2011 | *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 1 (1): 299–314

| Forum |

Von Hügel's curiosity
Encounter and experiment in the new museum

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In April 1875, Anatole von Hügel, natural historian and committed Catholic, arrived in Fiji on the John Wesley, a Methodist missionary ship. The south Pacific archipelago had, only a year earlier, become a British Crown Colony; the first governor was yet to arrive; the nature of the administration and hence the future of Fijian societies were uncertain. Von Hügel, who was just twenty years old, was missing his fiancée, and unsettled by an acrimonious row with the veteran missionary Lorimer Fison. What had brought him to the islands in the first place was the long sea voyage often recommended to the affluent by physicians of the period, an improbable remedy one might have thought for afflictions such as the rheumatic fever that the patient in this case suffered from. But the young man also travelled out of filial piety: he was of mixed aristocratic Austrian and Scottish descent; his father, Karl—who, the son acknowledged, had inspired all his own tastes and interests—himself travelled widely in Asia and the Pacific, made extensive botanical, zoological, and ethnographic collections, and written a book on the geography of the great ocean. He had died in 1870; Baron Anatole, as he became, had indeed been ill, but his voyage was something of an act of homage, indeed a re-enactment.[1]

He left what was by this time the family home in London in mid-1874, spent some months in both Australia and New Zealand, and cast about for opportunities

1 In 2010 the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA) in Cambridge launched an annual lecture series, named after the founding Curator, with the generous support of Peter Chapman. This is the inaugural Von Hügel Lecture, as delivered. Minimal references have been added but the text is otherwise unrevised. For details of von Hügel's biography, I am indebted to Jane Roth and Steven Hooper's "Introduction" to their 1990 edition of von Hügel's *Fiji journals* (Roth and Hooper 1990), abbreviated to *FJ* in this text. The Fijian section of the paper revisits my earlier work (Thomas 1991). The collections referred to are now the focus of a major project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council on Fijian art, co-directed by Steven Hooper (University of East Anglia) and Anita Herle (MAA).

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to engage in pioneering natural-historical work. He was understandably excited by a Methodist expedition to establish a new mission in the Bismarck Islands to the north of New Guinea, at the time an entirely untried field. The venture would be led by George Brown, who had more than a decade of experience in Samoa, and who would in due course become as renowned in scientific and specifically anthropological circles, as he already was among missionaries. Fison, the man whom von Hügel had angered—by swearing, in a moment of irritation, at one of his children—was likewise a serious student of Fijian and Australian society, and had already corresponded extensively with the great American theorist of kinship, Lewis Henry Morgan. The decade was marked by a scramble for souls, labor, land and sovereignty in the south Pacific, and by new scientific scrambles too.

The altercation put an end to von Hügel's voyage on the John Wesley. He could only remain for the time being in Fiji, but was anyway delighted by the tropical environment, so different to either the arid vastness of Australia or the Europeanized landscape in New Zealand. It was almost a process of elimination that led him to ethnological work—he might have collected birds or plants, were others not already seriously active in those fields. But von Hügel was also struck by a total lack of curiosity among Fiji's several thousand white settlers concerning the native people. "No one," he wrote, "had thought of making a local ethnological collection." (*FJ*, 13)

Though he knew little about either Fiji or anthropological method he reacted against such souveniring as planters typically engaged in—their dining rooms usually featured a few clubs or implements that stood as proofs of the extreme savagery of the local people. "Every dish was a cannibal dish, every club had been the instrument of some atrocious murder, and every stain on either was caused by blood" (*FJ*, 13). He lamented, too, that colonization would bring about "a crisis in the history" of the people; he feared it would not be long before "European capital will have laid its heavy hand on all around. The chimneys of sugar mills and of ungainly factories will dot the shore, the feeding of their fires will have bared many a hillside, and the wild forests will be changed into serviceable, well kept plantations." He did not write, as so many of his contemporaries did, that the Fijians would soon die out, but he did anticipate their distinctive institutions and character being swiftly effaced, and the people themselves "soon so much modernized" as to have "little mourning left in them for all the changes in their land" (*FJ*, 13, 45-6).

