

# **Pacific Exhibitions: Front-end Evaluation Results**

**Presentation 29 August 2003**

# Research Objectives

- **The overall objective was to provide the Museum with guidance on how to develop themes and interpretive approaches for a series of exhibitions about the Pacific region**
- **More specifically to:**
  - understand audience interest, prior knowledge, attitudes and feelings associated with the Pacific
  - identify themes that are of most interest
  - identify interpretive approaches
- **Practical outcomes were to:**
  - gain an understanding of base contextual information that needs to be provided for visitors
  - gain an understanding of interests and issues that the Museum could address in a series of Pacific exhibitions
  - gauge interest in specific objects in the Pacific collections
  - finalise themes that could be further developed
- **Part of a broader project**

# Methodology

# Five focus groups were held

- **Eight respondents per group:**
  - Parents aged 30-49, regular and non-regular visitors to museums
  - Adult visitors aged 50-64 with older children or no children, regular visitors
  - Older people aged 60-70, regular visitors
  - Young adults aged 18-30, regular visitors
- **Each group discussion lasted 1.5-2 hours**
- **Participants sent information prior:**
  - pictures of six objects from collection (no other information provided)
  - list of seven potential exhibition themes with brief description of each
- **Detailed discussion guide developed from the research brief**
- **Powerpoint presentation with images, text, further information used throughout discussions**
- **Selection of objects linked to each theme available for viewing**

# Focus groups are a qualitative form of research

- **To gauge detailed reactions to products, concepts, ideas**
- **Relies on good sampling and thorough discussion guide**
- **Allows for drawing out of ideas, opinions and feedback:**
  - test limits of what's possible
  - people respond to what we give them - ideas, concepts and themes
- **Analysis based on verbal responses as well as non-verbal behaviour within the group:**
  - level of enthusiasm shown
  - amount of discussion and noise!
- **Results are interpretations:**
  - based on experience of the researcher and client
  - used as information source for decision-making
  - final responsibility for exhibition content, design and interpretation lies jointly with Anthropology and Public Programs
- **Where relevant, findings from other AMARC audience research has been incorporated**

# Detailed Findings

# Museums and Galleries

# While experiences varied, common themes emerged

- **People want exhibitions that:**
  - cater for all ages
  - have topics and content that are of interest:
    - and change regularly
  - promote active participation, especially for children
  - allow you to wander around at your own pace, relax and enjoy whilst taking it all in
  - have lots of objects
  - plenty of seats, rest spots
  - focus on personal/community stories:
    - reflect everyday life
- **Participatory learning experiences sought:**
  - not just looking and listening
  - choice about what you do and don't do
  - hands-on activities for children that adults enjoy too
  - with staff there to answer questions if you want



# People had visited a huge range of venues

- **Both museums and galleries:**
  - MCA, Art Gallery of NSW, Powerhouse Museum, Maritime Museum
- **Many mentioned Canberra venues:**
  - National Museum of Australia
  - War Memorial
  - Questacon
- **As well as smaller, regional museums:**
  - Hazelhurst Gallery
  - Bakery Museum (St George Regional Museum)
  - Nicholson Museum
  - Jewish Museum
- **Therefore, participants were well-able to express needs and interests related to general museum visiting**

**THE PACIFIC:  
what words, images, thoughts come to  
mind?**

# Three categories of responses to the Pacific

- **‘Romantic’:**

- peaceful
- idyllic
- warm
- tourism:
  - resorts, friendly people, hula skirts, traditional food, palm trees
- traditional lifestyles, untouched
- old cultures
- blue, green

- **‘Unknown’:**

- vast in physical size and space
- view that the Pacific is Asia’s ‘poor man’s brother’

- **Most were able to rattle off lists of islands:**
  - Fiji
  - Vanuatu
  - Kiribati
  - Cook Islands
  - Solomon Islands
  - Papua New Guinea
- **Some confusion about what countries were part of the Pacific:**
  - Is Indonesia, East Timor part of the Pacific?
  - Is Hawaii included?
  - What about Norfolk Island?
  - Do you need passports to go to countries in the Pacific?
- **However, some respondents did use the terms Polynesia, Melanesia, Micronesia**

