

5th World Summit on Arts and Culture

Open session

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ATUA Sacred Gods from Polynesia

The exhibition “*Atua* - sacred gods from Polynesia” will focus on the relationship between art objects and *atua* ('gods', 'idols', 'spirits') from the pre-Christian period in Polynesia.

“*Atua*” is scheduled to open at the National Gallery of Australia, Canberra, in April 2014, and will then travel to two venues in the United States and one in Europe.

Polynesian 'gods'

- Some of the most evocative sacred works of Pacific art were originally collected as “gods” or “heathen idols” when the various Polynesian peoples were converted to Christianity in the 18th and 19th centuries.
- The Polynesian concept most often translated as ‘gods’ is *atua*, which refers to various life-forces that exist outside a living body.
- A number of different types of objects were used to represent, contain, or interact with *atua*. Some said to be ‘gods’ were in fact ancestor figures. Others were used as containers for disembodied life-forces.

The exhibition

- 85 major art works from across Polynesia will be shown.
- Polynesian art objects will be borrowed from more than 30 different institutions located around the world, including: British Museum, London; Kunstkamera, St Petersburg; Auckland Museum; Bishop Museum, Honolulu; Musée de la Castre, Cannes; the Menil Collection, Houston.
- Visually, the focus will be on the objects as works of art.
- Each piece will be given its own space so that other art works do not interfere with it, and so that the public will be able to appreciate the beauty and significance of each work.
- Each piece will be considered to be an ambassador for the people who created it and for their descendants.
- Each object will be treated with respect and courtesy.

- Each work will have its own conservationally approved lighting, will be protected and secure, and will be mounted so that it is shown to its best advantage.
- We will ensure that provenance for each piece is accurate, and attributions will be kept to an absolute minimum.

The catalogue

The 300 page catalogue will work on several levels. The objects will be presented to the public through high quality photographs and well researched provenance. The texts will focus on *atua* as they relate to particular objects; how they vary from region to region; and how people in the various regions have interacted with them.

Relevance to Polynesian people today

In 2010 Michael Gunn and Mahiriki Tangaroa began to collaborate on this project by exploring cultural links at sites on Polynesian islands and atolls known to have been associated with certain objects. Particular attention is being given to the context in which these objects used –geographical locations, social and cultural milieux, any names associated with a work.

One of the key objectives of this exhibition is to actively engage with Polynesian people to help revive and expand on past traditional knowledge, practices and concepts. The iconoclasm which accompanied conversion to Christianity in early 19th century Polynesia resulted in people losing the connection to their apical ancestors, contributing to the listlessness we see throughout much of the region today.

This dialogue involves identifying and consulting with key individuals in their respective communities within Polynesia. It will serve as a platform or resource and contribute to the wider development and well-being of the cultural and creative sector in these places.

Outcomes from this project will demonstrate linkages with the field of social cohesion, particularly shared cultural identity. By focusing on art works which were severed from the community in the early 19th century, this exhibition project will help many Polynesian communities regain a real sense and understanding of the roots and sources of their cultural heritage.