These forecasts were unduly pessimistic—even today a customary order, albeit certainly a modernized one, remains alive and pervasive in Fiji. One cannot spend a day in a village without witnessing, probably indeed participating in a kava-drinking ceremony, and being made profoundly aware of the enduring importance of rank and relatedness. But von Hügel was right as well as wrong: there was a whole world of pre-Christian belief, a host of cults and rites and art forms that had already, at the time of his arrival, suffered decades of missionary assault in most parts of the archipelago, and that persisted only in the interior of the great island of Viti Levu, where life and culture would indeed soon be changed brutally and forever. He was drawn, therefore, toward this customary enclave, to people who had long resisted threats and intrusions from the high chiefs and powerful confederations that dominated the coastal regions and the smaller islands. These high chiefs had converted to Christianity and agreed to cede the archipelago to the Crown; hence the people of the interior now struggled to preserve their autonomy

in the face not only of their longstanding antagonists, but of the colonizing church and administration too. The *kai Colo*, as the interior people were labeled, were predictably stigmatized as intractably savage. The men of the area wore a great head of hair (sometimes in fact a wig) that in this context represented a daunting expression of warrior masculinity; it certainly bestowed upon them a formidable air of independence.

Von Hügel lost little time in embarking upon a journey into his "unknown land." It was an ingenuous and romanticized undertaking, but a remarkably successful one, largely because he came upon an expert and sympathetic go-between in Walter Carew, a former planter turned district commissioner. Carew was one of those characters whom the most critical of colonial historians cannot help liking; he had a keen sense of injustice, he was often at odds with his superiors, he could speak local dialects as well as standard Fijian, and knew local people intimately. And he was utterly relaxed in his surroundings: in a precarious canoe that took them up the Rewa River, von Hügel fussed and fretted about his trade goods and equipment, while Carew lay on the deck in the sun reading *Great Expectations* (*FJ*, 29).

Before their rendezvous, von Hügel had succeeded in purchasing a few artifacts, but at Nakorovatu, on the Waidina river, a tributary of the great Rewa, Carew enabled him to start collecting on a more ambitious scale. He brought people together and made a speech announcing the visitor's interest, assuring them that he had plenty to trade and that everyone would be dealt with fairly. "The whole evening through," von Hügel wrote in his journal, "clubs, spears, bows and arrows, dishes, dresses and ornaments kept pouring in" (*FJ*, 31). He accepted everything, including objects he considered "trash," in order to encourage trade. He was seated just within a house, outside which a throng of people were gathered. They took it in turn to thrust objects through the door; Carew asked the price, generally in cash or cloth, which was then placed on the threshold and picked up by the vendor, who then stepped away to make space for the next villager. These oddly anonymous dealings enabled people, including people such as younger women who lacked social status, to engage in a quick and uncomplicated traffic, that did not require the usual expressions of respect, or imply the obligations that Fijian gifting customarily entailed.

Von Hügel went on to seek out and acquire many things from many parts of Fiji, but this inaugural acquisition exemplifies the almost inadvertent richness of the whole. What he took away was not the selection of Fijian material culture that he specifically wanted, or considered scientifically significant. The collection consisted rather of what Fijians brought to offer, indeed all that they brought to offer. As it happened, the array included much that von Hügel did prize, but he accepted things that he did not value or did not at first value, and later often saw objects he would have liked but which people would not give him. He carried the longstanding bias of collectors of Oceanic art toward sculpted figures and weapons, but was given fibre pieces such as women's skirts which only began to interest him when he understood that various types were worn by girls, unmarried and married women, women of particular status, and so forth. If his collection moved at first accidentally toward comprehensiveness, his curiosity quickly became wide-ranging. He discovered significance in things that looked nondescript such as small fishing nets that were highly valued because they were not local products, but rather things received in trade, as gifts from related peoples.

