today. At the same time, the Bishop's status as both an indigenous institution and an artifact of settler colonialism make an examination of its unusual cultural politics particularly worthwhile. The new exhibit is the embodiment of contemporary thought in Pacific Studies, which emphasizes the way that the ocean connects Pacific Islanders into a diverse but united cultural community.

The first and largest museum in Hawai'i, the Bishop was founded in 1889 to house heirlooms and other objects that belonged to the Hawaiian royal family. Located in urban Honolulu, the museum is named after Bernice Pauahi, a Hawaiian noblewoman married to the American businessman Charles Bishop. Their union is emblematic of the museum's unique history. The Bishop is a product of the late-monarchy period of Hawaiian history, in which Hawaiian nobility allied themselves with American business interests. After the overthrow of the Hawaiian monarchy by this same business elite and the kingdom's subsequent annexation by the United States, the museum expanded its collection, operating through the uneasy conjunction of Republican patronage politics imported from the United States and the continuing influence of the indigenous nobility on island affairs.

In the early decades of the 20th century, the Bishop became a central point for American research in the Pacific, building connections with major institutions such as Yale and creating a natural history collection typical of museums of that period. This included large ethnographic collections of material culture from the Pacific, with particularly strong collections in Polynesia and Island Melanesia (Fiji, New Caledonia, and Vanuatu). These collections form the core of Pacific Hall's exhibit.

The 1960s witnessed a global rise of indigenous and ethnic self-confidence, and Hawai'i was no exception. With its strong populist sensibility and a renewed political self-confidence, the "Hawai'ian renaissance" reconfigured the cultural politics of the islands. In the last fifty years, the Bishop Museum has attempted to navigate a new terrain in which some see it as an elitist institution complicit in American cultural imperialism.

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In 2009 the Bishop re-opened its main permanent exhibition, Hawaiian Hall, after extensive restorations. The new hall includes fine art from contemporary Hawaiian artists and attempted—in most opinions, successfully—to make the museum responsive to contemporary taste. The reopening of Pacific Hall in 2013, then, must be understood in this context. It represents the next step in the Bishop's efforts to reorient itself towards new understandings of the Pacific and Pacific Islanders as a whole.

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The major renovation of a permanent exhibit forces one to ask fundamental questions. Should it show 'masterworks' of indigenous art, such as the highly-criticized Musée Quai Branly (Price 2007)? Is the Bishop an 'indigenous museum' (Stanley 2008) designed to further the cultural projects of Hawaiian people? Or is it essentially a settler institution undertaking a process of reconciliation such as we see happening in Aotearoa New Zealand (McCarthy 2011), Canada (Phillips 2011), and the United States (Lonetree and Cobb 2008)? Let us take a look at the exhibition itself to see the curatorial choices that have been made to answer this question.

While the museum campus is home to several buildings, Pacific Hall is located in the original museum building, which was constructed to purpose in 1898. It is a relatively small, rectangular space (2,345 square feet) topped with a mezzanine that runs around the edge of the hall (adding another 1,630 square feet of public space). The main entrance is a small foyer featuring tamtam, slit drums stood vertically and carved with faces. Recordings of music from these drums play gently in the background. Stepping from the foyer into Pacific Hall, one is confronted by a carved post from a marae (Maori meeting house) that was made by a contemporary Maori artist for the Bishop Museum in the 1980s. Like many marae posts, it features a stylized human face which 'greet' visitors. As one moves beyond the confined space of the foyer into the hall proper, one is greeted by a feeling of space. Shades of blue—no doubt meant to invoke the ocean—fill the space, and are represented especially in the carpet and the background color of the displays. Most of the interior is koa, an acacia endemic to Hawai'i and symbolic of the island's unique identity. The brownish-reddish wood is varnished, but not painted, which allows its natural beauty to shine and lends a touch of modernity to the otherwise Victorian stylings of the hall. Indeed, this is one of the most effective parts of the renovation.

The ceiling stretches up far above the mezzanine to reveal the vaulted supports that hold the peaked roof in place, creating a 'central well' of space that fills the hall and makes it feel open and capacious. In this central well, hanging above the main floor of the hall, is a complete Fijian fishing canoe (Kam 2013). Next to it is a twenty nine by six foot screen onto which images are projected by discretely placed projectors. As the visitor enters, they are likely to see images of shimmering ocean waves along with short vignettes of island life. On the other side, photographs of Pacific Islander faces demonstrate the wide range in appearance and lifestyle that is typical of the Pacific. The screen is particularly effective in creating a sense of unhurried motion that fills the space of the hall, particularly during the segments showing the movement of the ocean. The portraits of Pacific Islanders are endearing, and avoid presenting a racialized typology of Pacific Islanders.

