

# Frontier Shores:

Collection, Entanglement, and  
the Manufacture of Identity in Oceania

On View April 22-September 18, 2016



*Tatanua* (mask for funerary ceremony).  
Malagan culture, New Ireland, Nusa  
Island, Papua New Guinea, late  
19th century. Wood, shell, pigment,  
plant fiber, seed, resin, bark cloth,  
paper. Courtesy of the Division of  
Anthropology, American Museum of  
Natural History, ST/ 691.

Bard  
Graduate  
Center  
Gallery

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“Indigenous peoples have the right to the dignity and diversity of their cultures, traditions, histories and aspirations which shall be appropriately reflected in education and public information.”

— 2007 *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the growing discipline of anthropology was both a powerful tool of colonial control and an ideological justification for it. As European empires and their commercial reach expanded, different populations became intertwined in relationships of exchange and power. Focusing on Oceania—the vast region encompassing Australia, New Zealand, New Guinea, and the tropical Pacific Islands—*Frontier Shores: Collection, Entanglement, and the Manufacture of Identity in Oceania*, a Bard Graduate Center Focus Project on view from April 22 through September 18, 2016, examines artifacts as the contested space of cross-cultural contact between European collectors and the native peoples of the region.

Curated by Shawn C. Rowlands, Bard Graduate Center–American Museum of Natural History postdoctoral fellow in museum anthropology, *Frontier Shores* explores how anthropology was used by colonial powers to justify and gain control over the resources and lives of the various native peoples of Oceania, how collection both described and pacified the frontier, and how marginalized peoples adapted to, resisted, or otherwise exerted their own power and agency in the colonial context.

Thirty-nine objects, collected from the 1830s to the mid-twentieth century, demonstrate the richness of cultural contact in Oceania and the ways in which this material was often used to construct an imagined culture or tradition.

## Description

Both the exhibition and the accompanying book explore the intellectual, cultural, and political realities of collection histories in Oceania. In the late



*Civitabua*, or *civavonovono* (breastplate). Fiji, late 19th century. Pearl oyster shell, sperm whale tooth, white metal, plant fiber. Courtesy of the Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History, 80.0/2061.

nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the terms of moral discourse concerning European domination over colonial subjects had shifted from the religious to the scientific. Scientific theory was often employed to rationalize how and why political dominance had been, or should be, obtained over others. A key element of this rationalization was the placement of non-Europeans—especially those people defined broadly as “savages”—lower than Europeans on an evolutionary scale.

A major facet of the new scientific discourse was based on material evidence. As anthropology emerged as a human science, the objects that people made, lived with, and used became part of how others defined them. Anthropologists evaluated the material composition of objects and the manner in which they were employed in terms of their perceived authenticity within a culture so as to place them on a scale of technological development. This approach put the people of Oceania



Glass points. Murchison district, Kimberley region, Western Australia, Australia, 1908. Glass. Image courtesy of the Penn Museum, Image no. 195217, 31-33-101, 31-33-104, and 31-33-113.



Child's imitation pipe. Arapesh culture, Aitape district, Papua New Guinea, early 20th century. Reed wood. Courtesy of the Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History, 80.0/6981.

and the objects they manufactured in the Stone Age phase of human development. Crucially, if the objects collected or simply recorded in observations exhibited more advanced techniques or materials, they were usually written off as evidence of the degeneration of culture, inauthenticity, and the destruction of tradition.

This was an age of salvage anthropology—collectors and observers sought what they believed to be authentic material culture before it vanished. There were some exceptions to this paradigm, as in the case of the glass and ceramic spear points from Western Australia that collectors actively sought as examples of ingenious artistic creations of a Stone Age culture, without seeing that the material used is in fact a product of the Industrial Age.

Some collectors were aware of the irony of the situation, in which agents of colonial powers invested in Oceania (and elsewhere) were in fact engaged in destroying the cultures they governed and observed. The relationship between colonialism and the perceived eradication of native culture was central to collection discourse. Imperial governments were actively involved in the appropriation of the lives and resources of those they governed. Native cultures were treated inconsistently, even within the same empire; generally, however, imperial governments sought to correct what they felt were pernicious or inexpedient local practices (cannibalism, tribal warfare, non-Christian religious practices) and to replace them with rules and beliefs more pleasing to authorities. At the same time, however, in changing or eradicating the customs of local peoples, European observers mourned the loss of what they had transformed.

European domination of colonized peoples was not always brutal and not always evenly applied or achieved. The colonial governors, agents, and observers who interacted with the people of Oceania were often humanists, such as Otto Finsch, Walter Edmund Roth, Archibald Meston, and Felix von Luschan, who drew attention to exploitation or flaws in the characterization of local populations. These individuals are discussed in detail in the book, with particular attention given to Finsch, whose humanism and rational approach to racial science were at odds with his unequivocal support of the German imperial endeavor. All four, in varying degrees, demonstrate that imperialism was not simply a monolithic apparatus that sought to reduce or erase those it governed.

*Frontier Shores: Collection, Entanglement, and the Manufacture of Identity in Oceania* is primarily intended as an historicized account of a particular kind of cultural entanglement in Oceania and the ways in which this entanglement conformed to the current trends in scientific discourse. It provides an analysis of how prevailing attitudes of the day dictated collection and categorization within the region.