Von Hügel would spend two and a half years in Fiji, dividing his time between journeys into the Viti Levu interior and various other parts of the archipelago, and residing at Government House as a guest of Sir Arthur and Lady Gordon. The Governor was engaged in what he understood as a bold experiment in colonial administration, a form of indirect rule that enshrined the Fijian aristocracy, and sustained much Fijian custom, or what Gordon considered acceptable in Fijian custom, as it was filtered by the faulty anthropology of the period, and codified in a copious set of native regulations. Gordon saw the Fijians as proud, clannish counterparts to his own Scottish ancestors, and those around him became more or less enthusiastic students of local custom and kava drinking. In the context it is not surprising that von Hügel's collecting stimulated a small-scale craze—Gordon himself, his nephew, also Arthur Gordon, his private secretary Alfred Maudslay, and the "lady traveler" Constance Frederica Gordon Cumming among others became preoccupied by the pursuit of curiosities, which were sketched, studied, and turned into tableaux, most elaborately in the dining room at Government House, the theatre of elite sociality in the colony. This photograph (fig. 1) speaks volumes about a strange aesthetic and anthropological game, peripheral in any formal sense to the business of creating a colony, yet central to the self-definition of its founding elite. It can be seen as broadly symptomatic of an ostensibly Fijianized culture of government that shaped the political life of the colony, that has reverberations still, in the postcolonial contention of the last twenty years.

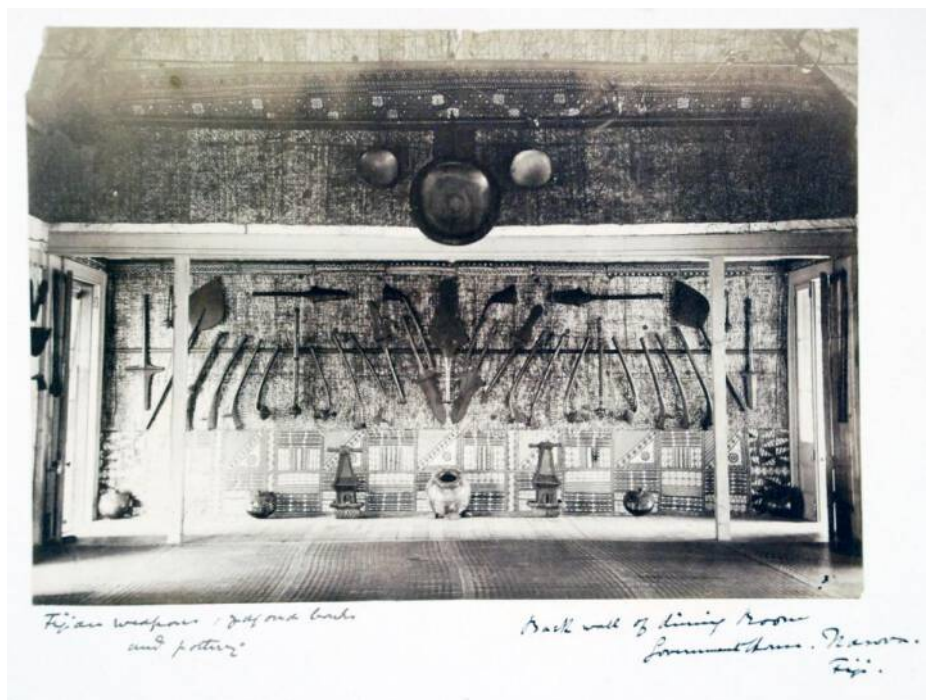

Figure 1. Artefacts on display in Government House, Fiji, October 1875. Collection of Lady Constance Gordon Cumming. Photo: Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge.

Back in England in the early 1880s, Gordon and Maudslay, who had studied at Trinity College and Trinity Hall respectively, presented their collections to the University of Cambridge. No doubt through their influence, von Hügel was appointed foundation Curator of what was at first called the Museum of Local and General Antiquities, reflecting the major donation of the collections of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society. He would hold the position for thirty-eight years, much of which he spent either writing letters to travelers and collectors in various parts of the world, or unpacking the boxes of artifacts they sent him. The Museum's collections would be dramatically enhanced, both by these acquisitions and by fieldworkers in the then emerging disciplines of archaeology and anthropology—notably including, in the early years, Haddon in the Torres Strait, and Burkitt in southern Africa (Herle and Rouse 1998; Elliott and Thomas 2011).

