

Sean Mallon, *Samoa Art and Artists: O Measina a Sāmoa*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2002. Pp. 224, illus., bib., index. US\$29.95 paper.

*Reviewed by Teri Sowell, San Diego State University*

The publication of Sean Mallon's book *Samoa Art and Artists: O Measina a Sāmoa* fills a key void in the field of Pacific art. It is a comprehensive and up-to-date survey of Samoan art, providing a valuable source for scholars as well as more general readers. The book is especially appropriate for use within a university curriculum, as the concise text has enough depth to compliment its breadth, while a generous number of illustrations beautifully elucidate the author's major points of discussion.

Organized into seventeen chapters, Mallon's book covers the spectrum of both traditional and contemporary arts, including sections on canoe and house builders, *siapo* (barkcloth) makers, weavers, carvers, tattooists, painters, photographers, and filmmakers, as well as addressing the arts of music, dance, theater, literature, and oratory. While the content of these divisions

sometimes overlap, such as discussing fine mats (*ie tōga*) within chapters devoted to weaving and to costumes and garments, the overall structure is practical. The most obvious problem that emerges from the use of such strict categories relates to contemporary artists who work in a variety of media. For example, the artist Jewel Castro (p. 100) is discussed in “Woodwork and Sculpture” rather than “Painting,” yet she is primarily a painter and an installation artist. Although she creates some three-dimensional works, she tends to situate paintings within a space (sound, light, sculpture) or simply creates a “canvas” to stand alone or integrated into a related series. Thus, to confine her work in a section that emphasizes sculpture seems inappropriate. These relatively minor problems are manageable, however, and perhaps necessary for overall clarity.

Within each of the aforementioned structural divisions, Mallon makes great efforts to interweave the contemporary with the traditional. Moving easily through the major ethnographic sources, from Augustin Kramer (1902–1903) through Peter Buck/Te Rangi Hiroa (1930) and up to Roger Neich (1985), Mallon supplements the overall summary with an in-depth look at the Samoan contemporary art world, including the diaspora. This reshaping of the ethnographic and historical sources makes the material more accessible for students and general readers. But the inclusion of the contemporary art scene is what makes this book so valuable to the field of Pacific art. With this publication, Mallon has taken great strides to bring some well-deserved attention to contemporary Samoan artists working in a variety of media. Treating transformation and change as a natural, positive, and long-standing aspect of Samoan artistic traditions, the author forcefully challenges the misconception that art stopped being produced after sustained Western contact. Avoiding a strict evolutionary timeline, Mallon instead stresses “continuity in social significance” to downplay a strict division between “traditional” and “contemporary” (p. 23). Like most scholars in the field of Pacific art, the author would like to abolish crass distinctions between traditional and contemporary, yet his approach (using media-based divisions) is problematic since categories such as “Photography and Filmmaking” and “Theatre” are dominated by contemporary examples, while chapters dealing with media more deeply rooted in traditional forms, such as “*Siapo* Makers” and “Weaving,” contain small sections at the end that deal with contemporary permutations.

While Mallon’s attempt to integrate Samoan arts through time and space is laudable, the underlying flaw of this volume is the lack of attention to aesthetics. Mallon fails to bring forth a thorough discussion of how the diversity of the arts presented is bound together, albeit he briefly points to some directions given by Roger Neich, Bradd Shore, and Adrienne Kaepler (p.

25). Thus, while this book will undoubtedly become another benchmark for summarizing Samoan art by media through the end of the twentieth century, it essentially replicates the same format as “ethnographic” material-culture books of the past. Unlike older ethnographic accounts, though, Mallon is very sensitive to the voices of individual artists, allowing much of their work and intent to be represented by extensive quotations directly from artists. However, the heavy reliance on direct quotes is not balanced with art criticism. This lack of analytical interpretation, combined with a concentration on contemporary artists working in Samoa (overlooking numerous important artists in American Samoa) and New Zealand (neglecting much of the rest of the diaspora), creates an uneven treatment of Samoan art. For example, when discussing contemporary *siapo*, the author states that the creation of *siapo* is “still centered in only a few villages, mainly on Savai’i” (p. 71). Yet some of the most important and innovative *siapo* artists working today are based in American Samoa, including Adeline Pritchard Jones, Marylyn Pritchard Walker, Reggie Meredith Malala, Nicholas King Jr., and Wilson Fitiao (see Sowell 2000). These artists work for both local and international audiences and are pushing the boundaries of the art form through manipulation of motifs, designs, and sculptural form, which makes their exclusion from this publication unfortunate.

If this review is starting to sound negative, that is not my intention. My critical assessment should not overshadow the substantial contribution of this book, an achievement on many levels. For the general reader, Mallon has succeeded in bringing together a vast and diverse body of information, creating a useful condensation of Samoan art studies. For the specialized reader, the inclusion and emphasis given to the contemporary Samoan art world will make this book a great addition to any Pacific scholar’s bookshelf.

## REFERENCES

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