# The other category was 'Problematic'

- **Colonisation has destroyed their culture**
- **Exploitation through tourism**
- **Poverty**
- **Political and social unrest:**
  - the coup in Fiji changed perceptions of Pacific as peaceful, friendly place
- **Migration:**
  - in and out
- **Technological change has affected traditional belief systems**
- **Environmental destruction:**
  - rising sea levels, global warming
  - over exploitation of natural resources
    - 'Nauru used to be beautiful but is now desolate'

# Some had personal experiences of the Pacific

- **Especially among the older groups:**
  - military service during WW2 (either them or their parents)
  - working for mining companies
  - husband/partner based in region
  - one born and raised in Tonga, another lived in the Cook Islands for several years
- **Most were aware of issues surrounding the Solomon Islands:**
  - and were concerned about the problems as reported in the media
  - and held opinions about what Australia's response is/should be

# Australia was not seen as part of the Pacific

- **Yet New Zealand was**
- **Australia a ‘cultural outsider’:**
  - felt that Aboriginal Australians had a closer connection with the Pacific than other Australians
- **Opinions varied about Australia’s role in the Pacific:**
  - concerns about contribution to global warming and effects on the people
  - colonisation and its contribution to loss of culture and traditional lifestyles
- **Australia's role in Pacific provoked discussion:**
  - should Australia be a ‘parent’ or ‘overseer’?
  - ‘We have a stronger role to play economically in Asia’
- **Overall, although we are geographically located in the region:**
  - ‘We are just too different from them’
- **Young adults felt most disconnected, older adults less so**

# They did see a role for the Australian Museum

- **To preserve, research, collect and educate because:**
  - we have collected and researched these objects over a long time
  - it is important that the Museum showcase the work & culture of these small islands:
    - they are our closest neighbours
    - the Museum has the original, traditional objects
- **To present historical facts, objects and stories:**
  - not representing contemporary issues
  - nor commenting on current hot political issues
- **But, is this the only role we should take??**
- **Museums can, and should, present both:**
  - visitors want both facts and ideas
  - but not ‘shoved down their throats’, overly PC and preaching, or trying to change opinions
- **Visitors want to construct their own meanings and draw their own conclusions:**
  - or be guided in how to find out more if they want to



# Reactions to Objects

# Objects are used by visitors to make meaning

- ***“Meaning making is about the stories we tell ourselves ... an opportunity to make sense of the complex world we inhabit.”*** (Rice & Yenawine, 2002, p. 292,294)
- ***“Objects are stimuli for conversations and explorations, a beginning point for discourses that may be scientific, historical, aesthetic, or personal. There is a great deal to learn about how people talk about objects and how objects foster question asking and answering.”*** (Paris, 2002, p.xvii)
- **Objects are unique ‘nodes for elaboration’ as they:**
  - are real & therefore information-rich, stimulating questions & reflection
  - are able to convey a sense of scale
  - convey authenticity and authority because they are in a museum
  - allow us to dream ... (adapted from Leinhardt & Crowley, 2002, p.304-5)
- **Yet, there is a need to consider and provide context:**
  - with a focus on personal stories

# When looking at objects participants were seeking to understand their meaning

- **Cultural meaning:**
  - significance to the community/individual
  - specific uses including rituals, taboos, everyday life
- **Spiritual meaning:**
  - ceremonial uses
  - Could all members of community use/see/access them?
- **Aesthetic meaning:**
  - the artistic value, beauty and patterns
  - How was the piece crafted?
- **Community meaning:**
  - importance to community then & now
  - What stories do they tell?
- **'Western' meaning:**
  - Why is it part of the Museum's collection?
  - How much money is it worth?
  - What objects do Westerners have/use that are like these?