Von Hügel's experience as Curator however had uncomfortable affinities with current circumstances. His capacity to raise funds, build buildings and open galleries would have impressed the policymakers who now call on museums to rely less upon government support. But the campaign to assemble a world-class collection and construct a museum appropriate to it had a cost so familiar to curators and academics that it barely need be mentioned. Von Hügel had anticipated publishing an authoritative monograph on Fijian "history, religion, manners, arts, and handiwork." He had lithographs and photographs prepared, and in anthropological circles it was widely known that a great work was in progress, perhaps embarrassingly widely known, since apart from a single short article, nothing ever appeared, nor, the archive suggests, did von Hügel ever do more than polish up sections of his journals.

In *Time and the Other*, his influential 1983 critique, Johannes Fabian argued that anthropological knowledge emerged from the shared time of fieldwork experience, what he called coevality—a foundation of understanding, but one which had been suppressed in anthropological discourse. The propensity, he argued, was to relegate the African or Oceanic peoples typically studied to earlier stages of cultural or social development, they were not acknowledged to be the contemporaries of the anthropological writer and his or her readers. If, for those within the discipline, the thesis is by now well and truly superseded by the analysis of indigenous and local modernity in many parts of the world, it is obliquely suggestive, for von Hügel's curiosity and for what we now make of his collections. And it remains true, that if ethnographic knowledge is gained in part through formal methodologies, it owes more to shared time, meals, conversations, journeys, and physical intimacies.

On June 29, 1875, still in the Viti Levu interior, von Hügel crossed a small stream and encountered a group of young women who were snacking on Job's tears, hard seeds that they referred to as *sila*, also the word used for the corn recently introduced by Europeans. "Much to their delight," he wrote, "I tried to crack one myself but the polished husk seemed as steel to my teeth, which made no impression on it. One of the older girls then took the grain out of my hand, and with perfect ease cracked it and transferred the white kernel from her mouth to mine. It would be long at home," he reflected, "before anybody would feed me out of their mouth, but here the process seemed quite natural" (*FJ*, 43).

I doubt that this small incident would have made it into von Hügel's great work on Fijian history, religion, manners and arts. Indeed, given the dry character of the compendia that ethnologists of the time tended to publish, the pressure of

Figure 2. Fijian display, Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, after 1912. Photo: Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge.

curatorial work may not have been all that prevented him publishing his Fijian researches. His youthful travels were experienced romantically and surely recalled sentimentally, and it would have been a struggle to distill out of them an authoritative synthesis of the sort that suppressed the time and space of shared food, humor, and sadness—in the wake of a catastrophic measles epidemic, many villages had lost many people. On the other hand, Von Hügel's Fijian displays were consistent with the advanced theory of the time, they did remove Fiji from any shared time or history, they were artifactual counterparts to the neatly ordered monograph that he was never able to compose (fig. 2). These and other exhibits carried over an armorial or trophy aesthetic from displays in aristocrats' houses to the scientific environment, they implied a full representation of variant forms, they exhibited Fijian art, its techniques and its cultural affinities, they enabled assessments to be made of the state of Fijian society.

Certainly the collection of over 2000 objects empowered and still empowers many sorts of inquiries into Fijian culture and history. But today it speaks most eloquently not to anthropological abstractions but of an extraordinary time, one marked by fraught and in part violent change, for the people of the Viti Levu interior. Von Hügel was offered *liku*, women's grass skirts, and men's great wigs, because the people had been more or less forced to accept Christianity, marked by the wearing of imported fabric in place of local fiber, and the abandonment of emblems of warriorhood. When certain tribes of the interior—referred to as "*tevoro*," "devils," or heathens—rebelled, some invaded neighboring Christian villages, and ripped people's new clothes from them, as if to refute and reverse the accommodation with church and government. Among the retaliatory acts of the administration was the shaving of the heads of captured warriors, some of whom were sentenced to death, and many deported (fig. 3; Thomas 2010). As he labored towards his unrealized monograph, von Hügel had photographs arranged, cropped and reprinted. These men appear as "Fijian types," not as warrior chiefs, humiliated, their *mana* or spiritual power violated, brought by the photo studio in the colonial capital, in all likelihood en route to exile to some distant island. But the extraordinary richness, the many loose ends, of von Hügel's collection enable this history to be reinstated. All the drawings, photographs, documents, artifacts and works of art bear witness to the circumstances that engendered them—a shared time, in the sense both of shared experience—such moments as that around the

seed on the river bank—and more consequentially, a shared but bitterly divisive colonial history.

