

A short history of the Oceanic collection in the Vatican Ethnological Museum

By Katherine Aigner

The Oceanic collection of the Vatican is housed in the Vatican Ethnological Museum, which is part of the Vatican Museums complex within Vatican City State. I offer a history of the early formation of the Oceanic collection in the context of the history of the Ethnological Museum before giving a selection of some important pieces.

The Vatican Ethnological Museum began in 1692 when five artifacts from the Tairona people of present-day Sierra Nevada in Colombia were sent to Pope Innocent XII. With its policy of re-connecting with source communities, the Ethnological Museum recently conducted a study tour to the communities now known as the Kogis, Arhuacos, Wiwas and Kankuamo peoples of Sierra Nevada and have started a cultural heritage exchange with them based on these rare cultural objects.

The oldest core of the Vatican Ethnological Museum came from the collection of Cardinal Stefano Borgia (1731-1804), who was a passionate collector of what were called 'exotic curiosities'. For many years he was head of the Congregation of Propaganda Fide, the ministry of the Catholic Church that

was responsible for all non-European countries. His position facilitated contact with travellers, missionaries, and diplomats from around the world, from whom he received artefacts as gifts or bought at his own expense. By 1769 he had a collection of ethnographic objects housed in his family home in Velletri, in the province of Rome. He was passionate about this museum, which became the talk of writers and travelers of the time, so much so that a visit to the palace of the Borgias in Velletri became a 'must see' on the 18th century *Grand Tour*. The most famous visitor was the German poet Goethe, who wrote of his admiration for 'such a treasure, a stone's throw from Rome'. He regretted that 'it is not visited more often.' [1]

After the death of Stephano Borgia in 1804, the collection became the Borgia Museum (Museo Borgiano) of Propaganda Fide, housed in the palace of Propaganda Fide in Rome (near the Piazza di Spagna). There the collection stayed until 1925. In 1925 the collection came to the Vatican through Pope Pius XI (1857-1939) who was the first 'scholar pope' since Benedict XIV (1740-1758). Pius XI was an expert paleographer, specialising in ancient and

medieval Church manuscripts. As pope (1922-1939), he founded institutions for research and higher education, including the Pontifical Institute of Christian Archaeology (1925) and the Pontifical Academy of Science (1936). As a learned humanist with special interest in the arts and sciences, he expressly renounced the spirit of nationalism at the time and recognised the value and significance of native cultures. [2]

Pius XI commissioned the great Vatican Universal Exhibition of 1925 to 'demonstrate the respect, attention, and opening of the Catholic Church towards all cultures and religions'. [3] For this major event, over 100,000 items were sent from around the world where missionaries were living, including Oceania. The exhibition lasted for over a year. Primarily a study collection, the cultural artefacts were used to show the daily, cultural and spiritual life of people from around the world. Various pavilions were set up inside the Vatican Museums, each of them dedicated to a specific area of the world, including Oceania.

After the closing of the 1925 Exhibition, a selection of works from the exhibition as well as the Borgia Museum collection from Propaganda Fide, were transferred to the Lateran Palace in Rome in 1926 where a new museum was set up over two floors. Oceania occupied the second floor. The guiding principle of the 1925 Exhibition had been respect for the inalienable rights of non-Christian peoples, a principle that led to a respectful approach to local cultures, this continued with the new museum. The first Director of the Museum was Fr. Wilhelm Schmidt, the most famous Catholic ethnologist of his time and founder of the journal *Anthropos*. His 12-volume work, *The Origin of the Idea of God* (1915-1952), on his theory of primeval monotheism was anti-evolutionist. He did not believe humankind was originally animist as E.B. Tylor maintained, but posited the existence of what he called *Urmonotheismus*, God's self-revelation to all humanity, the traces of which were now only found with tribal groups. Far from being 'primitive', they had conserved the original understanding of God.



Of special interest is a model of a 'Men's House' from Papua New Guinea, here shown in two different settings: the right shows the current display in the Vatican Ethnological Museum, not open to the public, the one on the left shows the display at the Lateran Museum in the early 20th century. Photographs courtesy Vatican Museums.

Objects from Oceania currently in the Ethnological Museum are the result of Wilhelm Schmidt's selection. Reproductions of some rare works were made for the Exhibition, such as the moulded *rongorongo* tablets of Rapa Nui or Easter Island.