# Key information to be addressed in labelling

- **Name of object**
- **Function**
- **Size, weight, shape, 'robustness'**
- **Where is it from?**
- **How old is it?**
- **What was/is it used for?**
- **Is it part of everyday life:**
  - or does it have some 'higher' significance?
- **When was it used?**
- **Does it still have a use or has it been replaced?**
  - and with what?
- **Who made it - male, female, child, chief, spiritual leader?**
- **How was it made:**
  - use of raw materials, patterns, markings

# Objects have multiple layers of meaning

- **And are interrelated:**
  - culturally, spiritually and aesthetically
  - as well as having a purpose within the community
- **Therefore, multiple interpretations of objects are required:**
  - to both illustrate complexity and help visitors negotiate these
- **This could be done in a number of ways:**
  - move from description to significance
  - the real thing, photographs, videos, narratives demonstrating use
  - layered text/website with interpretation from variety of views
    - Museum/anthropological
    - community
    - artist
    - male and female, young and old
- **Objects were usually described using past tense:**
  - need to show whether they are still made, used today
  - and, if not, what is?
  - in order to see Pacific communities as contemporary, surviving

# Object 1.



- ***“What is the significance of the markings?”***
- ***“How long would it take to produce?”***
- ***“Is it a weapon?”***
- ***“Are the faces to frighten/deter spirits?”***
- ***“Who gave it to the Museum?”***
- ***“Are these a type of funeral pole?”***
- **Symbolism, authenticity, carving techniques**
- **Why is it shaped like a penis?**

## Object 2.



- ***“It looks fragile.”***
- ***“Is it typical of the tribe/region/village?”***
- ***“Is it a lantern?”***
- ***“Do the colours have special meaning?”***
- ***“Is this a container for food or cooking?”***
- ***“Is it a family piece?”***
- **It looks ‘oriental’**
- **Was it made for tourists?**
- **Vibrancy - how do they get those colours?**
- **Does it have a practical, ornamental or religious purpose?**

## Object 3.



- ***“Is there any significance in the pattern?”***
- ***“What are they?”***
- ***“Why are these significant Museum pieces?”***
- ***“How big are they?”***
- ***“How do they get the colours in them?”***
- ***“Is it an armband or are they worn around the neck?”***
- **What is the scale?**
- **How does the Museum store and preserve these items?**
- **What do the symbols, markings represent?**
- **How are they worn?**



## Object 4.



- ***“How long would it take to make one?”***
- ***“How durable is it?”***
- ***“What is the purpose of the shape?”***
- ***“Is it a piece of furniture?”***
- ***“Does anything sit inside it?”***
- ***“It looks very practical and useful.”***
- ***“It looks like a birdcage.”***
- ***“I presume it is a fish trap - how did it work?”***
- **What kinds of fish were caught?**
- **Ingenious, clever technology**
  - How did the idea develop?
  - Other cultures have similar items, were they generated from Pacific?

## Object 5.



- ***“What do the markings on the body mean?”***
- ***“Why does it have six fingers ... and no toes?”***
- ***“Does everyone have one?”***
- ***“How was it originally displayed?”***
- ***“What is he wearing? Is it original or has it been added later?”***
- ***“Does it signify sexuality, strength or something else?”***
- **This object provoked the most discussion:**
  - about the markings
  - the facial expressions
  - the meaning
  - What does it represent?
  - How would it be used, displayed?

## Object 6.



- ***“Are the two linked in some way?”***
- ***“Where is the scene located?”***
- ***“What is the story in the painting?”***
- ***“What do they use to paint with?”***
- ***“Is it real or a replica?”***
- ***“Is the place the same today?”***
- ***“Painted by a European?”***
- **Why are the markings off-centre?**
- **How does the canoe relate to the painting:**
  - object placement issue

# Reactions to Proposed Exhibition Themes

# General interest levels



- **Natural Disasters**
- **Meeting Captain Cook**
- **Yumi Yet: this is us**
- **Animal Spirits**
- **Queen Emma**
- **Dress to Kill**
- **Kava and Betel Nut**

# Natural Disasters

- **This exhibition theme was the most popular:**
  - natural disasters happen to all of us (bushfires, floods)
  - seen as potentially highly interactive, hands-on, sensory, engaging
  - expectations that would include large working models, demonstrations, immersive experiences
  - great for kids
  - focussed on volcanoes
- **Content was of interest:**
  - relationship between traditional and ‘scientific’ explanations
  - Do traditional explanations remain?
  - How do communities react to natural disasters? Do they plan for them?  
Post disaster recovery
- **Also seen to cover key issues:**
  - human impact through global warming, bomb testing, tourism
- **However, given expectations and capacity of Museum to deliver on these:**
  - messages and content may be better off being incorporated into another theme, potential for ‘oversell’

