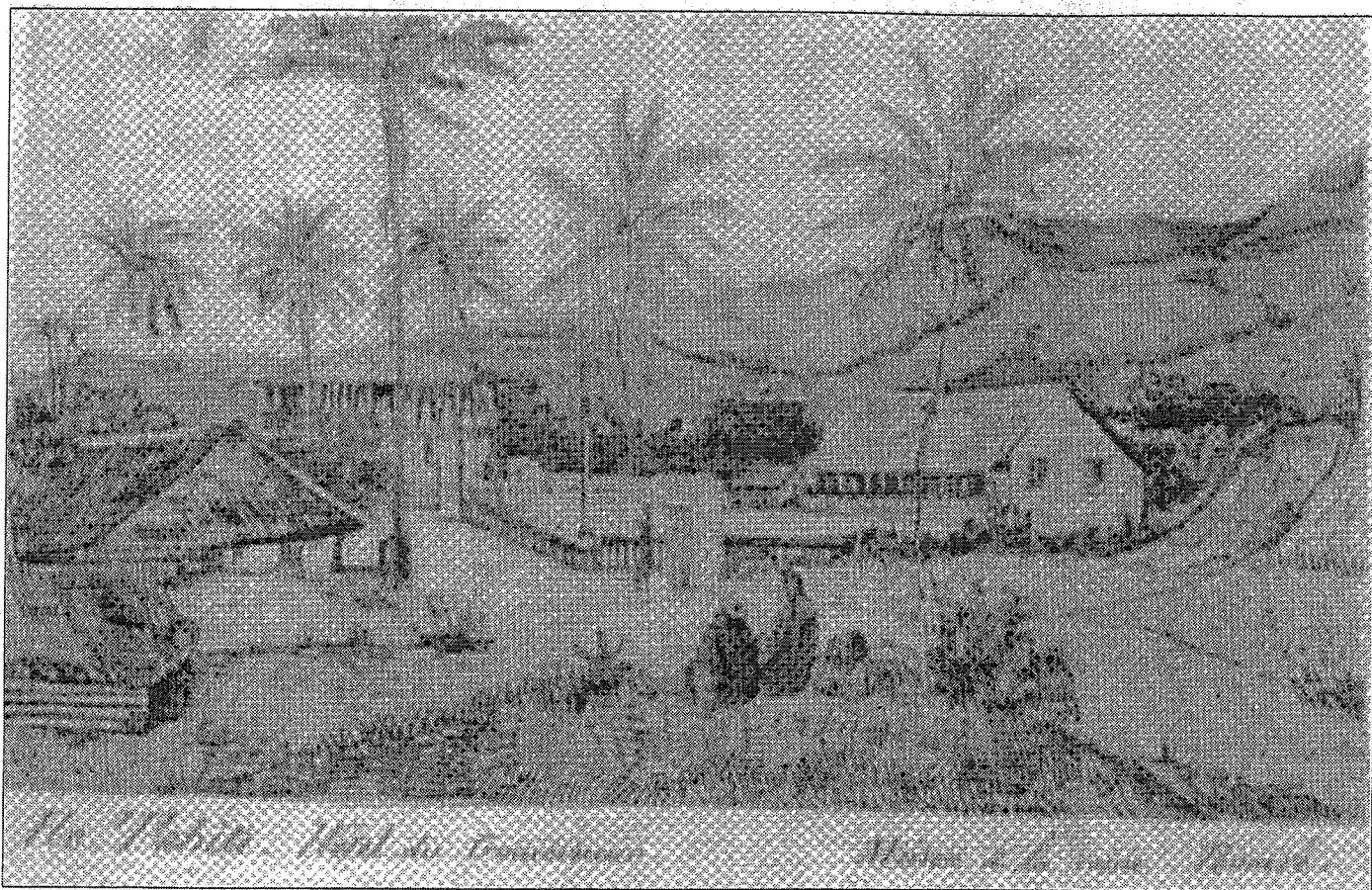


Polynesian Objects:

Tribal Tools, Works Of Art Or Ritual Devices?

Stephanie Sears



TAHITI

Drawn By Naval Officer Daniel Rohr (1948)

What is the real nature and value of those exotic, often cleverly-designed objects that we westerners call tribal objects?

Most early Polynesian objects were brought back some two hundred years ago by the discovery and scientific expeditions of the 18th Century of Enlightenment. Hundreds of them came from different archipelagos of what is called Polynesia, a vast area lying within a triangle formed by Hawaii at its northern apex, New Zealand at its southwestern tip and Easter Island at its southeastern tip. The value of such objects displayed in museums and in private collections continues, in my view, to be

two-faced. In the context of cultural renaissances taking place in different Polynesian islands, they possess a particular value for contemporary Polynesians, another for Westerners. Both values have changed over time and are susceptible to more change in the future.

Some of the artifacts picked up by James Cook and his sailors were exchanged "en route" for others from a different archipelago. Cook found that red feathers from Tongatapu were considered very precious in Tahiti and that he could exchange them for Tahitian manufactures which he considered more interesting or more rare.

