

Reviews

Art and Artists in Oceania. Edited by Sidney Mead and Bernie Kernot. Dunmore Press, Palmerston North/Ethnographic Arts Publications, California, 1983. 308 pp., illus. N.Z. price: \$29.95, soft cover.

LIKE MANY another symposium collection, the papers gathered here would be better described if the words 'aspects of' were added to the title. There are eighteen contributions to this volume in three sections — 'General', 'Melanesia and Micronesia', and 'Polynesia' — fairly evenly divided in number and length. Most authors are well-known specialists, who presented earlier versions of these papers at the Second International Symposium on the Arts of Oceania at Wellington in February 1978. Two important names that were then present are omitted: Anthony Forge and the late Douglas Fraser. The volume looks good at first sight, being handsomely bound and covered, and is typographically rather attractive.

An important theme to emerge from the collection is an emphasis on the artist as an individual. It would seem to be a masculine thing — to stand out as an individual artist in Oceania — if Jehanne Teilhet's analysis of 'The role of women artists in Polynesia and Micronesia' is correct. For instance, the three artists given biographical treatment by Albert Wendt are men. But Wendt and Katarina Mataira, both individualists and artists themselves (literary artists), do not seem to be so much provoked by sexism as by the need to institute or somehow recognize a contemporary and forward-looking metaphysical infrastructure that will facilitate the production of modern art in Oceania, by Oceanians, which will be found to be 'oceanic' in its character and styles (using retrospective analysis if need be), simply by being the art of the day. They are against a tendency they seem to find among art ethnologists who want to keep 'tradition' alive lest their field laboratories disappear. It's a familiar tension; perhaps a tilt at a problem already overcome. Mataira's stance was not overlooked, however, when the Symposium ended and the Pacific Arts Association (PAA) constituted itself and included in its aims the 'development' of Pacific arts.

The achievement of this volume is substantially Sidney Mead's. Professor Mead organized the first symposium in Canada in 1974, the Wellington one (of which this is the fruit and which saw PAA established with *Pacific Arts Newsletter* (PAN) as its lively mouthpiece), and is involved with preparations for a third symposium in New York, due to be held in September 1984 (the Tahitian proposal for 1982 having fallen through). Here he offers a joint preface with co-editor Bernie Kernot as well as his introductory address for Wellington on 'Attitudes to the study of Oceanic art', in which he calls for a greater degree of sharing with Pacific people in the process of analysis. (Indeed, as he commented to this writer, there is a substantial fund available to bring Pacific artists to New

York and subsequent venues; a major problem is finding artists willing to come.) The first symposium dealt exclusively with visual arts, but an effort was made to open into other art areas from the beginning, on the very good premise that Pacific art forms are often composed of sounds, movements, words, and tastes as well as sights. Thus we have Judith Huntsman on 'Tokelau cuisine', an impeccable ethnography full of evidences of the sharing of expertise — just as Mead had requested. Later, at an Auckland ANZAAS, song and dance was added to the repertory of arts treated.

Historians may well find the magisterial overview which Jean Guiart is able to exercise very stimulating in the study of 'Changing Western attitudes', or find further historical relevancies in tourism in Nelson Graburn's essay on 'Art, ethno-aesthetics and the contemporary scene'. Definitions of art and their conceptual frameworks are explored by Philip Dark in 'Among the Kilengi "art is something which is well done"' (having also useful appendices of art-forms, materials used, and techniques employed) and Jehanne Teilhet in her admirable dissection, not to mention the ethno-interpretations elicited by Ann Chowning in 'Inspiration and convention in Lakalai paintings', all beautifully described. For Teilhet, 'art' is not merely the province of men because they take the public decisions about what is important and thereby 'art', with women relegated to 'craft', but because they reserve to their sex certain materials, specialized tools and technology and, often, the making of figurative images. She concludes, 'Male hieratic art is promoted in general by males to maintain their own importance. Though the initial division of sexual labour in the arts may not have been a question of preference, it has manifested an intriguing set of tapus for women who want to become professional artists of hieratic forms.' This paper found an enthusiastic reception among students of Elam doing a survey-course on Pacific arts (K. Mataira to please note).

I enjoyed reading every one of these papers, without exception. In the space of a short review it is impossible to mention more than a few so I chose above those which I think have a more general appeal. There are also several detailed studies, for example Deborah Waite's 'Shell inlaid shields from the Solomon Islands'; Roger Neich neatly draws aside 'The veil of orthodoxy' covering some forms of Maori carving; Alan Hanson divines from the evidence 'Art and the Maori construction of reality'. What the book adds up to is not, however, broad enough to be a textbook for students. Producing a textbook is a task in train with PAA, an organization which shows herewith that it has the requisite resource of expertise.

The book is flawed by a disgraceful number of typographical errors, suggesting that most authors did not have the chance to proof-read their own texts, and a good deal of editorial inconsistency in the minutiae of scholarly publishing (matters of style). The reproduction of the plates is not brilliant either (nor were some of the originals), but it is better to have this book as it is than have another embalming done, however well-intentioned, by a world figure in colour photography. New Zealand's role in the study of Oceanic arts is dominant, although we hope not dominating, for half the authors in this book are or have been New Zealand residents. It shows, moreover, the vitality of modern anthropological approaches.

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