# Meeting Captain Cook

- **Strong interest shown:**
  - theme is both familiar (Cook) and unfamiliar (the Indigenous perspective)
  - welcome change from Western views of Cook story, therefore seen as different and new
- **Yet uncertain how Museum would do this:**
  - What types of records are there?
  - Has anything survived?
  - How did (do) Islanders record and communicate their history
    - orally? through art? objects? any written records?
- **Although there was high interest in Indigenous perspective:**
  - the Cook story also needs to be told
  - especially for children with school projects
- **Overall, this theme is good opportunity to demonstrate the links between Australia and the Pacific:**
  - and exhibiting the Cook cape would be a real hit!

# **This theme elicited lots of questions**

- ***“Welcome god or feared competitor?”***
- ***“Were they curious about [Cook’s] life and where he was from? What did they want to know?”***
- ***“Is there any written records of Islanders’ views on Captain Cook’s arrival on their shores?”***
- ***“Were they seeing the first white person?”***
- ***“For Islanders today is it really a significant part of their history?”***
- ***“How have the accounts of the meetings have been researched?”***
- ***“I would like to see something about why he was speared. He must have done something to stir them up.”***



# Yumi Yet: this is us

- **This was also seen as an important topic**
- **Emphasis should be on community and personal stories:**
  - everyday life of people
    - origins, cultural practices, spirituality, population, social structures and roles
- **Not so interested in contemporary conflicts:**
  - yet, this links to everyday life and the questions they had
    - *“To date I have not had any particular interest in this area. [more] information would probably stimulate interest.”*
    - *“Why do they want their independence?”*
    - *“How does day-to-day life continue during the hostilities?”*
- **After discussion they could see importance to Museum:**
  - and therefore think we should do it
    - *“An introduction to the history of the area would help educate the general public about the Bouganville community.”*
- **Links to role of Museum as ‘custodian’ and our relationship with Indigenous stakeholders**

# Animal Spirits

- **Perceived as highly visual, beautiful exhibition:**
  - object rich, colourful, sensual
    - *“Visually very good for kids.”*
- **Held most appeal for children:**
  - they love animals, stories, songs, performances
- **Seen as having potentially interesting content:**
  - Are pigs indigenous or introduced?
  - What animals are important on what islands?
  - rituals, spiritual significance
  - Which ones can be eaten ... and which are taboo?
  - conservation issues, management of livestock
  - domestication
- **And personal stories around different animals were considered essential**

# Queen Emma

- **This theme was less appealing as it was unfamiliar:**
  - feeling of unease - because she was a 'queen' we should know about her
  - not interested in an 'unknown Pacific personality':
    - *"A well educated rich woman who traded with the Museum is not interesting enough."*
    - *"Not a good selling point when you don't know about her at all."*
- **Theme was more linked to trade:**
  - Who was trading with whom?
  - How extensive were the trade routes?
    - *"A stand alone exhibition on her would not be interesting ... trade is interesting and she could be a part of that."*
- **Given this, personal aspects of her life would need to be focussed on:**
  - Who gave her the title 'Queen'?
  - Was she good to her people?
  - Does she have any living descendants?
  - Scandals and gossip would also liven it up!

# Dress to Kill

- **There was interest shown in the stories behind conflicts:**
  - Who was fighting whom?
  - Who were the enemies?
  - What were the outcomes of the wars?
  - How long ago did they occur?
  - What role did the sea play?
  - What was the role of women in warfare?
- **And in the evolution of weaponry and technology:**
  - How are they manufactured?
  - Are they stockpiled?
  - Can weapons be re-used?
- **How can it help us understand what's happening now?**
  - Islanders' views about war
- **Young adults interested in contemporary warfare and conflict, parents thought boys would like weaponry**

# Kava and Betel Nut

- **Does not appeal as a stand-alone exhibition:**
  - more interest lies under theme of ‘traditional medicine’
  - or connecting it to our experiences:
    - drug use in Australia (eg kava, marijuana)
    - what natural medicines are used during childbirth?
- **People want detail about the rituals:**
  - who uses, what islands, ceremonial perspectives
    - *“How long ago were these stimulants and relaxants used before the white men came?”*
- **As well as the physical aspects:**
  - effects on body, addictive properties, health benefits/detriments, what does it taste like
    - *“Have there been any current scientific studies about the properties of the drugs?”*
- **And the social consequences:**
  - When is it addiction and when is it accepted part of everyday life?
  - Western perceptions of addiction and drug use compared to Islanders’

