

Terence Barrow, *The Art of Tahiti, and the Neighbouring Society, Austral and Cook Islands*. New York: Thames and Hudson, 1979. Paper. Pp. 96, maps, illustrations, bibliography, index. \$6.95.

Images of the gods, the regalia of chiefs, ornaments, adzes, fishhooks, and fallen temples--the vestiges and fragments of South Sea civilizations--have fascinated Western man ever since European adventurers first penetrated the South Pacific. With these introductory words, Terence Barrow brings to the uninitiated a beautiful, affordable view of southeast Polynesia as it was before the traditional culture was "destroyed by time and vandalism." Using more than a hundred illustrations (nearly half in color), Barrow has given us a pleasing and sometimes visually stunning mix of artifacts, drawings and engravings from Cook's voyages, and other supporting materials that evoke the context in which southeast Polynesian art was made and used.

The volume is divided into four sections. An introductory essay, spanning some fifteen pages, gives a brief overview to the general reader unfamiliar with Polynesia. Topics include migration and settlement theory, geography, early contact and missionary history, postcontact "degeneration" of traditional art forms, and so on. A set of maps (one shows the Polynesian Triangle) brings the region into perspective and provides a helpful key to the remaining sections of the booklet: the Society Islands (thirty pages); the Austral Islands (twenty pages); the Cook Islands (twenty-four pages). Each section treats a wide range of subjects, as appropriate to the culture: social structure, domestic crafts, carving, clothes and tattooing, symbols of rank, canoes, houses, temples and religious images, war, and funeral rites.

Not surprisingly, Tahiti and the Society Islands receive the most comprehensive and balanced treatment, presumably because of the greater abundance of artifactual and documentary material. Tools, ornaments, barkcloth, and a few domestic and ceremonial implements are illustrated, as well as the usual god images of wood and one of coconut husk fiber. The Austral Islands are represented mainly by fly-whisk handles, wooden and stone god/ancestor images, and the decorated paddles and food

scoops made famous by the carvers who supplied the nineteenth-century curio trade. The Cook Islands discussion focuses on the diversity and provenience of ritual carvings: from Rarotonga, fishermen's gods, images with attached secondary figures, and staff gods with anthropomorphic heads and phallic ends; mace and slab gods from the Atiu-Mitiaro-Mauke cluster; and ceremonial adzes from Mangaia. Only passing reference is made to items such as plaited fans and belts, weapons, carved seats, and a spectacular headdress from Aitutaki. While informative, albeit not exhaustive, Barrow's discussions reflect his caution that in books dealing with art, ritual objects tend to get "pride of place"--usually at the expense of ordinary utilitarian objects that are often more revealing of a community's aesthetic values.

To assemble this volume, the author has drawn upon a dozen public and private ethnographic collections in Europe, the United States, New Zealand, and Tahiti. Nearly two-thirds of this material comes from two familiar resources, the Cambridge University Museum and the British Museum. Thus, students or scholars using this book will find little new material for study. For the specialist, the utility of this slender volume is lessened by frequent gaps in collection data. Without disrupting the text or picture captions, known details concerning collector, date, and locality would have made a worthy addition to the "Acknowledgments and list of illustrations" (pp. 94-95), an otherwise redundant and totally useless appendage. Such information is invaluable to students attempting to place, chronologically and geographically, those controversial pieces that continue to defy satisfactory provenancing in an area noted for its complex stylistic and cultural interrelationships.

The author is to be congratulated for a concise introduction to the major artistic traditions of three closely related Polynesian societies. Some of the latest research is incorporated (including my own on the attributions of Austral and Society Islands fly whisks, listed in the bibliography, although not credited in the text). Barrow's book will help a new generation of students to unravel the tangle of aesthetic conventions shared among these three Polynesian cultures. Yet, it is clear that more research is needed before the more elusive components of individual island styles can be isolated or fully understood. For example, there are questions about the Society Islands provenance assigned to a barkcloth *tiputa* or poncho (Fig. 33). The style is uncharacteristic of pre-European Tahiti; either the decorative motifs and cut of the garment are indicative of later introductions, or the object comes from elsewhere, perhaps Niue. (Incidentally, the classic fern leaf imprints on Society Islands barkcloth were made with a bright crimson, not brown, pigment [p. 27], most specimens

having darkened with age.) Also, the “necklace” in Figure 29 is made from land snails of the genus *Partula*, not cowrie shells; it is apparently a head or hat band of the type popularized in Tahiti and elsewhere toward the end of the last century. The basalt *poi* pounder illustrated in Figure 24 (center) is not Tahitian, as stated, but comes from the Austral Islands, probably Rapa. A few inevitable misprints have occurred, too: *maro* (p. 30) and *tupapa'u* (p. 45) are the correct Tahitian renderings for loincloth and corpse/ghost, respectively.

Despite an occasional but forgivable blemish, *The Art of Tahiti* may well prove to be an enlightening stimulus, even to those with only romantic curiosity about these islands. As Barrow observes in the first paragraph of his introduction, “The vision of Tahiti as an island paradise is at the heart of much of the romantic feeling about the islands of the Pacific. This emotional attachment to Tahiti has endured for over two centuries but the nature of Tahitian arts and the facts of Tahitian life remain obscure. This book is published in the hope that the veil will be lifted a little more.”

Roger G. Rose
Curator of Ethnology
Bernice P. Bishop Museum