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978-0-521-65998-7 - Double Vision: Art Histories and Colonial Histories in the Pacific

Edited by Nicholas Thomas and Diane Losche

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Double Vision

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Nicholas Thomas and Diane Losche

Assistant editor: Jennifer Newell



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978-0-521-65998-7 - Double Vision: Art Histories and Colonial Histories in the Pacific

Edited by Nicholas Thomas and Diane Losche

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

List of illustrations *viii*

Contributors *ix*

Preface *xi*

Introduction

NICHOLAS THOMAS *1*

Part I Voyages

- 1 Re-imagining Juan Fernandez: probability, possibility and pretence in the South Seas

JONATHAN LAMB *19*

- 2 Images of monarchy: Kamehameha I and the art of Louis Choris

HARRY LIEBERSOHN *44*

- 3 Art as ethno-historical text: science, representation and indigenous presence in eighteenth and nineteenth century oceanic voyage literature

BRONWEN DOUGLAS *65*

Part II Colonies

- 4 The penitentiary as paradise

MICHAEL ROSENTHAL *103*

- 5 Under Saturn: melancholy and the colonial imagination

IAN MCLEAN *131*

- 6 Looking at Goldie: face to face with 'All 'e Same T'e Pakeha'

LEONARD BELL *163*

Part III Imaginings beyond colonialism

- 7 Voices beyond the *Pae*

ROBERT JAHNKE *193*

- 8 The importance of birds: or the relationship between art and anthropology reconsidered

DIANE LOSCHE *210*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-65998-7 - Double Vision: Art Histories and Colonial Histories in the Pacific

Edited by Nicholas Thomas and Diane Losche

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CONTENTS

Part IV Counter-colonial imaginings

9 Past present: the local art of colonial quotation

JOAN KERR *231*

Visual essay

Australian icons: notes on perception

GORDON BENNETT *252*

Clumsy utopians: an afterword

PETER BRUNT *257*

Bibliography *275*

Index *278*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-65998-7 - Double Vision: Art Histories and Colonial Histories in the Pacific

Edited by Nicholas Thomas and Diane Losche

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Illustrations

- 1.1 'Affecting Interview of Two Moskito men . . .', Robert Pollard after Hubert François Gravelot. 30
- 2.1 *Camehameha, roi des iles Sandwich*, Langlumé. 52
- 2.2 *M. le comte N. Romanzoff*, Langlumé. 53
- 2.3 *Reine Cahoumanou*, Langlumé after Jean-Pierre Norblin. 56
- 2.4 *Habitans des iles [sic] Aléoutiennes*, Langlumé after Choris. 58
- 3.1 *Carte pour l'intelligence du mémoire de M. le Capitaine d'Urville sur les îles du Grand Océan (Océanie)*, Jules-Sébastien-César Dumont d'Urville. 67
- 3.2 '[Man of] *New Caledonia*', William Hodges. 71
- 3.3 *Sauvage de la Nouvelle-Calédonie lançant une zagaie*, Piron, engraved by Copia. 74
- 3.4 *Femme de la Nouvelle-Calédonie*, Piron, engraved by Copia. 75
- 3.5 *Nieuw Caledoniërs*, Kuyper, engraved by Portman. 77
- 3.6 *Homme du Cap de Diemen; Enfant du Cap de Diemen*, Piron, engraved by Copia. 78
- 3.7 *Port du Roi Georges [Nouvelle-Hollande]. Un naturel montre à ses compagnons les cadeaux qu'il a reçus à bord de l'Astrolabe*, de Sainson and A. Maurin. 84
- 3.8 *Nelle. Hollande. Ile des Kanguroos. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5. Femmes de l'Île; 6. Naturel de Van Diemen; Port Jervis. 7. Bam; 8. Djacamel*, de Sainson, lithography by Garnier. 88
- 3.9 *New Zealanders*, Earle, engraved by Landseer. 90
- 4.1 *Bathurst Plains and Settlement*, Augustus Earle. 106
- 4.2 *A View in Parramatta N.S. Wales looking East*, Augustus Earle. 107
- 4.3 *The Irish Whiskey Still*, David Wilkie. 108
- 4.4 'Stourhead: View to the Pantheon', Michael Rosenthal. 114
- 4.5 'Sydney, the Prisoners' Barracks', Helen Campbell. 118
- 4.6 'Sydney, St James's Church', Helen Campbell. 120
- 4.7 *The Entrance of Port Jackson, and Part of the Town of Sydney, New South Wales*, Robert Havell after James Taylor. 121
- 4.8 *The Town of Sydney in New South Wales*, Robert Havell after James Taylor. 122
- 4.9 *Part of the Harbour of Port Jackson . . .*, Robert Havell after James Taylor. 122
- 4.10 *Leeds*, J. M. W. Turner. 123
- 4.11 *Sydney, New South Wales, S. View*, wood engraving after a watercolour by Richard Read Jr. 124
- 5.1 *The Purple Noon's Transparent Might*, Arthur Streeton. 133
- 5.2 *Melencolia I*, Albrecht Dürer. 139
- 5.3 *The Last Muster of the Tasmanian Aborigines*, John Glover. 155
- 5.4 *My Harvest Home*, John Glover. 156
- 6.1 'All 'e Same T'e Pakeha', C. F. Goldie. 164
- 6.2 Installation at Auckland Society of Arts exhibition, 1905. 168
- 6.3 'The Modern Maori Knut'. 169
- 6.4 *Peeckelhaering*, Franz Hals. 172

