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INTRODUCTION

In the Pacific, the scattered islands known as Oceania — or in earlier times the South Sea Islands — are embraced by Australia on the west and New Zealand to the south. There are around 30,000 islands in this ocean (many merely coral reefs), yet their combined land area is only 1.5 million square kilometres. The 12 million population is concentrated in Papua New Guinea, the largest island, as well as Fiji, New Zealand and Hawaii, a state of the USA. Altogether 1,200 languages are spoken.

Australia and Borneo are included in this guide; however, Oceania geographically comprises three main groups of islands — Polynesia, Melanesia and Micronesia (see map). Mostly tropical, their climates vary from the warmth of white beaches bordering blue seas to steamingly hot lowland rainforests and snow-capped mountain peaks.

Ocean-wide links were established by the seafaring skills of the islanders. They reached as far as Easter Island, the eastern-most point of Polynesia and one of the world’s most inaccessible places; its vast stone figures stare enigmatically out to sea.

In 1521 the Portuguese explorer Magellan landed on Guam, his success followed by other European seafarers including Tasman, the Dutchman who discovered New Zealand in 1642. The ‘westernisation’ of Oceania, following the voyages of Captain James Cook (between 1768 and 1779), saw boatloads of artefacts being sent to European collections and much destruction by missionaries of what was seen as ‘pagan art’.

Easter Island’s giant statues: monuments to revered ancestors
ART’S POWER OVER LIFE
Oceanic art includes works that were essential to successful hunting. Carvings and paintings were equally necessary in encouraging the growth of children or crops. They were an integral part of male initiation ceremonies — the rites of passage from boy to man. Art objects could also exact punishment and even sentence to death those guilty of serious offences against clan law. Misfortune in life, accidents, famine, sickness and death could be attributed to the power of a mask or a statue.

Art is also linked with practical functions such as eating, drinking, education and law. The large decorated wooden posts, integral to men’s houses throughout Oceania, function as a kind of mythical history book and a legal document protecting land rites, while carved *bisj* poles can exorcise the unhappy spirits of unappeased ancestors.

Taking such artefacts out of context is problematic. In fact, to enclose a decorated *ancestor skull* from New Guinea in a glass case, or hang a painted *tapa cloth* from western Polynesia on a museum wall would, according to the laws of the society in which the work was made, call for heavy punishment.

Oceanic art is made to exist within a unity of six elements: it must be a mask or figure, be part of a ritualistic ceremony, adhere to the laws of society and be in the appropriate setting with the right music and magic. To remove an object from this environment is tantamount to a criminal act.

The artistic style of a region, village, clan or an individual artist is important in bolstering group identity in the face of other, often aggressive groups. It also encourages a strong sense of unity: clan motifs are protected by what we know as copyright.

RESPONSE TO THE PRESENT
Today, throughout the Pacific, there are four different kinds of artistic creativity: traditional art, traditional art that has evolved since contact with the western world, art made for tourists and contemporary art.

Traditional art has managed to survive contact with the west, although since the 1920s modern European motifs and Christian imagery have been incorporated. Motifs from playing cards, trucks, ships, aeroplanes, guns and western clothing have been assimilated into traditional designs, speeding the development of a more flamboyant art.

At present many artists make objects for selling to outsiders; fine replicas of traditional objects are made for collectors or museums. Masks, figure and animal carvings are factory-produced in a mixture of styles, while bark cloth paintings are produced in vast quantities for the tourist trade.
Part 3 — Looking at the images