Jerome Feldman and Donald H. Rubinstein, eds., *The Art of Micronesia*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Art Gallery, 1986. Pp. 76.

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The Art of Micronesia is, like the cultural artifacts it discusses, multifunctional. First, this slim volume served as a commentary and catalogue for the objects exhibited at a show by the same title held at the University of Hawaii Art Gallery in 1986. Second, the two substantive articles, Jerome Feldman's "Beyond Form and Function" and Donald H. Rubinstein's "Fabric Art and Tradition," attempt to place the study

of Micronesian "art" within the broader contexts of the cultural analysis of "primitive" art. While it may be true that many museum or show catalogues lose much of their coherence when detached from the particular site of their production, these two excellent essays put forward sophisticated arguments that deserve an audience beyond those fortunate to have visited the original exhibition.

Feldman's article deals with a variety of objects, including canoe-prow carvings from Truk, weather charms and spirit canoes from Ulithi, human masks from the Mortlocks, supernatural images from Nukuoro, meetinghouse architecture from Kiribati, Belau, and Yap, and carved figures from Belau. By demonstrating that the design features of objects in these classes cannot be reduced to purely instrumental or utilitarian functions, Feldman proposes that their cultural significance goes "beyond form and function." But Feldman's article, in fact, shows clearly how formal features such as abstract stylization, miniaturization, and decorative elaboration exactly fit local conventions of meaningfulness and how the "function" of these objects includes not just practical rationality but such things as being mythological reminders, repositories of sacred power, and marks of social distinction.

Rubenstein's article concentrates on woven, pounded, and plaited fabric as visual expressions of social relations in the Carolines (especially Fais and Tobi), the Marshalls, and Nauru. Given the recent surge of interest in textiles and fabric in Oceanic studies, Rubinstein's expert analysis of the productive techniques and geographical distribution of forms is timely. Cross-cutting techniques and distribution, however, are several interlocking themes, including: (1) the use of distinct patterns and degrees of elaboration to index social rank and life-cycle stages; (2) the close linkage of two dimensions of ritual usage: embodiment of sacred power and protection of people (especially the dead and chiefs) from the pollution and danger originating in that power; and (3) the widespread valuation of fabric objects as wealth tokens, exchange items, and tribute prestations. (A puzzle that begs for comparative attention is that fabric in Oceania serves, in some contexts, to facilitate communication between human and supernatural realms and, in other contexts, to prevent the interpenetration of these domains by bounding them.) It may be premature to ask for a theory accounting for the areal consistency of these three themes (such a theory has been offered by Valerio Valeri for Polynesian materials in *Kingship and Sacrifice* [Chicago, 1985]). One tantalizing suggestion (cited from Glenn Petersen's work on Pohnpei) is that "weaving" is a cultural metaphor for social integration; Rubinstein (in an earlier publication) proposed that fabric

design represents the order of social units. Another possibility (following the Ifaluk myth fragment cited on p. 58) would involve fundamental ideas about the ontology of artificial "bodies" or "skins" as quintessentially cultural products. Whatever the direction this theorizing eventually takes, Rubinstein's article guarantees that Micronesian data will play an important role in Oceanic comparison.

The exhibition as well as the articles under review need to be evaluated in light of several imposed constraints. First, many "traditional" arts of Micronesia all but died out over the past two centuries, especially as economic, political, and religious changes transformed the functioning of many of the societies. This means that the goal of a genuine cultural account of art, that is, an account which tries to establish the local functions of production, ownership, and use of various classes of material artifacts and which attempts to understand style and form in terms of meaningful conventions, may be impossible to achieve. Contemporary artists and informants frequently know less about these traditional forms and functions than the scholars who are familiar with the ethnographic record. Fortunately, artists and scholars alike can be grateful to the collections, illustrations, photographs, and explanations by members of the Hamburg Südsee Expedition (1908–1910). Many of the volume's illustrations are copied from the publications resulting from this expedition; and at least in Belau local craftspersons are relearning lost skills by copying designs from those volumes. Second, the label "Micronesia" encompasses a range of societies with distinct cultural traditions and artistic conventions. Included in the exhibit and covered in the articles are objects from island groups associated with Indonesian or Philippine stylistic heritage (Belau and Yap), groups with distinctive Polynesian cultures (Nukuoro), and groups in central Micronesia manifesting extreme ecological diversity, such as volcanic high islands (Pohnpei) and low atolls (the Marshalls, Truk). This diversity makes it difficult to seek out a coherent, underlying Micronesian "aesthetic" and compels the quest for comparative associations to seek beyond the geographical limits of the "Micronesia" label.

