



# PACIFIC PRESENCES

– VOLUME 2 –

## *Oceanic Art and European Museums*

edited by

LUCIE CARREAU, ALISON CLARK,  
ALANA JELINEK, ERNA LILJE  
& NICHOLAS THOMAS

## **Source Reference**

Carreau, L., Clark, A., Jelinek, A., Lilje, E. and Thomas, N. (eds.) 2018: *Pacific Presences - Volume 2. Oceanic Art and European Museums*, Leiden: Sidestone Press.





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Series: Pacific Presences, volume 4b  
General Editor: Nicholas Thomas

Published by Sidestone Press, Leiden  
[www.sidestone.com](http://www.sidestone.com)

Lay-out & cover design: Sidestone Press  
Photograph cover: Interior of the boat hall, Ethnologisches Museum Berlin,  
2015. Photograph by Mark Adams.

ISBN 978-90-8890-626-8 (softcover)  
ISBN 978-90-8890-627-5 (hardcover)  
ISBN 978-90-8890-628-2 (PDF e-book)

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## CHAPTER 9

### *From Russia with love: Nikolai Miklouho-Maclay's Pacific collections*

ELENA GOVOR

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#### **An anthropologist of 'the new type'**

The Russian explorer Nikolai Miklouho-Maclay (1846-1888), a highly respected figure in Russian anthropology, holds the unusual privilege of also being remembered and cherished by communities living along the Maclay Coast (now the Rai Coast of Papua New Guinea's Madang Province). He lived there for nearly three years (1871-1872 and 1876-1877), being the first European man to settle in that area. In the memory of many people of the Maclay Coast, he became a culture hero, who brought iron tools and diverse plants, European tobacco and salt. The Russian terms for some of these goods travelled along trade routes for hundreds of kilometres into the island's interior, while his local name, Makarai, became associated with European people and cargo cults in many areas of Papua New Guinea.<sup>197</sup> The island of New Guinea was the central focus of his studies, but between 1871 and 1883 he also travelled extensively in Island Melanesia and Eastern Micronesia, and visited Mangareva, Tahiti, and Samoa, as well as Indonesia, the Malay Peninsula and the Philippines. The main aim of his studies was uncovering the ethnogenesis of the Pacific Islanders, but his first-hand experience with different Islander communities in the turbulent 1870s and 1880s reshaped his attitudes to both the overall objectives of his studies and to the collecting of locally produced artefacts. He became deeply involved in the defence of the Pacific Islanders' rights and is famed for his humanitarian, anti-colonialist stance in respect of South Pacific peoples. He earned the praise of writer Leo Tolstoy, who wrote to him in 1886:

I do not know what contribution your collections and discoveries will make to the science for which you serve, but your experience of contacting the primitive peoples will mark an epoch in the science which I serve, that is, the science which teaches how human beings should live with one another.<sup>198</sup>

At the same time Maclay's engagement with the Indigenous people of New Guinea prompted Bronislaw Malinowski to refer to him as an anthropologist of 'the new type'.<sup>199</sup>

## **Maclay's collecting and field experience**

The bulk of Maclay's Oceanic collections are housed in the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (MAE) in St Petersburg, and warrant serious attention in a number of respects. By the 1880s the idea of 'collecting' was gaining negative connotations among Russian humanists such as Leo Tolstoy, who saw Maclay's 'collections' and 'science' as secondary to his humanitarian position, and further argued:

I wish to tell you the following: if your collections are very important – more important than anything that has been collected so far in the whole world – even in this case all your collections and your scientific observations are nothing in comparison with your observations of the essence of humanity, which you made after settling amongst the wild people in communion with them, and influencing them with reason alone.<sup>200</sup>

In reality, there was no opposition between these two spheres, and Maclay's humanist attitudes shaped his collecting practices to a significant degree.