Visitors enter the hall near its east end. On the east wall is a large glass case featuring models of Pacific canoes, designed to demonstrate the variety of different construction techniques used across the region. In the northeast corner a large monitor displays excerpts of interviews by Pacific Islander academics, activists, and cultural practitioners discussing the centrality of the ocean to their identity. There is also a case that holds one of the few ‘masterpiece’ artifacts of the collection—a remarkable Tahitian mourning outfit.

Looking west, one sees the open central well. On the ground is a large map of inlaid wood that uses tone on tone wood to present a map the Pacific in low relief, helping to orient the visitor to the proliferation of island chains in the Pacific. Beyond this, a large stairway rises gracefully to the mezzanine. The north and south side of the building contain six display cases that support the mezzanine, three on each side. These hold the bulk of the materials exhibited. Contemporary art from the Pacific is displayed in the crenellations between these cases. In the space behind the rise of the staircase is a small area for children’s activities, including dressing in tapa (treebark) cloth.

Each of the cases on the main floor of the exhibit can be viewed from the east or west, and contain artifacts related to a theme in Pacific life. On the north wall, this includes ancestors and gods, fishermen and fishing culture, agricultural staples and hunting and gathering in New Guinea. The south cases feature Samoan ceremonial dress in the same case as one on the theme of ‘people’ (which includes a discussion of family and social organization as well as of tattoo), chiefs and leaders, combined with community gathering places, and a case on ‘unity in diversity’ featuring common themes in Pacific societies, which shares a case with a display on way finding and voyaging.

The cases are well arranged and the wall text is accessible. The picture of the Pacific presented by these objects is of a very traditional, subsistence lifestyle. Contemporary issues such as nuclear testing in the Pacific or the role of church in everyday life are almost absent. So too are any industrially-manufactured objects. This is not the Tahitian Marketplace of the Field Museum (Jones 1999) or Haidy Geismar and Eric Wittersheim’s “Port Villa Mi Lavem Yu,” which conveyed the reality of a contemporary Pacific capital, complete bright plastic combs and inexpensive mobile phones (East-West Center 2011).

Visitors access the mezzanine through a wide staircase, and are greeted at the top by the large three-dimensional mural entitled *‘Anu’u Nu’u Ka ‘Ike*, which was painted by a group of contemporary Hawaiian artists, including apprentices. From the mezzanine, visitors can see more clearly the Fijian canoe suspended from the ceiling, as well as the reverse side of the multimedia screen. The main theme of the mezzanine, however, is the prehistory of the Pacific.

The Bishop Museum has long been a center for archaeology of the Pacific and continues to be so today. The 2nd floor presents what is probably the most comprehensive and up-to-date exhibition on Pacific prehistory in the world. On the east wall, a monumental map of the Pacific charts the settlement of the area. Around the edges of the mezzanine, rail cases present detailed descriptions of prehistoric material culture, ranging from fishhook distributions to the development of monumental architecture in Polynesia. On the south side of the building, cases present a mixture of items from the prehistoric and early historic period. On the north, cases move chronologically through topics such as the Lapita homeland, the settlement of near Oceania, and the distribution of culture traits such as fishhooks and monumental architecture. In one corner, an area for children allows them to explore the stratigraphy of an excavation by opening drawers in different ‘layers’ of a mural of an excavation in order to reveal the artifacts

that lie within. The 2nd floor also features multimedia stations with touch screens, which provide additional information should guests seek to dig deeper into the archaeology of the Pacific.

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What can one say of Pacific Hall as a whole? There are a number of plausible, if uncharitable, ways to read the exhibition. It could be criticized, for instance, for representing a basically Victorian outlook on the Pacific, one which ignores the specificities of island cultures, suppresses histories of colonialism, and presents ‘islands out of time’—and all whitewashed with a veneer of engagement with Pacific Islanders and a condescending high-art collection of contemporary artists. The mezzanine could be described as an exhibit that only archaeologists could love, filled with visually unappealing (and often minuscule) artifacts and crammed with a formidable amount of detail that, frankly, few visitors will care to take in.

But on the whole, such criticisms are unfounded. Overall, the exhibit conveys something else: an institution that assumes that its audience members are Pacific Islanders, or long-time residents of the Pacific, who are seeking to learn more about their traditional past. Instead of providing basic information about the Pacific that the Europeans might need, the museum appears to be giving its collection back to Pacific Islanders—encouraging them to see in its collections their own history. Its emphasis on common themes in Pacific cultures works to give a historical—indeed, a prehistorical—grounding to the sense that the Pacific is a ‘sea of islands’ that connects people. To this extent, it must be regarded as a success. It will take some time before we understand how the public receives the exhibit—perhaps in ten years, scholarship will swing back to emphasizing the uniqueness of Pacific cultures, making Pacific Hall seem ham-fistedly essentializing. But if the Bishop avoids this bad luck, it seems clear that the museum’s curators have successfully dealt with the complex cultural politics associated with this display, and have created an exhibit that deserves recognition for its work to reconcile contemporary approaches to the Pacific Islands with a historical collection accumulated with a very different sensibility.

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