

Impact case study (REF3)

Institution: University of Cambridge		
Unit of Assessment: UoA 22		
Title of case study: <i>Oceania</i> : a landmark exhibition		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2006 to date		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Nicholas Thomas	Professor of Historical Anthropology (2006) and Director of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology	01.10.2006-present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: September 2018 to date		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? No		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p><i>Oceania</i> was the most ambitious exhibition to date dedicated to the art of the Pacific. It gave Pacific communities a new level of international exposure; and prompted new debates and discussions about the future of Pacific heritage across European museums, leading directly to agreements to exhibit historic artefacts in countries of origin from 2019 onwards.</p> <p>Held at the Royal Academy of Arts, London (September-December 2018) and the Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac, Paris (March-July 2019), the exhibition brought together 169 outstanding historic and contemporary works (including loans from 26 museums) and attracted over 250,000 visitors. An adapted version of the exhibition opened at the Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden in February 2020, attracting 23,000 visitors. A major loan of 30 exceptionally significant artefacts to the Taraiwhiti Museum in New Zealand was agreed, attracting over 37,000 visitors. <i>Oceania</i> was extensively and affirmatively reviewed through national and international media.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>For over 20 years, Nicholas Thomas has researched and published extensively towards a fresh vision of Oceanic art history. His publications were among the first to enlarge the canon, including genres traditionally thought of as women's, such as textiles, and foregrounding colonial, modern and contemporary art from the region. As PI, he led a series of projects with university- and museum-based colleagues across the UK and Europe, and in the Pacific region itself, drawing attention to the extraordinary resources represented by museum collections: 'Melanesian Art' (AHRC, 2005-10) undertook innovative collaborative research on the collections of the British Museum; 'Artefacts of Encounter' (ESRC, 2010-13) explored early collections from Polynesia across European museums; 'Pacific Presences' (ERC, 2013-18) empowered wide-ranging investigations into historic collections, and the broader questions ethnographic museums' collections raised across Europe, from Spain to Russia. He was also co-I in 'Art in Oceania', (2007-09), a UK-NZ partnership led by Peter Brunt (Victoria University, Wellington), which generated a prize-winning history of the same title [R1].</p> <p>On the basis of this work Thomas was invited by the Royal Academy of Arts to curate the <i>Oceania</i> exhibition, as part of a series of major exhibitions dedicated to 'civilisations'. He shaped the exhibition in four key respects.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First, research in stores and reserves across dozens of institutions in 15 countries brought a new range of art into view, including previously unexhibited artefacts, for example by women, and related to colonial contact, which were selected for the 		

exhibition [R2]. The teams of the aforementioned research projects explored collections' history and significance, with the participation of community experts, scholars, curators and artists from the relevant regions in the Pacific, with whom study visits and the wider research programme were jointly undertaken [R2], [R3], [R4].

- Second, the field of Oceanic art was reframed through deep historicization. The team-authored 2012 book [R1] offered an Oceanic historical anthropology comparable to historically contextualised understandings of art for other regions, in contrast with conventional surveys of cultures and styles. The research generated new interpretations of how art genres responded to cross-cultural encounters, colonial change, the period of decolonization, and other aspects of the region's history. These understandings were integral to the organisation of the *Oceania* exhibition, which could not have been generated without this research.
- Third, the research group developed fresh approaches to collaboration that involved Islander partners from the start, in the framing of project questions, methods and orientations, rather than treating them as advisors or participants brought in after an activity had been defined [R1], [R5]. This entailed acute responsiveness to local concerns around the scope for returning heritage to communities of origin. The project enabled practical work towards the exhibition of highly important early historic pieces in regions and communities of origin. The first such extended loan, to the Tairāwhiti Museum in Gisborne, was of a major group of artefacts from Cook's first voyage; the artefacts were made accessible for community performance and study in the tribal meeting house prior to display.
- Finally, the research programme, particularly over the course of the ERC project (2013-18), enabled the development of close relationships with curators, postdoctoral fellows and scholars in or associated with over 50 European museums, from some of which great historic works were requested for loan. Loans – to bring some of the highest-value works from these collections together – could not, in many cases, have been successfully negotiated without the strong relationships and shared understandings that research activity over 15 years had generated. Equally, the support of Islander communities, critical to the value and the credibility of the exhibition, could not have been secured without this dedicated engagement and sustained collaboration and knowledge exchange.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

All research outputs and funding below were peer-reviewed. [R1] won the 2013 Authors' Society Art Book Prize. Based on his research and impact activities around the *Oceania* exhibition, in 2019 Thomas was awarded the University of Cambridge's Vice-Chancellor's Public Engagement and Impact Award.

