

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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ARTS OF THE SOUTH SEAS OPENS AT MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

A gigantic head 11 feet high, 6 feet wide, 4 feet thick will greet the visitor to Arts of the South Seas opening at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, Wednesday, January 30. This head, a replica of one of the huge stone sculptures on Easter Island, was too large to be taken by elevator or stairs to the second floor of the Museum where in gallery after gallery 400 strange and fantastic objects are on view. Eighteen months in preparation, the exhibition will close at the Museum May 19, after which certain sections of it may be circulated about the country.

The exhibition has been directed by René d'Harnoncourt, Director of the Museum's Department of Manual Industry, in collaboration with Dr. Ralph Linton, Professor of Anthropology at Columbia University, and Dr. Paul S. Wingert, Instructor in the Department of History of Art at Columbia University. The noted Mexican painter, Miguel Covarrubias, and the distinguished Australian ethnologist, Charles P. Mountford, also contributed generously of their time and knowledge.

Arts of the South Seas embraces many of the islands made poignantly familiar through the war years: Guadalcanal, Bougainville in the Solomon Islands, New Guinea, Truk, New Britain--particularly the section of Raboul--the Gilbert and Caroline Islands, and the Marianas. Objects to be shown include sculpture in stone, jade, bone and wood, stamped and painted fabrics made of bark cloth and fibre, jewelry made of shell and turtle shell, carved details of ceremonial houses or temples, canoe ornaments, weapons, masks, large idols and ancestral figures. Jewelry, weapons and masks also make use of human hair, human, shark, rat and whale teeth, and boars' tusks.

The Museum will publish a book of the same title, with 200 illustrations (4 in full color) of objects shown. Its 200 pages will be much more than a catalog of the exhibition. With text by Dr. Linton and Dr. Wingert in collaboration with Mr. d'Harnoncourt, it will be the first publication giving a representative picture of the art styles and the background of the entire region known as Oceania.

In his foreword to the book, Mr. d'Harnoncourt writes in part:

"In spite of its variety and beauty, Oceanic art is still relatively unknown. Anthropologists have of course dealt with many of its regional and local manifestations but have treated them chiefly as a source of useful evidence in their studies of other aspects of native life. Only a few artists and art lovers, most of them associated with advanced movements, have recognized its full esthetic value. The kinship between arts of the South Seas and recent movements in modern art such as Expressionism and Surrealism is similar to that between African Negro art and Cubism so much discussed early in this century.

"The appreciation of foreign art forms by an art group is always connected with the group's own preoccupations. It is significant, therefore, that Oceanic art was among the last of the primitive arts to be 'discovered.' The Cubists, in their search for the basic geometric forms underlying the complex shapes of nature, turned to African Negro art. The reviving interest of modern sculptors in direct carving and their emphasis on actual volume without recourse to 'painting' with light and shade, led to a new appreciation of the ancient sculptures of Mexico and Asia Minor. More recently, the interest in the dream world and the subconscious that first developed during the later phases of Expressionism, made us aware of the Magic art from Oceania. The affinity of this Magic art with certain contemporary movements is not limited to concept and style but can be observed also in the choice of materials and in technique."

The presentation of the arts of the South Sea islands involved a number of specific problems. The area includes great variations in natural surroundings from dark, tropical rain forests to sun-baked atolls. Since in all so-called primitive societies objects are made to fit the locale in which they are to be seen, it was essential for their adequate display to give consideration to the natural characteristics of the various islands such as color, light, spaciousness.

There are at least twenty distinct cultural areas in Oceania, every one of which is closely related to one or more of the others. Cultural characteristics and art styles extend from region to region so that a traditional presentation in closed exhibition units would have given a completely false picture. The plan of the exhibition, therefore, has been designed to show the visitor open vistas from one section to another wherever there is a close relationship between the objects. Closed units are introduced only where unique local styles have developed.

It is the aim of the installation to present the objects to the visitor in an atmosphere closely related to that for which they were created and to recreate the experiences of the traveller who, in going from country to country, witnesses the sharp contrasts between, as well as the gradual merging of cultures.

The necessary research and experimentation to apply this new display method was made possible through a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation.

Lenders to the exhibition of Arts of the South Seas include American Museum of Natural History, New York; Brooklyn Museum, New York; Buffalo Museum of Science; Chicago Natural History Museum; Milwaukee Public Museum, Wisconsin; Newark Museum, New Jersey; New York Historical Society; Peabody Museum, Harvard University, Cambridge; Peabody Museum of Natural History, Yale University, New Haven; Peabody Museum of Salem, Massachusetts; Philadelphia Commercial Museum; Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence; Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto; South Australian Museum, Adelaide; United States National Museum, Washington, D. C.; University of Pennsylvania Museum, Philadelphia; Washington University, St. Louis; also Mr. and Mrs. Gordon Bolitho; Lt. John Burke, U.S.N.R.; Max Ernst; John Ferno; Capt. Sheldon A. Jacobson, U.S.N.R.; Mrs. Harold Florsheim; L. Pierre Ledoux; Prof. Ralph Linton; Miss M. Matthews; Charles P. Mountford; Dillon Ripley; Dr. V. G. Simkhovitch; John and Margaret Vandercook; John Wise.

To quote further from Mr. d'Harnoncourt's introduction to the book Arts of the South Seas:

"For three centuries the distant islands of the South Seas have held a strange fascination for the Western World. The tales of early explorers and adventurers, often edited by romantic stay-at-homes, made us think of a perilous paradise inhabited by picturesque children of nature. But recent reports from the men stationed in the Pacific theatre of war struck a grimmer note. These men learned to know the islands the hard way--fighting and sweating it out in the suffocating heat of the damp jungles and in the desolation of god-forsaken specks of coral lost in a vast ocean.

"Seen against these contrasting backgrounds, the arts of the South Seas become a vital document that gives reality and substance to the dreams of the romantics and fills the stories of mud and rock with dramatic human content. Here is a record of the extraordinary achievements of scattered groups of primitive men who conquered the isolation of a vast island world and created in it a series of rich cultures.

"The terms South Seas and Oceania are used in this book to designate the large section of the South Pacific Ocean that includes Australia, Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia. There is good reason for dealing with this region as a unit since each of its component cultural areas has marked affinities with one or more of the others, so that together they constitute a network of related cultures even though no single important feature is common to all....

"In certain sections racially well defined groups have lived next to each other for generations without losing their cultural identity, while in others they have merged to form new homogeneous groups. In the case of successive migrations of people of the same ancestry, the newcomers were either completely absorbed by the early settlers or formed an aristocracy within a racially uniform people....

"Far too little research has been done up to now to make possible a systematic analysis of Oceanic art based on considerations of content and form, but even a preliminary survey provides many stimulating points of departure. There is no doubt that the great variety of styles and the outstanding quality of individual works of art from the South Seas would make such a study a major contribution to our knowledge of the primitive arts of the world."