

Berlin, the "Mother Museum" of Oceanic art

I have never before visited an Oceanic museum as impressive as the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin - not just the quality, almost all of it 19th century, but also the quantity, the depth, and the open and accessible display. This museum is a triumph of post-Berlin Wall reconciliation, reuniting the divided ethnographic holdings of East and West Berlin to display the collection in all its glory once again.

It's all a matter of history. When Germany became a colonial power in the South Seas in the mid-19th century, the government decreed that the fruits of all official collecting would go to Berlin. This not only ensured that Berlin would quickly build an astounding collection, it also spurred every other cultural museum in Germany to purchase Oceanic pieces in order not to be outdone. Sadly, many of the great

Oceanic collections of Germany are currently inaccessible - for example, neither the Leipzig nor Dresden collections are on view and Dresden no longer has a full-time curator. Thankfully, the Berlin collection, the mother of them all, is open, with enough space at its disposal to do justice to its magnificent holding of Oceanic art.

It is the scale of the display that impresses as much as the quality of the pieces. At the back of the lower level are eight full size canoes, including a magnificent 10 - 12 metre canoe from Luf Island in full sail, with its paddles, bailers and ornaments. There is also a full size Sepik dugout and a full size Asmat canoe with a superb figurehead - a large sculpture of a standing man holding a pig. This display is a tribute to the old German navy, who took their duty as anthropological field collectors seriously - obviously hauling a 10 metre canoe on deck for Berlin was no problem at all!

Germany in the second half of the 18th century up to 1918 was the colonial possessor of a large slice of New Guinea including the Sepik and the Admiralties coast, the Bismarck Archipelago and the Western Solomons (Buka and Bouganville), and early collections from these areas are astounding. The German navy sent the first expedition to map the Sepik mouth in 1886, another upriver in 1894 and a third in 1912, and many pieces on display were collected on these voyages. One such piece is a magnificent Middle Sepik orator's stool with human hair collected in 1912.

As you would expect, the display from New Britain and New Ireland is spectacular, particularly the *malangan* carvings. One case contains 12 magnificent *malangan* figures, seven *tatanua* masks and 16 other masks from New Britain, plus a huge fish carving more than two metres long and almost a metre tall (marine animals in malangan carving apparently designate the deceased as being a salt water person rather than a bush person).

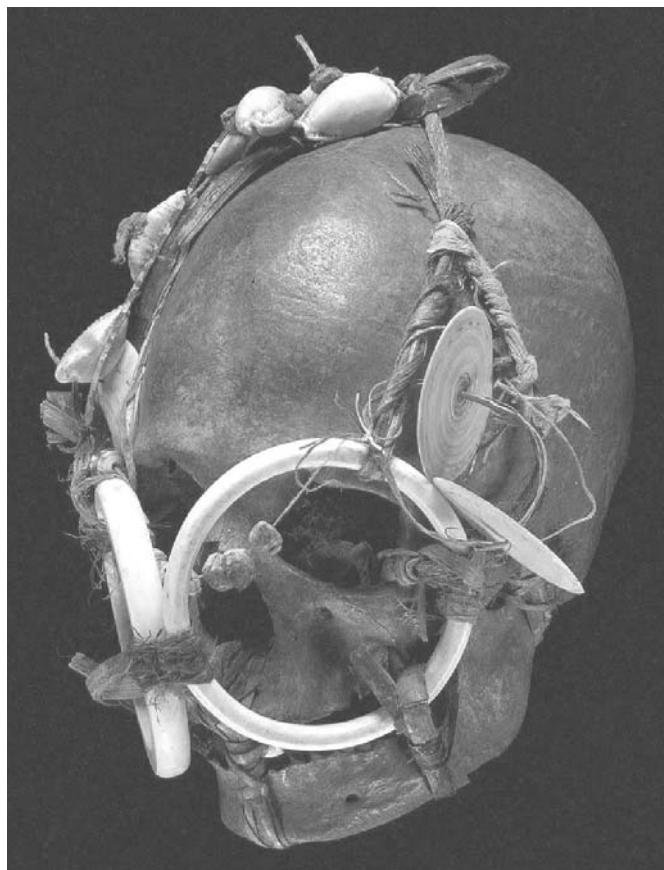
There are three very large (around one meter) chalk *kulap* figures, and the Sulka masks are also exceptional. There is a large collection of Tolai dance sticks (*pokopoko*), some with human figures, some carved as *dukduks*, and others abstract.

The impressive range of decorated skulls on display from different areas of Melanesia is also remarkable, including a complete *rambaramp* skull display figure and several over-modelled skulls from Vanuatu, painted skulls



◀ Two superb old *kulap* figures from the Bismarcks.

▼ A rare 19th century Solomons skull decorated with shell currency rings.



(directly onto the cranium) from Bouganville, overmodelled skulls with shell inlays from the Solomons, a remarkable skull from the Bismarcks overmodelled with clay and white lime to resemble a spiky blowfish, and examples from the Kwoma and Iatmul people.