[R1] Thomas, N. and Brunt, P. (Eds.). (2012). *Art in Oceania: a new history*. Yale University Press. ISBN 9780500239018.

[R2] Carreau, L., Clark, A., Jelinek, A., Lilje, E. and Thomas, N. (Eds.). (2018). *Pacific presences: Oceanic art and European museums*. 2 vols. Sidestone. ISBN 9789088905902 (Vol. 1) and 9789088906268 (Vol. 2)

[R3] Bolton, L., Thomas, N., Bonshek, E., Adams, J. and Burt, B. (Eds.). (2013). *Melanesia: art and encounter*. British Museum Press. ISBN 9780714125961.

[R4] Carreau, L., Clark, A., Jelinek, A., Lilje, E. and Thomas, N. (Eds.). (2017-2020). *Pacific Presences*. Vol. 1-8 (by ERC funded staff, project associates, etc.). Sidestone.

[R5] Thomas, N., Adams, J., Lythberg, B., Nuku, M. and Salmond, A. M. (2016). (Eds.). *Artefacts of encounter: Cook's voyages, colonial collecting, museum histories*. Otago University Press. ISBN 9781877578694.

Research grants associated with *Oceania*:

Nicholas Thomas was PI in all awards below, except for the SWICH (2014-18) and Marsden Fund grants (2007-9).

- 1) 2016-18 AHRC GCRF, 'Heritage matters: culture and development in the Pacific', **GBP100,000**.
- 2) 2014-18 SWICH, Creative Europe, 'Sharing a world of inclusion, creativity and heritage', **EUR2,000,000**, awarded to consortium of 10 museums led by the Weltmuseum, Wien.
- 3) 2013-18 European Research Council Advanced Investigator Award for 'Pacific Presences: Oceanic art and European museums', **EUR2,300,000**.
- 4) 2010-13 ESRC, 'Artefacts of Encounter', **GBP940,000**.
- 5) 2007-9 Marsden Fund, NZ 'Art in Oceania: a History', **USD480,000**. Nicholas Thomas was co-applicant with Peter Brunt (Victoria University), Deirdre Brown (Auckland University), Sean Mallon (Te Papa), Susanne Kuechler (UCL) and Lissant Bolton (British Museum).
- 6) 2006-9 Major Research Fellowship, Leverhulme Trust (2006-9).
- 7) 2005-10 AHRC for 'Melanesian art: objects, narratives, and indigenous owners', **GBP530,000**. Nicholas Thomas was co-applicant with Lissant Bolton (British Museum).

Academic events linked with the *Oceania* exhibition received financial support from the Wenner-Gren Foundation (**USD20,000**), the *Journal of Pacific History* (**AUD5,000**), the Royal Academy of Arts (in kind, approximately **GBP50,000**), Cambridge institutions and funds incl. Trinity College (**GBP2,500**), the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (in kind, approximately **GBP20,000**), the Faculty of History (**GBP2,500**) and the Smuts Fund (**GBP5,000**), and a private donation (**GBP2,500**). Most of the funds received enabled the participation of 20 Pacific Islands students and scholars.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The *Oceania* exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts in London (29 September-10 December 2018) and the Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac in Paris (11 March-7 July 2019) was the first large-scale show dedicated to the Pacific in the northern hemisphere since 1979. It coincided with a double anniversary: the 250th anniversary of the Royal Academy of Arts and the 250th anniversary of the departure of Captain James Cook on the first of his three voyages of exploration to the Pacific. The exhibition's principal sponsor was the New Zealand Government, which provided GBP1,000,000. The beneficiaries of the impact included the museums that hosted the exhibition and Pacific communities who gained greater access to heritage through subsequent extended loans to museums in Pacific countries.

