

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

NEWS RELEASE

SIXTH STREET AT CONSTITUTION AVENUE NW WASHINGTON DC 20565 • 737-4215 extension 224

ADVANCE FACT SHEET

Exhibition: The Art of the Pacific Islands

Dates: July 1 through October 14, 1979

Concept: The most comprehensive exhibition in this subject ever mounted, The Art of the Pacific Islands will focus on the visual arts of Polynesia, Micronesia, Melanesia and New Guinea--Pacific island groups whose existence was not discovered by Europeans until the sixteenth century and whose cultures were untouched by European influence until their contact with Captain James Cook, his successors in the whaling industry and the China traders of the eighteenth century. These cultures, for the most part remaining unaffected by contact with the West until well into the nineteenth century, produced powerful works of art independent of any impetus other than their own traditions and the talent, vision and craftsmanship of their own artists. Owing largely to historical factors, including early downgrading by missionaries and later neglect by Western art historians, the arts of the islands remain less well known or appreciated than those of pre-Columbian and African cultures. Research since World War II and the discovery of unknown styles in areas explored only in recent decades have greatly increased knowledge of the cultures and peoples represented in this exhibition.

Content: Devoted to the major achievements of the islands' visual arts in a variety of media, including wood, ivory, barkcloth, feather work, bone and shell, the exhibition will present over 400 of the finest works extant, rigorously selected for their pristine relationship to the original cultures, demonstrating the artists' sculptural mastery combined with striking use of color, their employment of simple but elegant abstract design and their great variation of form, particularly that of the human figure. The majority of the objects comes from the earliest periods of Western contact and exploration, with many dating back to the voyages of Captain Cook and other early visitors to the different areas. Included will be intricately carved wooden figures, masks, canoe ornaments and decorated weapons; highly finished bowls and other ceremonial implements; necklaces and other ornaments made of shell; large, brightly colored feather capes from Hawaii; and fine examples of weaving from Micronesia. Many of the objects are over life size, among them a large figure of the Hawaiian War God

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Kukailimoku lent for only the second time since 1846 by The Peabody Museum of Salem, Massachusetts, a twenty-foot figure of a crocodile created for use in religious celebrations in New Guinea, a brightly painted, full-size house front from New Guinea, and an intricately carved house front from New Zealand.

Geography: The objects in the exhibition represent the visual arts found in the three great island groups of Micronesia, Melanesia and Polynesia.

Lenders: The objects are being lent from about seventy public and private collections in the United States, Australia, Austria, Belgium, England, the Federal Republic of Germany, France, the German Democratic Republic, Hungary, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Switzerland and the U.S.S.R. Among the public institutions abroad are the Museum für Völkerkunde, Basel; The Australian Museum, Sydney; Übersee Museum, Bremen; University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge; The British Museum, London; The Otago Museum, Dunedin; Auckland Institute and Museum, Auckland; and Linden-Museum, Stuttgart. In addition to The Peabody Museum, other U.S. lenders include the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago and The American Museum of Natural History and The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Guest Curators: The exhibition is being organized for the National Gallery by Douglas Newton, Chairman of the Department of Primitive Art at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, Dr. Adrienne Kaeppler, Anthropologist at the Bernice P. Bishop Museum in Honolulu, and Dr. Peter Gathercole, Curator of the University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge, England.

Catalogue: A fully illustrated catalogue written by Douglas Newton, Adrienne Kaeppler and Peter Gathercole, with a Preface by J. Carter Brown, Director of the National Gallery, will accompany the exhibition.

Installation: To be installed in the 18,000-square-foot special exhibition area on the Concourse level of the East Building, the exhibition will be designed by Mark Leithauser and Gaillard Ravenel, of the Gallery's Installation Design staff, and Douglas Newton. The concept of the installation is a voyage through the island groups from east to west, beginning in Hawaii. The route then takes the visitor through the small island groups of Polynesia and related areas of Micronesia, traverses the large islands of

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Melanesia, and culminates in New Guinea. This plan is designed to illuminate the interrelationships of the style areas and to illustrate recurrent themes in Pacific Islands art.

Series: The Art of the Pacific Islands is the fourth exhibition in a series devoted to exo-Eurasian art presented by the National Gallery. Earlier exhibitions in the series have been African Sculpture in 1970, The Far North in 1973 and African Art in Motion in 1974.

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January 25, 1979

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION or photographs contact Katherine Warwick, Assistant to the Director, or Mary Dyer, Information Office, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. 20565, area code 202, 737-4215, ext. 224.