The display from the Solomons is also very impressive, including an old and crude *nuzu nuzu* with round shell eyes rather than nautilus inlays, collected 1839, a bonito bone coffin, and three U-shaped dance shields from Nissan Island (Buka), including a rare and exceptional example with a human figure in the centre.

Because the 19th century was an era of curiosity and discovery for the natural sciences, and Germany was an international leader in these fields, the collection is much wider than the ex-German colonies. There were German botanists, ethnographers and enthusiastic travelers all over the Pacific, from Yap to New Zealand, and even the sea shell and plant collectors took time to pick up a few ethnographic items. The German Pacific trading companies were also keen participants in the South Seas curio trade and sent a stream of specimens back to Germany. So, for example, there are two magnificent Torres Straits turtle shell masks (a crocodile and a human face) purchased by Linde in 1860, 40 years before Haddon even got there!

And this is only the lower level, housing Melanesian art. The Micronesian and Polynesian treasures are on the upper level, and the age and rarity of the pieces leap out on every side. In the Hawaiian case for example, there are only about dozen objects, but every one of them could rival the best the Bishop has on display. These include a very rare wooden sculpture of the deity Mahikama, kneeling with outstretched arms - a carving that pre-dates the large statues of Ku introduced by king Kamehameha 1, (see Bishop Museum report, last issue). There is also an 1886 feather cloak, a feather god representing Ku which was actually collected by Cook, and two beautiful support figures for spears or harpoons.

The New Zealand collection is also outstanding, and includes a superb war canoe prow and stern collected by Buller in 1893, a protective figure from a store house collected in 1911, (ex-Oldman), a lovely food bowl held in the arms of two crouching figures, wood, jade and whale bone clubs and old feather boxes. The other Polynesian cultures of Oceania are equally well represented, and stand-out items include a full Tahitian mourning dress with shell tunic, a very tall figure of a goddess from Nukuoro in the Carolines, collected by Kubary in 1877, which could be the sister of the famous example standing at the entrance to the Pacific Hall at Auckland, a massive Easter Island dance staff and a very large Marquesan shell headband collected by Karl von den Steinem in 1898 - this piece has a huge mussel shell at the centre (about 20 cm wide) with a turtle shell disk with six tiki heads fixed to it.

The Berlin Micronesian collection is also quite exceptional. There is a collection of beautiful Wuvulu (Matty) bowls collected between 1893 - 1905 with round and oval examples as well as the common square and rectangular bowls, beautiful bamboo and stone artefacts from the Marianas, unbelievably complex and delicate carved combs and lime spatulas from Kaniet - many collected by Happe in 1885, turtle- and pearl shell jewelry from Yap and a wooden Yappese house board carved with a cat catching rats (I assume both cats and rats were novelties introduced by whites, probably helping to wipe out much of the island's fauna).

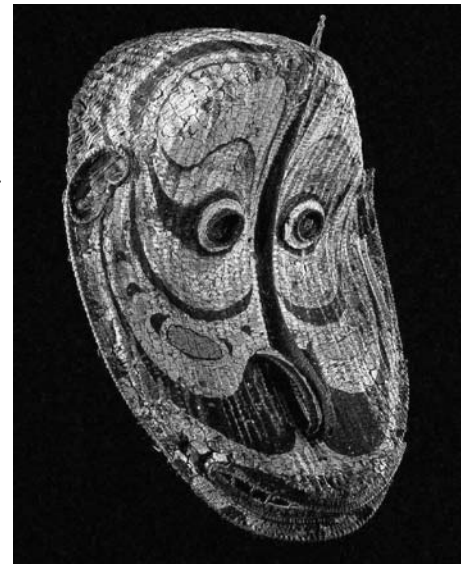


▲ A magnificent and spacious display. Part of the Melanesian section - note the full bisj pole in the background.

▶ An old Sepik gable mask. Most of the Museum's large Sepik collection was obtained by the official German naval expeditions of 1894 and 1912.

▼ (below left) A superb 19th century malangan figure.

▼ (below right) A very early uli figure from New Britain. The only other I saw where the main figure was standing on a human head is in the Beyeler Foundation collection in Geneva.



Much of the energy of Berlin's dynamic display comes from the Museum's curator of South Seas and Australian Collections, Dr. Markus Schindlbeck, whose enthusiasm for his collection is a delight to share. For example, Schindlbeck has reserved one case which changes monthly to show off yet another treasure from the downstairs store room. I had the opportunity to visit the reserve collection, and found it every bit as impressive as the formal museum upstairs. Much of it is secured in open storage, and almost all of the pieces could quite easily take their place upstairs. (Many had, for example, an impressive *malangan marada* figure which had been on public display very recently). There is no doubt in my mind that this large and accessible store is one of the prime assets of the museum - maintaining the integrity of the collection, giving the public area strength and depth and an ensuring an ever changing and relevant display.

David Said

Note: After I had written this article, I received a disturbing letter from Dr Schindlbeck regarding the future of the Museum at Dahlem - printed on page 8, this issue.