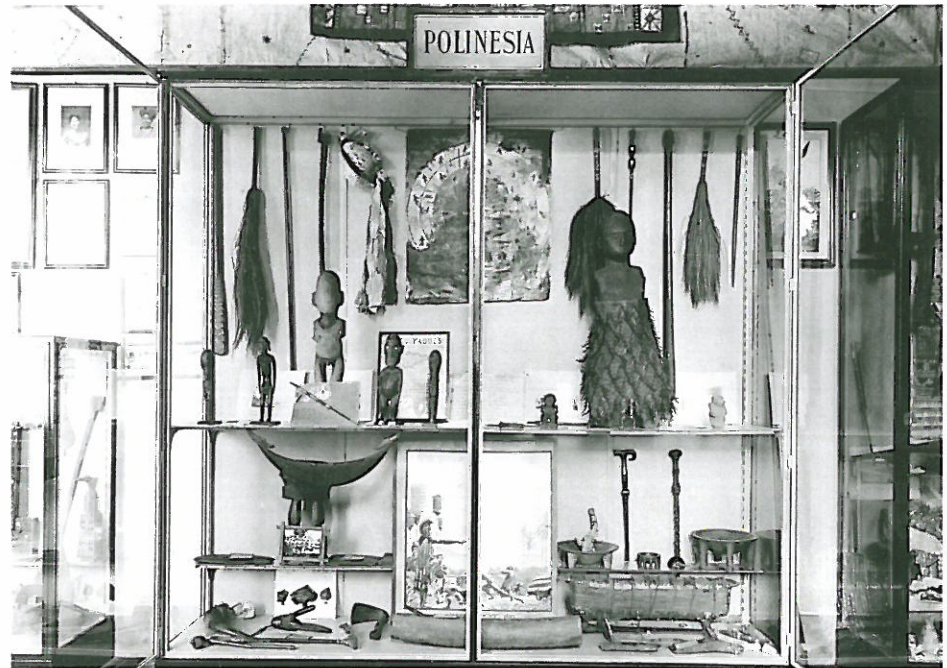
In the early 1970s the collection was relocated to the Vatican Museums into a new architecturally designed space. For a variety of reasons relating to conservation, the Ethnological Museum remained essentially closed for about 40 years. The Museum reopened in 2010 with an exhibition dedicated to indigenous Australia. The exhibition was called *Rituals of Life*, and coincided with the canonisation of Mary MacKillop, Australia's first saint. The opening of *Rituals of Life* was the first time indigenous culture was staged inside the Vatican, on this occasion with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander dancers and musicians performing. This set a precedent for future exhibitions; using cultural artefacts to inspire an international audience about local contemporary issues and including the source communities into the exhibition space. For example, at the recent opening of an exhibition dedicated to the diverse religions of Indonesia, Hindu dancers performed inside the Vatican atrium.[4]

Documentation of objects in the Museum is often sparse and since 1692 three separate inventory systems have been created. The records indicate there are about 7000 works in the Oceanic collection. It is now undergoing detailed study. The most substantial collection came via Father Franz Kirschbaum from the Sepik River in Papua New Guinea and was sent between 1923 and 1932.

One of the most spectacular works sent for the 1925 exhibit is a headdress from the Mekeo people of Papua New Guinea. It is currently on display in the museum, after several months of restoration where each feather was individually cleaned. Made for the pope, it stands almost three metres high.

Some objects from Australia and Oceania were given as gifts to various popes. The almost ten-metre-long ceremonial canoe (*ivukapi*) from Choiseul in the Solomon Islands was presented to Pope Pius XI in 1929. The pirogue was recently restored by the ethnological restoration laboratory of the Vatican Museums, a process that lasted several months. It is now on display at the entrance to the Vatican Museums.

In 1885 Angelo Colini drafted an



One of the Oceania showcases in the Lateran Palace. The statue of Tu, clothed with a skirt, can be seen on the top right; at the bottom is a godhouse from the Tuamotu Islands. Colini's representation of Tu with a feather headdress in 1885. Photograph courtesy Vatican Museums.

initial description of the artifacts in the Museo Borgia, as it was known. Colini devoted several pages to a description of the Oceanic collections in which he highlighted objects that would especially arouse the curiosity of Europeans, such as the *tapa* works and tattooing instruments (from the Gambier Islands). The Museum holds several *tapa*, from both the 19th and early 20th century. Maybe one of the oldest objects from the Borgia Museum is a *hei tiki* from Aotearoa (New Zealand); research is currently ongoing to verify and provenance this.

The tradition of giving gifts to the pope continued in the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century. One of the most meaningful is "The Illuminated Address," given to Pope Pius X in 1904. The text, in the Maori language, expresses the hope that the newly elected pope will have a fruitful pontificate. Rhonda Paku of the Te Papa Museum in Wellington made a translation of this text. Another example held in the Borgia Museum is a staff from Aotearoa New Zealand which was given to the Head of Propaganda Fide in 1846.

During the 19th century many artifacts from around the world continued to be sent to the popes and to the Borgia Museum. A statue of the god Tu from the Gambier Islands of French Polynesia was sent to Pope Gregory XVI (1831-1846). Chief deity of the island of Mangareva, Tu was associated with the breadfruit tree and represented a culture unfamiliar to the Europeans. It is now the most famous statue in the Oceanic

collection of the Ethnological Museum. Tu can be seen in the current *Atua* exhibition at the National Gallery of Australia (23 May -3 August 2014).

Research into the Oceanic collection is still very much an ongoing process ...

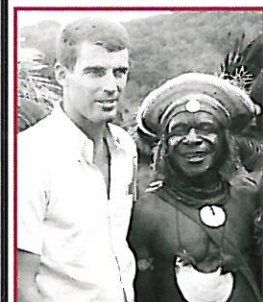
[1] Goethe, *Viaggio in Italia*, 1816-1817, 1829, vol.II, p.1.

[2] See L. D'Orazi, *Il coraggio della verità: vita di Pio XI*, Roma 1989.

[3] *Ethnos*, Vatican Museums Ethnographic Collection, 2012 Edizioni Musei Vaticani

[4] See: <http://mv.vatican.va/>

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