Figure 3. Highland Viti Levu prisoner, photographed c. 1876-77, Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge.

Hence, collections such as those of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology are not only archaeological and anthropological, nor simply collections of art. They are historical collections also, and European historical collections specifically, artifacts of European exploration, travel, colonization, and knowledge. These spears look like unremarkable Aboriginal fishing and hunting implements, but were obtained by Captain James Cook within an hour of his first Botany Bay landing, mid-afternoon on the 28th of April, 1770 (fig. 4). They are almost certainly the first objects obtained from Australia by any European. They were picked up in the aftermath of a brief but violent encounter that inaugurated a troubled history of intrusion and miscommunication that remains unfinished and unresolved to this day. This foists an acute poignancy upon their very ordinariness.

It would be almost disingenuous to identify these just as Aboriginal artifacts; they are part of a material culture of eighteenth-century British ambition.

Figure 4. Mark Adams, Gweagal Spears, Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge University, England. 2002. C type print from 10 x 8 inch C41 negative. Courtesy of the artist.

In the aftermath of decolonization, ethnographic collections and museums have been much debated. Contention around the management and representation of culture has been driven, in particular, by the renaissance of indigenous identity and power in countries such as Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. Among the consequences of the process of negotiation and rethinking was that curatorial practice became increasingly collaborative. It is now widely presumed that any exhibition on an African or native American topic would involve consultation, indeed it might be expected that relevant communities would be fully engaged, as equal partners in any such undertaking from the outset (Peers and Brown 2003). And poachers have turned gamekeepers, in the sense that in New Zealand, for example, research projects and exhibitions featuring Maori *taonga* or

heirlooms, are led by Maori curators, on the permanent staff of the institution, who themselves consult with particular families and communities.

Wholly desirable as it has been, this sea-change has proceeded somewhat unreflectively. It is too widely presumed that historic artifacts constitute heritage and that contemporary communities have, or could and should have, an organic connection to whatever it is that is supposed to constitute their heritage and sustain their identities. A dominant language of patrimony and heritage informs the management of the past in agencies ranging from UNESCO to local councils, that is oddly oblivious to things we all know. Personal and collective identities involve attachments to people, place, practice, and work, and may not require the past, or the material culture of the past, at all. Conversely, while some people indeed do treasure things made by their ancestors, or things that otherwise evoke their ancestors' lives, others value them for different reasons, they may be uninterested and indifferent, or actually hostile. For instance, the overwhelming majority of Pacific Islanders today are Christians and a sizeable minority belong to fundamentalist sects of one sorts or another. People with these affiliations typically see their identities in a community of worshippers; if they think about the ritual arts of their ancestors at all, they probably demonize them, and if masks and idols were once burnt or taken away, they would feel good riddance rather than loss.

Collaborative engagement should be seen as essential to museums today, but not or not only because it redresses a wrong. The values and legacies things possess are there to be discovered, not specified in advance by a global language. Curators at institutions such as the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology have enriched understandings of collections in many ways, and have also created an extraordinary range of continuing relationships, that ironically re-enact those between colonial collectors and indigenous communities, with all the complications of deliberate reciprocity. Most vitally, these engagements are experiments, they take us to places we had not anticipated reaching.

In 2007 a discussion began with James Schuster, a descendant of Tene Waitere, arguably the most important Maori artist of the colonial period (for background and fuller discussion see Thomas et al. 2009). It concerned a *pouhaki* or flagpole that Waitere had carved late in his career, a gift from his tribe to Edward, Prince of Wales, who visited New Zealand in 1920, in the course of a tour of the dominions to thank them for their support during the First World War. Maori were notable for a propensity, during the colonial period, to emulate and adopt new European technologies and symbols of sovereignty, and had begun carving flagpoles fifty or more years earlier, with crosspieces and supplementary poles, perhaps intended to evoke displays of flags on sailing ships, the instruments of global commerce and colonization. The 1920 flagpole, together with a rich array of other treasures, was gifted to the Prince, not out of some subservient loyalty, but to reaffirm the relationships between Maori to the Crown, and the importance of neglected reciprocal obligations (fig. 5). On his return to England the Prince presented the flagpole to the commander of HMS Excellent, a naval base in Portsmouth Harbor; it was erected in a rose garden and there it remained for 85 years (fig. 6). In 2006, when Schuster saw the flagpole himself for the first time, the 8 meter carving was in remarkably good condition, given its exposure to harsh coastal weather, but clearly needed to be moved indoors.