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-65998-7 - Double Vision: Art Histories and Colonial Histories in the Pacific

Edited by Nicholas Thomas and Diane Losche

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

ILLUSTRATIONS

- 6.5 Photographs of the same model, one illustrating the 'true' or 'natural' smile, the other the 'false' or 'unnatural' smile. 173
- 6.6 'All 'e Same T'e Pakeha' without its frame. 180
- 6.7 'The Passing of the Maori – What We're Coming To', J. Blomfield. 181
- 7.1 'Ipu Pure', Manos Nathan. 197
- 7.2 *Unidentified Maori Women (No. 3)*, Robyn Kahukiwa. 200
- 7.3 Installation at *Korurangi* exhibition, 1996, Auckland City Art Gallery. 201
- 7.4 Installation at *Toihoukura* exhibition, 1995, Dowse Art Museum. 201
- 7.5 'Te Maori' poster for 1984–5 exhibition, Metropolitan Museum of Art. 202
- 7.6 Installation at *Patua* exhibition, 1996, Wellington City Art Gallery. 203
- 7.7 Tumanako meeting house, Hoani Waititi marae, West Auckland. 204
- 7.8 *Broken Whare*, Sandy Adsett. 205
- 7.9 Hineringa meeting house (interior view), Rauponga. 207
- 8.1 Learning the speech of birds, East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea. 216
- 8.2 Headdress with representations of birds, East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea. 217
- viii 8.3 A gas mask transformed into a baba tagwa figure, East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea. 218
- 8.4 The sides of houses, said to resemble the wings of birds, East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea. 220
- 8.5 Aerial view of a hamlet, East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea. 221
- 8.6 Ceremonial entrance to the *korombo*, East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea. 222
- 9.1 *Twice Upon A Time*, Lin Onus. 233
- 9.2 *White Panorama – Select Views of Sydney Real Estate 1788–1989*, Ruth Waller. 235
- 9.3 *Dancers with Weapons; Hunting and fishing; European house and couple*, Tommy McRae. 236
- 9.4 *Trade Delivers People* (detail), Narelle Jubelin. 239
- 9.5 *Nanulterra: A young cricketer of the Natives' Training Institution Poonindie*, John Michael Crossland. 240
- 9.6 *Big Romantic Painting: Apotheosis of Captain Cook*, Gordon Bennett. 242
- 9.7 *The Scientific Artist*, Geoff Parr. 245
- 9.8 *Cyclopedia*, Fiona MacDonald. 246
- 9.9 *Slicing History*, Vivienne Binns. 247
- Australian Icon (Notes on Perception No. 1)*, Gordon Bennett. 253
- Australian Aborigines (Notes on Perception No. 4)*, Gordon Bennett. 254

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-65998-7 - Double Vision: Art Histories and Colonial Histories in the Pacific

Edited by Nicholas Thomas and Diane Losche

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-65998-7 - Double Vision: Art Histories and Colonial Histories in the Pacific

Edited by Nicholas Thomas and Diane Losche

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CONTRIBUTORS

of *Eighteenth century life* entitled *The South Pacific in the eighteenth century* (1995), and a volume edited with Bridget Orr and Alex Calder, *Voyages and beaches* (University of Hawaii Press, 1998).

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x

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Cambridge University Press

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Edited by Nicholas Thomas and Diane Losche

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Preface

This book has considerable ambitions: it attempts to re-imagine art and culture in the Pacific, particularly in Australia, New Zealand, and the islands of the South Pacific. Confronted by rich colonial art traditions in the region, by the autonomy and power of indigenous cultural expressions, and by a complex pattern of connection and non-connection between these European and indigenous visions, we struggle to find an interpretive frame that makes sense of these histories, in and for the present.

The book draws upon a conference in honour of the work of Bernard Smith which took place in August 1996 in Canberra. The event was not intended simply as a homage to Smith's foundational work, though the example of his extraordinary book *European vision and the South Pacific* (1960) loomed large in our efforts to push further in addressing the vital questions of cross-cultural representation that have become increasingly central to research and argument in the humanities. Coincidentally, Peter Beilharz, who participated in the conference, had recently completed his fine study combining biography, intellectual history and social theory, *Imagining the Antipodes: culture, theory and the visual in the work of Bernard Smith* (1997). The conference and this collection agreed with Beilharz's claim that Smith's work provides a vital departure point for contemporary theorizing and complements his book, in the sense that we do not attempt any sustained appraisal of Smith's writings, but rather ask where we go from here. The ways in which the essays in this volume constitute answers to that issue, and the issue of how they relate to the very considerable recent literature on colonial and postcolonial questions, are addressed in the introduction.

The wider salience of these issues was reflected in the range and number of people who attended the conference and in the support the event received from a range of institutions, which we would like to acknowledge here,

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

PREFACE

especially the National Library of Australia, the program's host. The conference was organized and funded primarily by the Humanities Research Centre at the Australian National University. The National Gallery of Australia and the Canberra School of Art supported the travel of some speakers and hosted linked exhibitions and events. We particularly want to thank the Australia Foundation for Culture and the Humanities and the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, who supported the participation of indigenous artists and curators (and the travel of some overseas scholars, in the case of the Wenner-Gren Foundation). A number of people whose contributions to the conference are not represented in this book made vital suggestions that have helped shape the publication, including Margaret Jolly, Terry Smith, Marshall Sahlins and Bernard Smith. The editors would especially like to thank Jenny Newell, without whose editorial co-ordination, copy-editing and picture research the book would certainly not have been completed.