## Gallery Display

The exhibition, featuring thirty-nine objects—most from the collections of the American Museum of Natural History—deliberately avoids the narrative of collector stories, with the exception of Otto Finsch. Thus, the objects rather than the collectors are its focus. For instance, whale tooth breastplates from Fiji with metal rivets, or a child's toy from Mount Arapesh carved to resemble a trade tobacco pipe, demonstrate cultures that were vibrant, adaptive, and heavily engaged in cross-cultural contact. Some of the objects deal with stories of subjugation and violence, while others show profound commercial interactions and spiritual dynamism. A woman's bonnet of the late nineteenth century from the Ni-Vanuatu culture is clearly imitative of European styles and inclusive of non-indigenous materials. This object also demonstrates the rapid adoption of foreign religious beliefs, through the Ni-Vanuatu imagination of the Christian body.

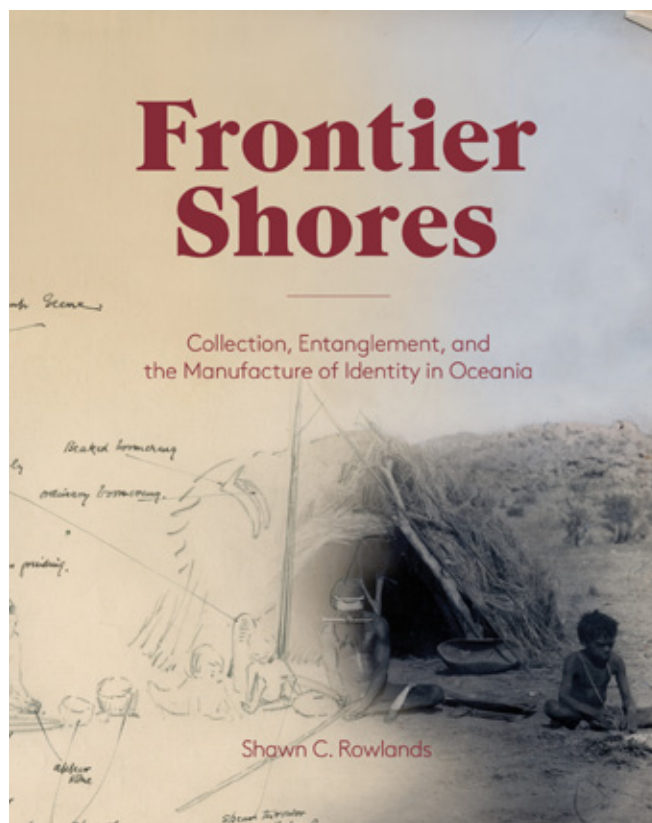
A digital interactive available in the Gallery and online will explore the cultural makeup of this diverse region and plot many of the objects into a chronology of cultural contact.

In preparation for the exhibition, Dr. Rowlands taught “In Focus: Frontier Shores: Ethnography, Colonialism, and Oceania from the Eighteenth to the Early Twentieth Century” (Spring 2015) and “In Focus II: Entangled Frontiers” (Fall 2015) at Bard Graduate Center. Students contributed substantively to the project through their participation in the classes and as faculty assistants.

## Publication

*Frontier Shores: Collection, Entanglement, and the Manufacture of Identity in Oceania* is a richly illustrated book by curator Shawn C. Rowlands. It expands upon the themes of the exhibition and conveys the collection stories associated with the objects by combining physical analyses with related archival materials, positioning them within both contemporary

and current intellectual discourse. With primary sources quoted frequently and often at great length, it will provide students, researchers, and other interested readers with access to archival material that might otherwise be unavailable. Published with the University of Chicago Press, the book will be available in the Gallery and online at [store.bgc.bard.edu](http://store.bgc.bard.edu).



## Focus Project

Bard Graduate Center Focus Projects are part of an innovative program organized and led by faculty members or postdoctoral fellows through seminars and workshops that culminate in small-scale academically rigorous exhibitions and publications. Students, assisted by the Center's professional gallery staff of curators, designers, and media specialists, are closely involved from genesis through execution and contribute to each project's form and content. Focus Projects promote experimentation in display, interpretation, and the use of digital media reflecting the Center's commitment to exhibitions as integral to scholarly activity.

Focus Projects to come include investigations of Byzantine codices, Balinese textiles, the anthropologist Franz Boas, and central European poster design.

## Related Public Programs

Lectures, gallery talks, and conversations are offered in conjunction with the exhibition.

For more information, please call 212.501.3011 or e-mail [programs@bgc.bard.edu](mailto:programs@bgc.bard.edu).

## Group Tours

Exhibition tours are offered Tuesday through Friday between 11 a.m. and 4 p.m. and Thursday until 7 p.m. Reservations are required for all groups. To schedule a tour, please call 212.501.3013 or e-mail [tours@bgc.bard.edu](mailto:tours@bgc.bard.edu).



Woman's bonnet. Ni-Vanuatu culture, Aneityum, Vanuatu, late 19th century. Pandanus leaf, cotton, cotton ribbon, newspaper. Courtesy of the Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History, ST/3267A.

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For press information and images, please e-mail [hollis.barnhart@bgc.bard.edu](mailto:hollis.barnhart@bgc.bard.edu) or call 212-501-3074.

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