I want to make two sorts of criticisms of the volume, the first concerning the "fabric" of the volume itself and the second with reference to the particulars of Belauan ethnography. I can only suppose that great care went into producing this volume, since the unusual color and paper quality point to an artistic volition; however, the finish of the paper (designed perhaps to imitate Micronesian fabric) makes the illustrations and photographs appear dark and blurred. This is a shame, since in many cases the detailed workmanship of objects cannot be fully appre-

ciated. More regrettable is the fact that no key is provided to enable the reader to move back and forth between the complete exhibit catalogue printed at the end (pp. 70–75) and the photographs selected to accompany the articles.

And, as a Belauanist, it is my duty to register objections at a few points—none that affects the validity of the authors' substantive arguments. First, Feldman's statement that the "only masks indigenous to Micronesia come from the Mortlock Islands south of Truk" (p. 29) needs to be slightly hedged in light of the unique Belauan shell mask depicted in Hidikata's *Stone Images of Palau* (Agana, 1973 [1956]) (and the protective and curative functions described for this shell mask correspond almost exactly with the functions of the Mortlock masks). Second, the discussion of Belauan "men's houses" fails to distinguish those structures that house men's clubs *(bai er a cheldebechel)* and those that house titleholders of the village *(rubakbai)*. The structures pictured in figure 24 (located in Ngeredelolk village of Beliliou, not in "Melekeiok" as indicated in the caption) are examples of the latter category. This distinction is relevant to the analysis of the icons on these buildings. Their principal theme is not, as Feldman claims, fertility but rather finance: heads are depicted not because of "cosmic renewal" but because captured heads were ransomed for valuables; the birds conventionally depicted are associated with the "money bird" that generates valuables; the crossed circles placed between and below the heads stand for valuables; and the carved female figures called Dilukai recall the fact that concubines operated not as representations of some abstract "female presence" but as money-makers for their home villages' titleholders. Third, the six meetinghouses in a village are not conceived of as the "cornerposts of the village." The "cornerposts of village" are the four house affiliation units ("clans") centered around the four principal titles; correspondingly, these four principal titles are said to be the "cornerposts of the meetinghouse." Fourth, the ruins of the first meetinghouse mentioned in myth are not located "beneath the sea near Babeldaob Island" (p. 71); the familiar story of the first master builder Orachel describes his visit beneath the sea at Mekaeb near Ngeaur Island. This mistake results from the confusion, in this paragraph, of the story of Orachel and the story of the creation of heavenly bodies, featuring Iechaderngel (not "Techadrengel").

Despite these limitations and criticisms, the authors should be congratulated for their sensitivity in two specific areas. By downplaying the distinction between traditional and contemporary artistic production, these articles will actually encourage artists and craftspersons from the

various island communities not to be depressed by the huge gap between their experience and the ethnographic record and to realize that "form and function" exist as a *cultural* rather than a necessary linkage. Thus, their creative talents can be inspired by the axial symmetry and abstract clarity of traditional artifacts without being forced to produce objects mechanically tied to long-vanished functions. Finally, the exhibit and the volume should play a significant role in enabling art to become an important source of pan-Micronesian identity. Lacking common cultures and languages, dispersed across the expanse of the Pacific Ocean, and committed to different strategies of political modernization, Micronesians might well find a bond in the technical skill and aesthetic vision of their artists. Ironically, it can be argued that only by treating the exhibited objects as "art," in the sense of objects created with high expertise whose special valuation is tied to perceptions of formal beauty *independent* of specific practical, ritual, and social functions, can these objects be refunctionalized as the "fabric" of Micronesian identity. Thus, the "art of Micronesia" lies in the future, not in the past.