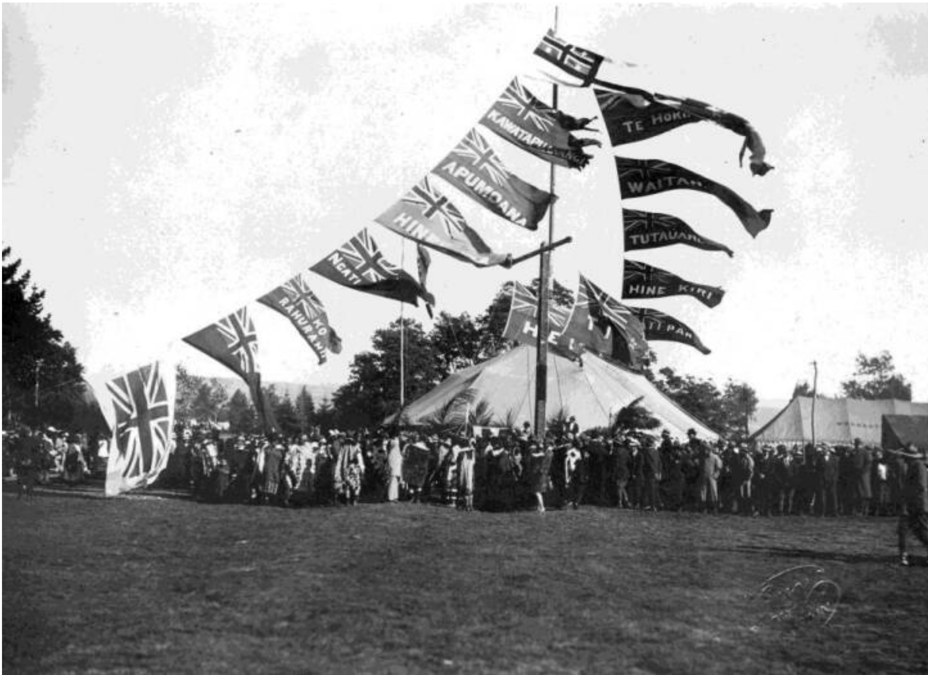

Figure 5. The Maori welcome for Edward, Prince of Wales at Arawa Park, Rotorua, on Thursday, 29 April 1920. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington (PAColl-7081-03).

Figure 6. The pouhaki at HMS Excellent, Whale Island, Portsmouth Harbour in June 2007. Photo Nicholas Thomas.

In due course it was agreed that Waitere's work—the only flagpole of this kind outside New Zealand, and possibly the oldest extant anywhere—might be relocated to Cambridge. James Schuster, himself an expert in restoring historic carvings, and his wife Cathy did some work on the flagpole—using some of Tene's own tools, that had been passed down—and a year later it was installed in the Museum's permanent galleries (fig. 7). It is rare today for an ethnographic museum to acquire a major historic work, and almost unprecedented for such an object to enter an institution with the active support of family members concerned.

Figure 7. Welcome, *powhiri* and ceremony of dedication at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, 4 December 2008. Photo Jocelyne Dudding.

The Schusters' visits enabled long and rewarding discussions about the artist, his work, and the pouhaki. One serious issue arose, but it was not that of the flagpole's appropriate location; the family did not seek its repatriation to tribal land; though had it been illegitimately acquired, they might well have done so. From their perspective, the pouhaki had been gifted to the Prince, it ought to remain in Britain, we had undertaken to care for it, and the Museum was for this and other reasons an appropriate host. The question that was much discussed, rather, was how the pole should be treated. In the past, museum artifacts were commonly restored, even recreated, but over recent decades the profession has turned toward purism, the consensus is that a piece should be preserved in the state in which it was acquired. But, for Jim Schuster, for Te Arawa and Maori in general, caring for a carving at home would involve giving it a good coat of paint with whatever ordinary red housepaint might be available.