From the onset of his travels, Maclay had very limited finances and opportunities for acquiring and transporting his collections, and developed quite a critical attitude towards 'collectors' per se, whom he described as 'suppliers of various European museums', and 'commis voyageurs' or salesmen.<sup>201</sup> In 1882 a New Zealand journalist published a characteristic yarn of Maclay's confrontation with Otto Finsch, a German naturalist:

Otto Finsch observed with some astonishment that though Maclay had spent years among the islands and had unrivalled opportunities for collecting, he, nevertheless, had not brought back a single specimen of any kind. The haughty Russian could not stand that. Drawing himself up with an air of superb disdain, he said – 'Pardon, Monsieur le docteur, je n'suis pas commis-voyageur!', which being interpreted means 'Excuse me, Sir, but I am not a confounded bagman.' It was a palpable hit against poor Otto Finsch, whose sole mission in life is to collect curiosities for the museum of his Society at Bremen.<sup>202</sup>

Nevertheless, as Maclay travelled, his encounters with people in different parts of Oceania made it clear to him that the region was experiencing rapid change, and that the particular skills and crafts of artefact manufacturing were rapidly falling into disuse. 'Seeing this everywhere on the islands of the Pacific', he wrote, 'despite my marked antipathy to the assembly of collections, I began to systematically acquire everything that characterised the way of life of the natives of those areas where I ended up living'<sup>203</sup> (Figure 9.1).

Maclay's approach to collecting was different to that of other 'collectors'. While living on the Maclay Coast, although his supplies of goods were gradually depleted, he took pains to observe fairness in bargaining with the local people. Characteristic in this respect is a scene which took place during his visit to the village of Male in October 1872, when three different men reported to him that *tamo russ* (*i.e.* 'Russian men', the



*Figure 9.1. Nikolai Miklouho-Maclay, c.1873, upon return from New Guinea.*

members of the Russian naval corvette *Vitiaz*, which brought him to New Guinea) had taken an *okam* 'small drum (made by mountain people)', a *nenir* 'basket for catching fish' and a very good spear from either their huts or a fishing spot (in the case of the *nenir*). He described his response in his journal:

Being sure that these complaints were not inventions, I considered it only fair to satisfy their demands and promised to compensate them for the articles taken by the *tamo russ*. Knowing that the natives value the *okams* very highly, I promised to give an axe for it, for the *nenir* I suggested a knife, and for the spear it seemed to me sufficient to give three large nails. They could get all these things, when they wanted to, at *Garagassi* [Maclay's place of residence]. My decision, which it seems they in no way expected, aroused great enthusiasm, and exclamations of '*Maklai is a good, good man*' were heard from all sides.<sup>204</sup>

Moreover, while travelling in Melanesia and seeing the unscrupulous dealing of the traders, he tried, for instance, to explain to Islanders the difference in the relative worth of iron and steel, to prevent traders from cheating Islanders out of high-quality materials.<sup>205</sup>

For Maclay the collecting of artefacts was not a final goal. He believed that data about the 'purpose, use, and meaning of collected objects' was of paramount importance, and that it was impossible to obtain such data without 'time and more time, and on top of this, trust towards the white man living among them, knowledge of the language, etc.' None of these aims could be achieved by short-term visitors, be they 'a whole learned

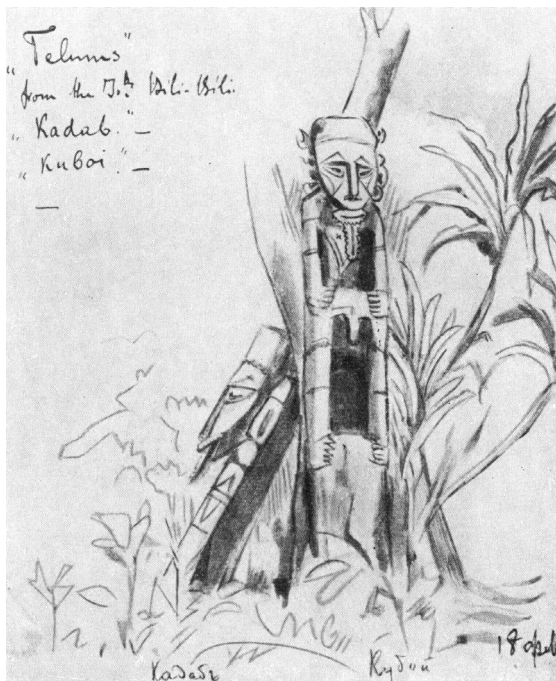


Figure 9.2. Nikolai Miklouho-Maclay's sketch of telum, ancestral figures from Bili Bili Island, PNG. (N.N. Miklukho-Maklai, *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, vol. 5 (Moscow-Leningrad: Izd-vo AN SSSR, 1954), p. 68).



