FIERY FINALE BUT MOAI STILL THERE

A 20 foot moai constructed from old car parts, and created for the botanical garden at Ventnor, Isle of Wight, is back in the news. As we reported (RNJ 17(1):58), Clare Taylor’s sculpture, erected on a cliff and facing out to sea, was removed because local residents declared it an eyesore. Its last public appearance was at the Nokia IW Festival at Seaclose Park, Newport, in June. After years of controversy, it was supposed to come to a fiery end by being burned on a massive funeral pyre on the Isle of Wight. Taylor, its creator, decided that the sculpture, which has been rusting largely out of public gaze off Watergate Road, Newport, had reached its end. She intended to destroy it by making it the centre of a symbolic bonfire. Although packed with wood to aid combustion, the fierce fire failed to destroy the sculpture and the question remains, what is to be done with it? One option may be to create an offshore reef.

On the planned destruction of the statue, Clare, who runs a jewelry-from-fossil business, said: “It’s out with the old and in with the new as far as I’m concerned. We thought the head should have the same fate as the Easter Island heads that inspired it – broken up when it had served its purpose. But it is still in one piece and actually, in its burnt hardened state looks better than ever.

Gavin Foster: Isle of Wight County Press 23 December 2004

The new ethnographic exhibit at the Museum of Mankind, British Museum. Photo credit: Kathy Cleghorn

HOA HAKA NANA IA AND THE BRITISH MUSEUM EXHIBIT: AN EYEWITNESS ACCOUNT

I DON’T SUPPOSE ANY RAPANUIPHILE who visits the British Museum can escape the famous basalt moai known as Hoa Haka Nana Ia. I will dispense with the oft-reported history of this statue, but I can say that, every time I see it, I can’t help but mark its stunning state of preservation, despite the fact that it used to sit outside on the museum’s portico. Upon completion of the renovations to the Museum in 2000, the moai was placed on a pedestal in the Great Court (a huge courtyard now enclosed under a remarkable glass dome). Starting last year, however, the moai was moved into – and has become the centerpiece for – a new exhibition entitled “Living and Dying.” We found the exhibit disappointing.

Unlike virtually every other exhibition in the museum, this one incorporates a theme of cultural evolution (from “living to dying”) and this means that certain items are forced into categories in order to match the theme. Literature on the gallery states “the theme is universal, it can be traced in one degree or another in all the galleries of the British Museum” but this doesn’t tell us much as the Museum’s holdings are so extensive that it would be impossible to cull together a series of representative pieces, regardless of the theme. The literature goes on to say, “in looking at and beyond objects as a means of comprehending human experience we enlarge our experience of the world, opening a window on what life is and was like for people in widely different places and times”. But this is obvious; every item, every artifact in the British Museum adheres to this standard and intention. So a gallery of this type is both superfluous and far too subjective to be useful (at least when compared to the rest of the Museum). I submit that the content of the British Museum speaks for itself and does not require, nor is best served by, this kind of compulsory commentary. Moreover, the “Living and Dying” gallery is a jumble of materials and artifacts.

Adjacent to the moai and running almost from one end of the display hall to the other is a long glass case with a modern art assemblage of textiles, photos, and other objects identified by the title “Cradle to Grave by Pharmacopoea, 2003”. Created by “textile artist” Susie Freeman (and others), it seems to have no relationship with the rest of the gallery’s exhibits. Unless, of course, one accepts the gallery’s raison d’etre, namely a “focus on life’s challenges as they affect all of us”. Then why the remainder of the exhibition emphasizes ancient cultures is difficult to fathom; there’s no transition between ancient and modern.

The design of the gallery is frustrating, including huge display cases lining two walls plus four very tall cases in the middle of the room whose contents are difficult to see close up (they rise almost to the ceiling and half the display objects are at the top) but at the same time, it is impossible to recognize details from a distance. One of those display cases is labeled “Pacific Cultures”, but only those of Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu are featured (bark cloth, ceremonial masks, feather work, wood sculpture, weapons – that sort of thing). I suppose this “new venue offering a fresh perspective on the collections of the British Museum” (as the gallery literature claims) doesn’t need to make extensive or appropriate associations. True to form, the literature also says it “is not just about particular cultures”. This isn’t too surprising; despite closure of the Museum of Mankind in 1997 and reports that artefacts would be transferred to the British Museum, the British Museum still has woefully inadequate coverage of Pacific cultures generally. Indeed, even the colossal British Museum bookshop devotes a measly 18 inches of shelf space to books on the Pacific.

In the end, it’s simply not clear why the moai was moved into this exhibition. It seems as if it has actually lost the prominence it once had on its pedestal in the Great Court. Call me a purist, but I welcome the day when Hoa Haka Nana Ia resumes its elegant place, or the British Museum actually devotes some real attention and space to the Pacific (and, one
would hope, Easter Island). Until then, we’ll keep going back, of course and maybe one day we’ll be able to say we’ve seen it all.