He discovered that Polynesian bark cloth (*tapa*) collected on one island was considered more valuable on another than the mirrors, nails, axes, beads and buttons that he had brought from Europe to trade for fresh supplies to feed his crew. His expedition thus became part of an economic and ceremonial Polynesian exchange which must have opened his eyes to the fact that the islanders did not always have the primitive fascination for western knickknacks that he had expected.

It also must have made him aware of the ritual significance of these Polynesian

CONT. P.22



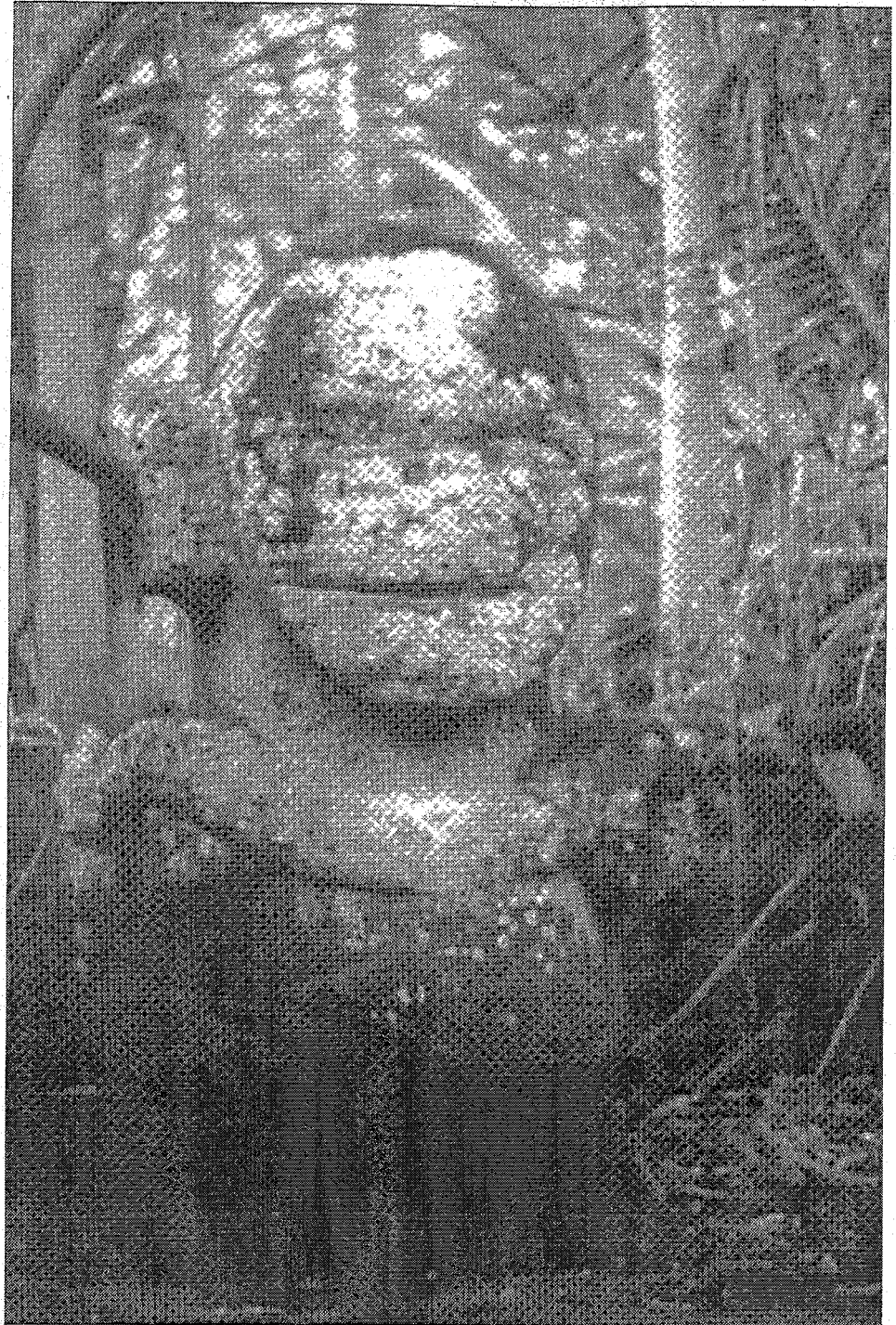
MARQUESAN WARRIOR-CHIEF (Holding A Ritual Fan And Club)