Figure 9.3. Telum, ancestral figures from Bili Bili Island, PNG, collected by Nikolai Miklouho-Maclay, 146 & 102 sm. (Miklukho-Maklai, *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, vol. 5, p. 48).

expedition' or 'the most indefatigable and canny collector'.<sup>206</sup> For many artefacts in his collection we can find drawings and comments in his field notebooks. For instance, before he acquired a pair of Maclay Coast *telum* (ancestral figure) he drew them in their natural surroundings. He also recorded the personal names of the *telum*, first in Russian while drawing and talking with the Islanders, then in English while reworking the drawing<sup>207</sup> (Figures 9.2 and 9.3). When collecting musical instruments, he recorded their names, material, and context of use, and sketched the position of the musician playing the instrument in his surroundings.<sup>208</sup> In another case, the unsightly frame of a headdress comes to life in his drawings, which show the aesthetic and practical aspects of the frame's usage.<sup>209</sup>

Collecting stone tools, Maclay painstakingly sketched and described each stage of their production and use, and was interested not only in traditional forms of manufacture, but also kept a record of how new artefacts and materials introduced by Europeans were incorporated into traditional practices. For instance, he argued that people from the Admiralty Islands valued iron hoops, which successfully replaced sharpened shells in their axes and served as a currency in barter; at the same time he believed their other tools surpassed European ones in their functionality and would hardly ever be replaced. Visiting Melanesian islands at a time of rapid change, he warned fly-by-night 'collectors' and armchair scholars that the people of Oceania valued the crafts of other Oceanic people more than European trinkets, and that traders often brought artefacts from one island to another for barter. Without knowledge of the local language, these pseudo-local crafts might be wrongly provenanced.<sup>210</sup>

Maclay had a deep interest in Oceanic art and made sketches of it whenever he saw and acquired it. In the 1870s, after his first stay at the Maclay Coast, he published accounts of 'Traces of art' that he found there, arguing that materials – bamboo, for instance – determined the patterns, in this case straight lines.<sup>211</sup> By this time he had noticed the uniformity of certain designs applied to bamboo, wood and pottery, and noted that the study of carved sculptures might be 'of great interest because they can provide some indications about the relation between Melanesian tribes'.<sup>212</sup> As he travelled, his horizons broadened, and he began to see these patterns quite differently, as part of the heritage of possible ancient migrations in Oceania. While visiting the Admiralty Islands in 1879 he zealously collected patterns on pottery and tattoo coming from the same location, commenting on the tattoo sketches: 'There is a very similar pattern marked on the pots made of two straight lines'.<sup>213</sup>

### **Maclay's collections in St Petersburg**

Maclay brought his Oceanic collections to St Petersburg in 1886. He wanted to donate them to the museums, but the academic establishment was in no hurry to accept his gift and the collections remained stranded at the railway depot. Only upon his appeal for assistance from the Emperor were the collections transferred to the Great Hall of the Academy of Sciences, where he could unpack and prepare them for exhibition. This exhibition, which was originally planned for just three days but lasted much longer, provoked considerable interest among the public, academics and dignitaries.<sup>214</sup> Maclay's contemporaries noted how he would 'with passion' tell the visitors interesting stories about each artefact. Vladimir Mainov, an ethnographer who visited the exhibition, argued that it demonstrated the



‘necessity, which had now come to a head’ of the construction of an ethnographic museum for Russia, as such museums were being established all over Europe.<sup>215</sup>