Much more satisfying is the newly opened “Enlightenment” gallery in the former British Museum library, just off the Great Court. Sub-titled “Discovering the World in the Eighteenth Century”, the gallery houses parts of the collection of physician Hans Sloan, who founded the British Museum in 1753. And it really feels as if you are seeing the first vestiges of museum as you walk among the seven display sections, whose contents represent “Arts and Civilization”, “The Birth of Archaeology”, and “The Natural World”, among others.

One of the sections, which caught my attention immediately, is entitled “Trade and Discovery: The Pacific” and it is here that these venerable Easter Island artifacts are displayed: two wood moai kava kava; both about 18 inches [46 cm] tall, and both have Makemake carvings on top of the head; a moai pa’a pa’a (also about 18 inches [46 cm] tall; a badly-worn tangata manu (probably no more than a foot [30 cm] long); a rapa (with simple line carvings and no eyes; it’s about 3 feet [1 m] long; two rei miro carvings (with bearded heads; one is about 18 inches [46 cm] wide, the other is 2 feet [61 cm] wide; and that famous carved hand taken by Cook in 1774. Needless to say, it was a real treat to see these original artefacts — and they are another in a long series of reasons to visit the British Museum!

Shawn McLaughlin

WHAT’S NEW IN THE PACIFIC

NEW ZEALAND

ABOUT 10,000 MAORI protested in Wellington, marching against government plans to nationalize the seabed and foreshore. Many Maori believe they have special rights over such areas. The bill, which would place the coastal areas into state ownership, is under debate.

Pacific New Bulletin 19: 5-6, 2004

HAWAI’I

HAWAI’ILOA IS IN DRY-DOCK at the Marine Education Training Center to repair some cracks in her hulls; repairs are expected to take a year. The original sailing canoe, Hōkūle‘a, sailed 5500 miles within the Hawaiian islands in 2004 while training new captains to meet the growing demand for voyaging education programs in the schools. The Hōkūialaka‘i sailed with the Hōkūle‘a on sea trials. A special trip was made to the island of Kaho‘olawe for a reunion and dedication of the star platform at Kealaikahiki, which may be the most important traditional astronomical site in the Hawaiian Islands. Master navigator, Mau Piailug, participated in the ceremony.

Polynesian Voyaging Society, December 2004

VANUATU

MATTHEW SPRIGGS HAS EXCAVATED thirteen skeletons just outside Port Vila, Vanuatu; he claims this may be the most significant site in the region. He believes the burials date back more than 3000 years and are Lapita, ancestors of the Pacific peoples. Similar pottery finds elsewhere in the Solomon Islands have been carbon dated to more 3000 years.


FIJI

FIJI HOSTED THE FIRST EVER International Conference on Kava in December 2004. It was organized in conjunction with the International Kava Executive Committee, and following a recent Kava symposium that was held in Europe. One of its aims was to create improved quality control for Kava raw materials, and search for bi-products use, such as in cosmetics, and apart from pharmaceuticals.


PACIFIC

TUNA ARE A CRITICAL RESOURCE for many Pacific Island countries, but the widespread collapse of fisheries is feared unless urgent action is taken. Unregulated fishing undermines the attempts to determine sustainable levels of catches. Tough rules are needed, according to studies conducted by Greenpeace.


TUVALU

ON FEBRUARY 16TH, A LANDMARK U.N. pact to curb global warming came into force. Under the Kyoto Protocol, developed countries are supposed to cut emissions of carbon dioxide, largely from burning fossil fuels such as coal and oil in power plants, factories and cars, by an average 5.2 percent below 1990 levels during 2008-12. But the world’s biggest greenhouse polluter, the United States, has refused to join Kyoto, and some Kyoto signatories, such as Spain and Portugal, have increased greenhouse gas emissions by 40 percent over 1990 levels. Earlier in that same week, Tuvaluans in the capital Funafuti watched extreme high tide and strong winds send waves crashing across the island’s main road, littering it with rocks and debris. The seawalls that were constructed to provide barriers from the waves stood no chance; today they are only tatters of wire amongst other debris along the shores. People watched helplessly as their homes were flooded.

Michael Perry, Reuters, 12 February

WHAT’S NEW IN HANGA ROA

ELECTIONS TOOK PLACE on Rapa Nui on October 31. The position of mayor was hotly contested, as well as those for city council. The results: for mayor, Pedro Edmunds: 58.57%, Julio Araki: 41.42%. The councilors who won include: Alberto Hotus, 13.7%, Eliana Oivares, 12.9%, Marcelo Pont, 9.2%, Marcelo Icka, 9.1%, Hipolito Juan Icka, 7.0% and Nicolas Haoa Cardinali, 6.6%. Eleven other contenders for city council lost.

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