But Jim saw also that the work's appearance should be consistent with that of other great pieces in the gallery, such as the Haida totem pole, and consideration was given to attempting to replicate a matt, mud-based stain, that had used traditionally, though all were aware that even before the pole was carved, Maori artists had adopted commercial paints and varnishes, and analysis of traces of a stain on the pouhaki established that what had been applied, presumably in 1920, was shellac. What was essentially Jim's inspired idea, that linseed oil would reinvigorate the carving, was consistent neither with customary nor curatorial practice, but enabled the object to shine in the specific environment of the gallery, it enabled it to express the prestige of the tribal group, and by extension that of all Maori, it made it what it had always been intended to be, a potent ambassador.

A report by a Polynesian journalist in the *New Zealand Herald* carried the headline, "Historic flagpole recovers its mana" (Tapaleao 2008). The notion that the spiritual power of a great work of indigenous art could be *restored* through relocation into an ethnographic museum might perplex those who presume a natural antagonism between native peoples and museums, that the institutions are storehouses of colonial loot, that is only waiting to be repatriated. The pouhaki's presence in the United Kingdom is emphatically the upshot of a colonial history, but the flagpole never played the part of an abducted victim in that history. The pouhaki was, rather, a telling gift, an awe-inspiring artistic instrument. If Cook's spears were symptoms of an eighteenth century intrusion, the flagpole exemplifies, not a native riposte, in a straightforward sense, but an indigenous affirmation of prestige, that capitalized on the distinguished service of Maori in the First World War. The relative prominence of the flags, on the great day of the welcome, hinted even at a degree of tribal sovereignty within the empire.

Much more could be said about the pouhaki and its past and present significances, but the suggestiveness of the object itself implies a wider reconsideration of what museums are and do. A rich literature in museum studies has been broadly divided between professional manuals—on everything from conservation through exhibition development to public programs—and critique haunted by the issue of appropriation, that rehearses the politics of representation, the contention around the stories that museums tell. It may crudely be said that this began as much needed scrutiny of colonial collections and exhibitions, and turned toward more positive advocacy of the kind of collaboration that I have discussed. These topics remain vital, and warrant further work, but something right in front of us has been overlooked, and that is what curators, what museum

researchers do. The museum is not only a collection and institution, a place the public go, it is also a kind of work, a method. This has been obscured, because curators have disciplinary affiliations, they are art historians or archaeologists, but I suggest that there is a kind of discipline, a kind of experimentation, that is characteristic of museum work itself.

In *A history of the world in ten a half chapters*, Julian Barnes wrote, "There's one thing I'll say for history. It's very good at finding things." If there is a method in the museum, it turns on finding things, identifying them, and placing them in some relationship to others; moments, we could say, of discovery, captioning, and juxtaposition. Curators can be said to select things—for exhibition, for example—but the term discovery more aptly evokes a less rational process, one involving chance and surprise, and perhaps also the fraught exposure of something enigmatic or troubling. A simple search for a "good" or "representative" example may lead one to an object that is neither good nor typical, yet curious, that points to some anomaly that bears singular intent, as the Maori flagpole did. Captioning is not only the composition of a line of text that might accompany an image or object, but a wider effort of description and contextualization, that begins with deceptively simple questions, such as "What is it?" Is a certain object a decorated barkcloth, or a painting? Is a diminutive spirit house a model? Is a certain carving a spirit figure, or a copy of a spirit figure commissioned by an ethnologist? The questions may be asked of the particular pieces, but they prejudice distinctions, for example between fabrics and paintings, and demand that we clarify what, for example, a model or a souvenir is.

Objects are seldom exhibited on their own, hence they are juxtaposed. Whatever "it" may be, one has to ask what it goes with, what it may be placed in a series with, or what it may be opposed to. A chronological ordering of works by a single artist, or an assemblage representing a particular culture, each ask objects to speak to different conventions. My interest is not in the burden these classificatory or narrative conventions carry, but the sense in which other possibilities are present, and relationships of many kinds may throw up questions that again, are deceptively simple. How can a work of secret sacred ritual art stand for a "culture" in the same sense that a fish-hook or basket might?