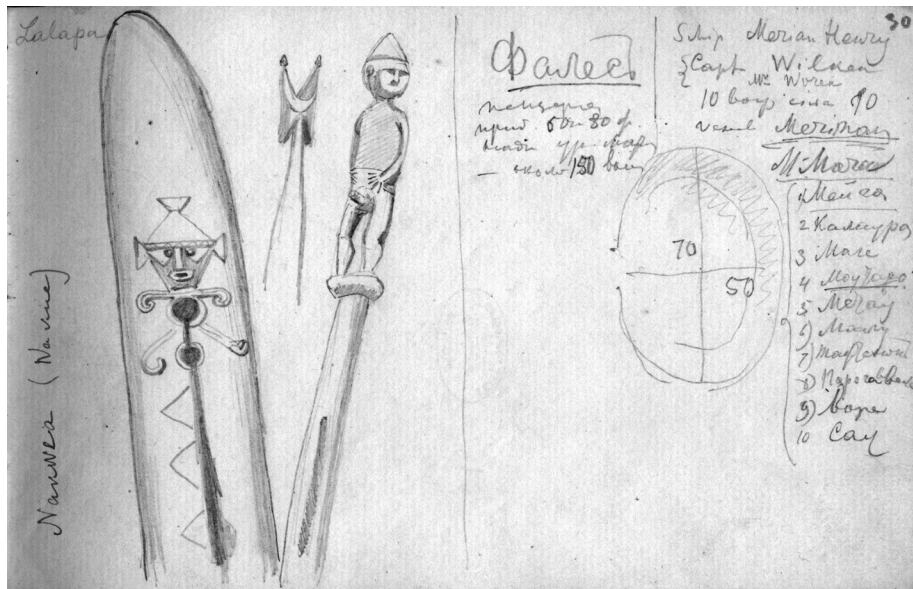
After the exhibition Maclay’s collections were donated to the MAE in St Petersburg. The collections were accompanied by a catalogue produced by Maclay which included detailed data about artefacts, including their local names and the names of the villages where they had been acquired. His collection includes about 800 items; the bulk of them are in the MAE, but some are preserved in the Russian Geographical Society in St Petersburg, in Dnipro Historical Museum (Ukraine), in the Macleay Museum in Sydney, and even in the Museum of Ethnology in Leiden (now part of the National Museum of World Cultures). According to the calculations of MAE curatorial researcher Elena Soboleva, New Guinea and Melanesian artefacts comprise nearly 80% of his overall collection. Maclay’s interest in the ‘daily life’ of the Islanders is evident in the composition of the collection. Tools in the collection account for one fifth of all artefacts; in combination with the raw materials used for their production, they comprise nearly one third. On the other hand, weapons comprise 15%; ceremonial objects, dance regalia, musical instruments and other cultural and spiritual items make up 11%. ‘As we can see’, argues Soboleva, ‘it was not characteristic for this scholar to chase after sensationalist rarities. He was able to expand the typology of artefacts usually falling into the hands of travellers.’<sup>216</sup>

### Living heritage

Maclay’s personal involvement with almost every artefact that he collected, as part of a process in which the acquisition of an item was only the beginning of a dialogue between the source community, the general public, and the academic community, is a remarkable feature in the context of collectors of this period. His involvement with source communities is revealed by the marginalia on his drawings, where he recorded, often in Russian scribbles, what people were commenting on while he was drawing their artefacts.<sup>217</sup> The public involvement is obvious from his inspirational talks at his exhibition in St Petersburg when quotidian objects inspired tales which gathered crowds around him. When donating his collections to MAE, Maclay insisted on provisions to ensure his ongoing access to the artefacts, which he needed while preparing his field materials for publication, envisaging their images as an integral part of this publication.<sup>218</sup> Tragically, Maclay died in 1888, soon after returning to Russia, without publishing his main works; moreover, many of his papers, including some of his field journals, were lost. What has survived has been studied and published by Russian scholars. Currently his artefact collection is one of the best studied and published in the MAE holdings. A significant proportion of it was published in the two editions of Maclay’s *Collected Works* in 1940-1941 and 1954. A special volume consisting of an illustrated catalogue of Maclay’s collections was the result of painstaking research by Ludmila Ivanova, Elena Soboleva and other scholars, and was recently published in the new edition of his *Collected Works*.<sup>219</sup> The mesmerizing influence exercised upon the Russian public in the early and mid-twentieth century by the Oceanic artefacts brought by Maclay was discussed in Chapter 4 in *Volume One*.<sup>220</sup>



The details of carved decoration on spear shafts, clubheads and slit drums [...] excite Lelepa viewers, and have served, along with photographs of woven baskets collected by Miklouho-Maclay and held in Russian collections, as templates or inspiration for a craft revival. Slit drums, carved in imitation [of Maclay's drawing ...] have been produced on Lelepa for the first time in more than a century, and forgotten weaving patterns reconstructed after close inspection of the photographs of baskets.





