MOAI SIGHTINGS

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 remark on 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 collate 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