Impact on museums

The total number of visitors across London and Paris venues exceeded 250,000 [E1]. Driven by the complex and controversial history of ownership and a desire to reach Pacific Island communities, the research and exhibition teams made entry to the Royal Academy exhibition free to these communities. The teams were successful in attracting 4,557 Pacific Island passport holders to the exhibition [E1, p.3]. The version of the exhibition that opened at the Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden in February 2020 has attracted 23,000 visitors as of October 2020 [E5]. The catalogue for the Royal Academy exhibition, co-edited by Thomas, was awarded the Prix Internationale Livre d'Art Tribale [E2] and sold over 10,000 copies; the print run of the French edition was 4,000 [E1]. The exhibition underpinned a Pacific focus in cultural programming over September-December 2018: associated events took place at the Frieze Art Fair, at New Zealand House, at the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, the British Museum and in Cambridge; a Pacific Fashion Week was scheduled just before the exhibition opening; and Gafa Samoa, a performance group, performed in London churches.

The role of Thomas and his collaborator Peter Brunt is highlighted by the Royal Academy of Arts' President: 'The exhibition [*Oceania*] would not have been possible without their specific knowledge of the region and direct contact with indigenous communities which not only facilitated and encouraged loans but, significantly, provided the support of community Elders from across the region. That relationship, deepened through the research project Pacific Presences initiated by the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge also facilitated important loans from public European institutions' [E3].

The significance of the *Oceania* exhibition for the Royal Academy of Arts is also noted by the Artistic Director of this institution: 'it's been quite a privilege, it's been quite eye-opening to enter into that world' [E4, 0:28-1:52]. The Curator of the Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden states that his institution 'is indebted to the Royal Academy and the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge for their development of the acclaimed London exhibition, from which our own exhibition was inspired and adapted', highlighting that the Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds described *Oceania* as 'verheugtentoonstelling' (rejoice-exhibition) and ranked it among the six must-see exhibitions in the Netherlands [E5].

Two television series broadcast on BBC4, *Oceans Apart: Art and the Pacific with James Fox* (2018) and *Handmade in the Pacific* (2018), featured art works shown in the exhibition, MAA collections, and related themes of voyaging and encounter. Nicholas Thomas was consultant to both series [E6].

Leading print media in Britain, France, Germany and the US hailed *Oceania* as a landmark exhibition [E7]. Some English-language comments include: 'a feat of diplomacy, procurement and preservation' (*The Times*); "'Oceania" is a powerful demonstration of art's capacity to fight the tide of loss, honouring tradition, reclaiming places, histories, and identities, and opening the way to the future' (*New York Review of Books*); '*Oceania* is a gathering of spectacular historical treasures. It is also – and perhaps more importantly – an exploration of heritage remembered, reclaimed and reinterpreted' (*FT Weekend*); 'this dazzling exhibition is like having the ocean roll under your canoe' (*The Guardian*); 'What this ravishing show displays most clearly is a constellation of cultures in conversation with themselves, their dead, and the outside, in a constant state of flux and movement' (*The Arts Desk*); 'Too often, in dry-as-dust ethnographic museums, artefacts like this linger half-forgotten in the twilight, embarrassing reminders of our colonial past. At the RA, though, they are presented spot-lit and centre-stage – and they hit you like a revelation.' (*The Telegraph*) [E7]

Impact on communities

A strong sense of cultural pride is conveyed by indigenous leaders, who have considered the *Oceania* exhibition a vital affirmation of their culture. A Māori leader said: 'The beautiful artwork, through carving, weaving, storytelling and drawing, has enabled us to never forget our past. From our past we can affirm why we are here, and for the generations that will follow' [E7.]. Cultural pride is also expressed by the Secretary of Cook Islands' Ministry of Culture, who stated that *Oceania* was 'a milestone recognising the importance of our history and retaining that and preserving that identity so that we know we are and so that our culture, our heritage, our identity is not being lost. Having that understanding for our people in the European countries to actually see the monuments here, the artefacts here, gives them that spirit, that power that we who used to live many centuries ago in the Oceania region.' (E4, 3:02-3:37)

Generating debate around restitution and return

The exhibition prompted not only renewed debate regarding the restitution and repatriation of artefacts collected during the colonial period, but practical action. The Royal Academy scheduled a panel discussion on 'Repatriation within the Arts' (7 November 2018, with approximately 200 attendees) [E8]. Dialogue with Pacific government and community representatives enabled Cambridge's Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, the British Museum and the Pitt Rivers Museum to proceed with a major loan of 30 exceptionally significant artefacts, including 22 from MAA, collected during the first voyage of Captain James Cook. The artefacts were loaned to the Taraiwhiti Museum, a regional institution close to the site of Cook's first contacts with Maori and the location of the artefacts' acquisition. The Taraiwhiti Museum exhibition opened in October 2019 to mark the 250th anniversary of the encounters between Maori and participants in Cook's first voyage; it is now extended to around early 2022. A loan of materials of such historic significance to a local museum, in the area of the community of origin, is internationally unprecedented.