*Figure 9.5. Manearu, Lelepa expert-carver, and new napea, slit drum, recreated by Maclay's drawings, Vanuatu, 2006. Photograph by Chris Ballard.*

As Ballard reiterates, however, 'There seems to be little interest in producing exact reproductions of these heirloom images, [...] as contemporary makers seek to instil in their artefacts an element of their own individual creativity and identity', thus continuing the multimedia dialogue opened by Maclay with their ancestors<sup>222</sup> (Figures 9.4 and 9.5).

By comparison with other Oceanic collectors, Maclay's collections might not appear particularly rich or spectacular. When Germany annexed the Maclay Coast soon after Maclay's departure, meticulous collections of every type of artefact and their variations were made. Among these collectors were Otto Finsch, the Hungarian Ludwig Biro and German missionaries; their collections surpass those of Maclay in quantity and variety, but Maclay's collection remains distinguished by the manner in which it was assembled, with a sense of deep intercultural understanding, respect and love.

- Collections in Welsh Museums* (Council of Museums in Wales, 2007); Yvonne Schumann (ed.), *Survey of Ethnographic collections in the United Kingdom, Eire and The Channel Islands: interim report* (Hull: The Museum Ethnographers' Group, 1986), Volumes 1 and 2; Janet C.M. Starkey, *Myths and Mirrors: A report on Ethnographic Collections in the North East of England* (Newcastle upon Tyne: North East Museums, 1998).
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  190. Roger Neich, 'Pacific collections here and there', *Journal of Museum Ethnography* 17, (2005), 172-5: p. 174.
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  195. Arthur F. Grimble and Rosemary Grimble, *Migrations, Myth and Magic from the Gilbert Islands: Early Writings of Sir Arthur Grimble/Arranged and Illustrated by Rosemary Grimble* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972).
  196. Peter Buck, *Arts and Crafts of the Cook Islands* (Honolulu: Bishop Museum Bulletin 179, 1944).

## Chapter 9

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198. Leo Tolstoy, 'Letter to Miklouho Maclay. 25 September 1886', in N.N. Miklukho-Maklai, *Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh*, vol. 5 (Moscow: Nauka, 1996), pp. 773-4.
199. B. Malinowski, *A Diary in the Strict Sense of the Term* (London: The Athlone Press, 1967), p. 155.
200. Tolstoy, 'Letter...', p. 774.
201. N. Miklukho-Maklai, 'Na Malakskom poluostrove' [On Malacca Peninsula], in *Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh*, vol. 2 (Moscow: Nauka, 1993), p. 77; 'Chteniiia N.N. Miklukho-Maklaia v Geograficheskome obshchestve' [N.N. Miklouho-Maclay's lectures at the Geographical Society], *ibid.*, p. 520.
202. 'Notes', *Timaru Herald*, 11 April 1882, p. 2. Cf. Finsch's own reference to this discussion: O. Finsch, 'Nikolaus von Miklucho-Maclay, Reisen und Wirken', *Deutsche geographische Blätter* XI(1888), pp. 297-8.
203. N. Miklukho-Maklai, 'Chernovik rechi na otkrytii vystavki etnograficheskikh kollektzii v Akademii nauk' [Draft of speech for opening of exhibition of ethnographic collections at the Academy of Sciences], in *Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh*, vol. 5, p. 553.
204. N. Mikloucho-Maclay, *New Guinea Diaries, 1871-1883*, translated by C.L. Sentinella (Madang: Kristen Press, 1975), p. 226.
205. N. Miklukho-Maklai, 'Ostrovok Andra' [Island Andra], in *Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh*, vol. 2, p. 284.
206. Miklukho-Maklai, 'Chernovik...', p. 552.