Polynesian Objects

FROM P. 22

tahu'a, kahuna... (depending on the archipelago from which they came) were prestigious and essential members of all Polynesian societies. Their reputation and therefore their economic well-being relied on their superior skill in making whatever it was their specialty. To be functional, the object had to be beautiful, the aesthetic adding to its power. Each craft has its god or gods. To be functional, the object needed to be made according to certain rites and invocations to the particular god(s), be it boat — or house building, the making of a weapon, of an adze. The master craftsman was therefore also a priest who needed to know the proper prayers and ritual procedure which surrounded his creation. The omission of some words and ritual gestures would cause the house to collapse, the canoe to sink, the adze would fail to cut wood, etc. The god(s) was considered the creator of the object used and his presence pervaded that material. The divine was present in all of the Polynesian's life, down to the smallest aspects. Body ornaments such as red-feathered belts, carved bone-handled fans, headdresses made of old men's beards, or of tortoiseshell or feathers were not only finely wrought to be aesthetically pleasing but also reflected the wearer's high social status. In its turn this was a reflection of the individual's sacred origins. In the oral traditions of Polynesian societies, history had to be memorized through the recitation of genealogical lines, legends, sacred chants about the beginning of time. The highest social status implied divine ascendance. Every individual's life was ruled by his relative proximity to that central ancestral line. The law of *tapu*, or of that which is forbidden or sacred, controlled the individual's life in a multitude of ways, including wearing certain colors, tattoos, types of bark cloth...

The mystical attributes of some objects are more directly evident to us westerners because they are direct representations of gods made exclusively to participate in ceremonial rites of a more universal nature



TIKI STATUE, RA'IVAVALE ISL. AUSTRAL ARCHIPELAGO.

Photo: Stephanie Sears

than those specialized rites of the master craftsman. Certain anthropomorphic representations are generically termed *tiki*. There are also ceremonial paddles used only in dancing, ceremonial adzes with intricately carved handles that are too wide for functional purposes. The staff gods of the Cook Islands are stylized representations of human figures wrapped in bark cloth and sennit. The even more abstract *to'o* Tahitian effigies represent Oro, god of fertility and renewal. They are mere pieces of wood shaped like maces wrapped entirely in tightly woven sennit and showing very slight anthropomorphic traits.

In the case of the *to'o*, the artistry lies not so much in the outer form but in the weave of the sennit itself. Here the ritual aspect dominates. The complete object (there are few *to'o* left and most are in incomplete form) had feathers, usually red and tied to the sennit, which represented the sacred relics of the god. During the ceremony the old sennit wrapping was taken off of the effigy in the island's most important *marae* as were called ritual enclosures, and replaced by a new sennit. Its feathers were distributed to other less important effigies brought on that day from less important 'marae'. In this way the *mana* or sanctity of the main god was cloned and came to be present in several ritual enclosures. New feathers on the main *to'o* replacing the ones that had been distributed, immediately became in turn sacred by simple contact with the effigy. Some *to'o* have small openings in place of bellybuttons (seat of all emotion in Polynesian tradition). In this aperture were placed human teeth, hair, old *to'o* sennit envelopes; for the sennit wrap that had once bound the god was itself saturated with the presence of that god.

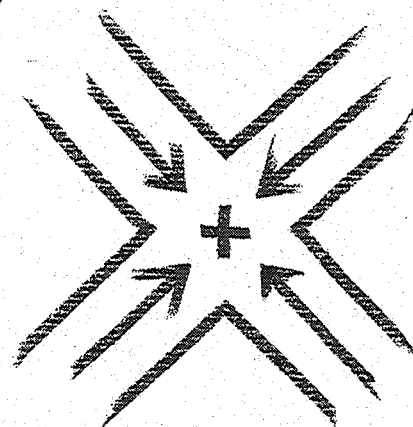
Certain *tapa* or bark cloth, particularly very long strips of fine mulberry bark cloth served to capture the breath of gods, to shelter their presence by being used as curtains or as wrappers.

The mystical value of an object varied somewhat from island to island. What remained a constant throughout Polynesia

was the fact that unlike Western cultures, Polynesia did not disassociate the object's practical, aesthetic and mystical values. The beauty of a tool was equal to its usefulness and to its intangible spiritual quality. I suspect that Polynesian master craftsmen would have found our distinctions odd.

Some Polynesian objects are now shown as art, but the dilemma subsists whether some of the finer ones should be exhibited on an equal footing with, say, a Gothic sculpture of the Madonna or a Vermeer. Some tribal objects are in fact already being shown in great art museums like the Louvre or the Metropolitan Museum of Art; but often, for the sake of a modern, minimalist, aesthetic sensitivity, they are rid of ritualistic appurtenances such as feathers, beads, *tapa*, or hair. There is no or insufficient written information to allow the visitor to picture them in their original context.

After two centuries of changing values the objects continue to appear in our museums, confined, in any given exhibition, to only one or two of their essential aspects. Even when explained from an ethnographic point of view, their functional value in a small insular environment, their astonishing refinement and their mystical power can only be underestimated or incompletely understood; the mystical value may even be rejected by latent religious reticence in the sterile, if protected, environment of a museum. Paradoxically, the generational and geographic distance that separates these objects from their native lands, their extraordinary dispersal throughout the world appear to renew, even increase their mystical power for Polynesians. Individuals of Polynesian descent may see some of these only once during a trip, or in books or on film. There lies their intangible and eternal value — and not in possible comparisons with other world arts. ■



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