# Potential Interpretive Approaches

- **A range of ideas were spontaneously mentioned :**
  - personal stories:
    - historical and contemporary
  - juxtaposition of objects to show scale
  - videos, live people demonstrating how objects were used
  - layered text panels
  - audio tours with different perspectives
- **Objects to touch and use were considered essential**
- **As were using all other senses:**
  - sight, sound, taste, smell
- **Activities for children are necessary:**
  - text panels/labels told by children, for children
  - craft, performances, demonstrations, dress ups
  - a Pacific activity station?
  - Museum in a Box?
- **Website where you manipulate objects, layered information**
- **Specialist talks by Museum staff, community members**

# Overall, generally a positive response ...

- **After much discussion, the content was of interest:**
  - seen as a very important topic
  - many questions arose that they would like answered
- **Adults/parents might bring their children:**
  - only if 'hands-on', touching, relevant and interesting topics
  - or complements school learning
  - Meeting Captain Cook was of most interest
- **Seniors showed the strongest general interest:**
  - but not as a special visit
- **Young adults more interested in contemporary themes:**
  - warfare, conflict, drugs, political issues
  - they need a good reason to visit, or a special interest in the subject
  - more likely to visit art galleries rather than museums
- **Females more interested in Queen Emma exhibition:**
  - as well as dealing with the role of women in Pacific societies

## However,

- **Topic area not seen as a ‘must see’ compared with dinosaurs or ‘exotic’ ancient cultures:**
  - focus groups got the Full Monty
- **A sense of disconnectedness to the Pacific:**
  - they are ‘out there’
  - ‘us and them’
- **Not a targeted visit for most:**
  - ‘If I came across it I’d have a look, but not necessarily a special visit’
  - unless they had a particular interest in the topic or wanted to take the kids to supplement their school work
- **The audience for these exhibitions are:**
  - adults who visit cultural exhibitions
  - adults with a special interest in or connection to the Pacific region
  - maybe families ...
- **Certain themes appeal to certain groups**



# Recommendations

# A. Exhibition Development

- 1 **There is sufficient interest (from them and us) shown for Museum to have a dedicated space for showcasing Pacific collections:**
  - need to be changed/updated regularly to maintain interest and respond to current political, social and other issues in region
- 2 **But not just another ‘Pacific objects’ gallery:**
  - like *Pieces of Paradise* or *Taonga Maori*:
    - large, expensive, paying, art gallery style exhibitions
- 3 **Develop following exhibition themes:**
  - Yumi Yet: this is us
  - Meeting Captain Cook
  - Animal Spirits
- 4 **Further thinking needs to be undertaken on Natural Disasters:**
  - What is it really about? Are there other ways to incorporate these messages?
  - Do we have the resources to design and market this exhibition?

## **B. Exhibition Content**

### **1 Focus on daily life and personal stories:**

- show diversity of faces, ages and cultures

### **2 Each exhibition must include:**

- map of Pacific region that includes Australia
  - highlight specific areas that are being focussed on
- clear rationale/purpose of exhibition:
  - Why is the Museum doing this?

### **3 Object text needs to be based on visitors' quest for meaning:**

- How does this relate to me?
- use visitors' questions as a starting point rather than just providing information
- with emphasis on multiple layers of information:
  - layered text panels
  - computer kiosks with multiple stories/viewpoints about objects (similar to IA gallery) using variety of media - video, archives, photographs
  - catalogues, brochures, information sheets
  - workshops and lectures

- 4 To maximise access to detailed information, selected objects could be made available using the web:**
  - manipulate objects
  - show how they are stored
  - multi media approaches to layers of stories from different perspectives
  - archive of taped lectures
  - while serving as an archive of these exhibitions for a broader audience who may not choose to or be physically able visit the Museum
  - but also needs to be shown to scale
- 5 Development of a Pacific Museum in a Box and/or Activity Station should be considered**