In 2007 the Australian artist Brook Andrew spent just a day in the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology's photographic archive, and was astonished to come upon a set of loose prints, reproductions from a singular album, Wilhelm Blandowski's *Australia in 142 photographs* (fig. 8). Blandowski had led an expedition in 1856-57 to the confluence of the Murray and Darling rivers, a region then little known to white settlers, and accumulated a massive collection of new natural specimens, on the basis, he was happy to acknowledge, of close collaboration with the Nyeri Nyeri people, whose activities and ceremonies were studied and depicted by the expedition artist, Gerard Krefft. On his return to Melbourne, Blandowski was initially feted, but swiftly caught up in controversy and compelled to return to Europe. Over 1860-61, he employed a draughtsman to rework Krefft's drawings, together with illustrations from other sources, and planned an ambitious visual encyclopedia in the Humboldtian tradition. But he failed to gain financial backing and only two copies of the album appear to have been produced, in any case only two are extant, one now in Berlin, the other in the Haddon Library in Cambridge (Allen 2010).

Figure 8. Pages from Wilhelm Blandowski, Australien in 142 Photographischen, unpublished album, Haddon Library, Cambridge.

Andrew was intrigued by the images for many reasons, not least because they documented an indigenous Australian architecture. Stereotypes suggested that hunter-gatherers, nomadic peoples, simply inhabited environments without modifying them, here was a landscape aesthetically and ritually shaped. Only a few weeks later, on his return to Australia, Andrew wrote seeking digital reproductions that he could rework, and began working on a spectacular series. Three meters in width, two and a half meters high, these works raised the question of scale, of what difference it makes to make something much bigger (fig. 9). If models are reductions that make objects manipulable, these enlargements, the surfaces of which alter as they were seen from different angles and in different light, are alive with a surfeit of sensory effects.

Figure 9. Brook Andrew, The Island I. 2007. Mixed media on linen, 250 x 300 x 5 cm. Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge. Acquired with a grant from The Art Fund.

Andrew's particular intention was to produce work on a public scale. Like classical history paintings, or the pop works of Warhol, these prints declare an aspiration to shape a nation's understanding of a time and a history, specifically an Australian understanding of the cross-cultural past. Yet there is no straightforward political message, these are not the artistic equivalents of slogans. There is rather the interest in bringing "into the light" as Andrew puts it, the affirmative images of Aboriginal life that have languished in anthropological archives, that have unexpected stories to tell (MAA 2008). An evolutionary ideology, it is well known, consigned foragers such as indigenous Australians, to a primordial epoch, to the dawn of time, whereas images of this sort, that are interested in burial mounds, like those that at the same time preoccupied antiquarians within Britain and Europe, are oddly familiarizing, and bring Aboriginal people, as it were, much closer to us, into a comparatively recent past.

Andrew engaged, as an artist, in research that paralleled that of curators, that asked how we might understand images and artifacts in historic collections, and exhibit them today. His works, like the best exhibitions, do not answer questions, but stimulate people to ask them. They also raise the issue of what kind of knowledge museum experiments result in. Exhibitions may be accompanied by catalogues and texts but they are not texts, they are artifactual series and juxtapositions, they are experiences that have particular qualities, that arise from objects, from lighting, from display environments, they are visual and more broadly sensory. We all, of course, know a great deal, at a sensory register, as opposed to a discursive one. We know places and people, most obviously our own children, through sight, touch, hearing and smell; we may similarly know public events, even history, as experience rather than information. But art works and exhibitions involve something different, that is a knowledge of argument, of analysis, in the form of an arrangement of things, rather than an arrangement of words, through the experience of that arrangement, as opposed to the reading of a text. This is not the place to begin elaborating upon or qualifying this suggestion. My claim is merely that museums are places in which all sorts of experiments remain to be tried out. They may be fertile, especially, since despite the surfeit of things in the world, despite the sheer excess of artifact collections, we have only started to appreciate what objects and collections have to tell, about the extraordinary histories that engendered them, as well, even, as what counts as knowledge itself.

You will recall from my account of von Hügel's collecting that the young natural historian got, quite literally, more than he bargained for. There is likewise more to his collection, more to his legacy, than we might anticipate or be prepared for. Curiosity has a problematic, even a disturbing history. Yet it may be indispensable to our future.

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