207. N.N. Miklukho-Maklai, *Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh*, vol. 3 (Moscow: Nauka, 1993), p. 71; vol. 6 (Moscow: Nauka, 1999), p. 177.
208. *Ibid.*, vol. 3, p. 76; vol. 6, p. 182.
209. *Ibid.*, vol. 6, pp. 390, 184.
210. N.N. Miklukho-Maklai, *Sobranie sochinenii v piati tomakh*, vol. 5 (Moscow-Leningrad: Izd-vo AN SSSR, 1954), pp. 55, 56, 58; Miklukho-Maklai, 'Ostrovok Andra', pp. 283-4, 296-7.
211. N. de Miklucho-Maclay, 'Vestiges de l'art chez les Papouas de la Cote-Maclay en Nouvelle Guinée', *Bulletins de la Société d'Anthropologie de Paris*, Sér. 3(1) (1878), 524-31.
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213. Miklukho-Maklai, *Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh*, vol. 6, p. 428.
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217. C. Ballard, 'Marginal history', *History and Anthropology* (forthcoming 2019).
218. N.N. Miklukho-Maklai, 'Letter to L.I. Shrenk, 5 December 1886', in *Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh*, vol. 5, p. 478.
219. Miklukho-Maklai, *Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh*, vol. 6.
220. Elena Govor, 'Oceania in Russian history: expeditions, collections, museums', in L. Carreau, A. Clark, A. Jelinek, E. Lilje and N. Thomas (eds), *Oceanic Art and European Museums Volume One* (Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2018).
221. B. Putilov, 'Pesenno-muzykalnyi folklor bonguantsev' [Song and musical folklore of Bonguans], *Na Beregu Maklaia (Etnograficheskie ocherki)* (Moscow: Nauka, 1975), pp. 227-52.
222. C. Ballard, 'The return of the past: on drawing and dialogic history', *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 14(2) (2013), 143-4.

## Chapter 10

223. Ethnographic artefacts were considered as being natural history objects in many instances, as sales brochures show. See Rainer F. Buschmann's chapter 'Oceanic collections in German museums: collections, contexts, exhibits', in L. Carreau, A. Clark, A. Jelinek, E. Lilje and N. Thomas (eds), *Pacific Presences: Oceanic Art and European Museums Volume One* (Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2018).
224. Sixty-two of the original 90 pieces labelled in the museum's entry log have survived the world wars. The collection comprises types of artefacts which were more or less typical for ethnographic acquisitions from the same period: jewellery, Marshallese mats, boat models, weapons, fish hooks, tools and a Gilbert island/Nauru armour. Cf. Amiria Salmond, 'German women collectors in the Pacific: Elisabeth Krämer-Bannow and Antonie Brandeis', Chapter 12 in this volume.
225. The files consulted in the Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes were: Personalakten 1066-1077; R 19488- R 19495, R 19497 – R 19508, R 19511, R 19525, R 19526, R 19543 – R 19548, 19575, R 141963, R 252919; R 252920.

## PACIFIC PRESENCES – VOLUME 2

Hundreds of thousands of works of art and artefacts from many parts of the Pacific are dispersed across European museums. They range from seemingly quotidian things such as fish-hooks and baskets to great sculptures of divinities, architectural forms and canoes. These collections constitute a remarkable resource for understanding history and society across Oceania, cross-cultural encounters since the voyages of Captain Cook, and the colonial transformations that have taken place since. They are also collections of profound importance for Islanders today, who have varied responses to their displaced heritage, and renewed interest in ancestral forms and practices.

This two-volume book enlarges understandings of Oceanic art and enables new reflection upon museums and ways of working in and around them. In dialogue with Islanders' perspectives, It exemplifies a growing commitment on the part of scholars and curators to work collaboratively and responsively.

Volume II illustrates the sheer variety of Pacific artefacts and histories in museums, and similarly the heterogeneity of the issues and opportunities that they raise. Over thirty essays explore materialities, collection histories, legacies of empire, and contemporary projects.