The Taraiwhiti Museum exhibition attracted over 37,000 visitors to September 2020; over 5,000 young people have taken part in education programmes. [E9] The Director of the Tairawhiti

Museum highlights the importance of the loans: 'MAA, as the caretaker of the primary collection of taonga related to the Endeavor's first voyage, has made the advancement of relationships between iwi and the institution a very important one. Tairawhiti iwi have been determined in their wish for the taonga to return to reconnect with their descendants, to reclaim the knowledge they hold, and to sustain their legacy and the institution and staff of MAA have always been supportive and active in this process' [E9]. On the return to NZ of a key early sculpture, the Chair of the Te Rarawa group stated: 'It's wonderful that our lintel has represented our history and our people internationally, on the world stage, and been widely admired and appreciated.' [E7, p.2]

The NZ High Commissioner to the UK explains that *Oceania* 'reinforces the Government's Pacific Reset to make sure that we know that our ancient history is one of connectedness to the Pacific and to Pacific peoples' [E4, 4:01-4:15]. (The Reset is a policy which sets out five principles to guide NZ agencies' activities in the Pacific: understanding, friendship, mutual benefit, collective ambition and sustainability.) The High Commissioner also notes the exhibition's environmental significance: 'the ocean, which is part of the fabric of the connection, is also calling to us, because it needs help in these contemporary times and so what the Government is seeking to do with the Pacific Reset, and helping into the Pacific as much as drawing the concerns out of the Pacific about the world in which we live in today, is an important part of *Oceania*'. [E4, 4:24-4:52]

Attendance at academic events linked with the *Oceania* exhibition, including an opening symposium, lectures, a panel on repatriation and the conferences of two major subject associations (the Pacific History Association and European Society for Oceanists), totalled approximately 1,150, and included academics, curators and graduate students from 20 countries. Alongside responses from the media were extended academic reviews in the *Journal of Pacific History* and *Museum Worlds*.

The *Oceania* exhibition also created opportunities for new dialogues involving MAA curators and government ministers and museum staff from Tahiti, French Polynesia. A series of four meetings took place in Paris and Cambridge between March and September 2019; a long-term loan has now been confirmed, beginning in March 2022, of 12 key works of early heritage to the Musée de Tahiti et de ses Îles, the principal museum of the territory. [E10]

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

[E1] Exhibition attendance figures **CONFIDENTIAL**

[E2] (i) Announcement: Tribal Art Book Prize. [Link](#) (ii) Catalogue: Thomas, N. and Brunt, P. (Eds.). (2018). *Oceania*. Royal Academy of Arts.

[E3] Testimonial: President of the Royal Academy of Arts.

[E4] Video interviews on *Oceania* exhibition, NZ's Ministry of Foreign Affairs & Trade. YouTube. [Link](#). [Video files only available from YouTube].

[E5] Testimonial: Curator, Museum Volkenkunde, Leiden.

[E6] Documentaries: (i) *Oceans apart: Art and the Pacific with James Fox*. (2018). BBC. [Link](#) (ii) *Handmade in the Pacific*. (2018). BBC. [Link](#). [Video files available on request].

[E7] Selected Media Reviews as indexed, including: Times (London), 28.09.18; New York Review of Books, 02.12.19; Financial Times, 29.09.18; Guardian, 25.09.18; Daily Telegraph, 25.09.18; The Sunday Times, 29.09.18; Le Monde, 9.10.18; (ix) Welt am Sonntag, 14.10.18; NZ Herald, 16.07.19

[E8] Royal Academy. *Oceania* learning programmes.

[E9] Testimonial: Director, Tairawhiti Museum.

[E10] Letter: Loan request from Musée de Tahiti et des Îles.