

ATUA SACRED GODS OF POLYNESIA

By Michael Gunn

Atua began out of curiosity. The pre-Christian cultural world of Polynesia was populated with gods and I, living in the first years of the twenty-first century, did not know what a god was, at least not in the visceral sense. I began to look toward Polynesia with curiosity. Perhaps Polynesia could show me what a god was.

I didn't know where to start, but I thought I would begin by trying to find out more about what a god figure was—a heathen idol, as the missionaries were so fond of labeling them. I liked the idea of starting with sculpture—figures of wood, of feathers, and of stone. I'm a museum curator and I specialize in this sort of thing, so that seemed like a logical place to begin.

It soon became clear that this personal exploration could develop into a major Polynesian exhibition. I spoke with Brent Benjamin, director of the Saint Louis Art Museum, where I was then employed, about the possibility. He mused about the idea for a minute and then said that I shouldn't restrict myself and I should find the best examples of Polynesian art throughout the world. With those words, a Polynesian exhibition was on the books for the Saint Louis Art Museum. I had a subject but didn't have a theme. When I moved to the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra in 2008, the exhibition came with me on the understanding that Saint Louis would be the second venue. I mentioned this to the NGA's director, Ron Radford, and he could immediately see the possibilities of such an exhibition and agreed that I should continue to develop it.

Steve Hooper at Norwich was already developing a general exhibition involving Polynesian gods, the 2006 *Pacific Encounters: Art and Divinity in Polynesia, 1760–1860*. He had a team of people working on the project, scholars such as Karen Jacobs, Ludo Coupaye, Maia Nuku, Wonu Veys, and Amiria Salmond. I didn't want to replicate what Steve and his people were doing, but my project was developing a distinctive identity. I had begun hunting for Polynesian art objects that were associated with the name of an *atua*, that is, the gods and spirits of Polynesia. Records indicated that there had been thousands of *atua*—not just the big four god names of Tangaroa (Kanaloa), Tu (Ku), Tane (Kane), and Rogo (Rongo, Lono) that people who think about such things think of today.

Within a comparatively short period of time I had accumulated photos and information about more than 5,000 objects from Polynesia. I found that a number of these objects had been attributed names—names that were given to the objects after they had left their homelands—but their real names were not known. Attributed names included generic or descriptive terms such as *tiki* (image), *moai kavakava* (ribbed carving), and *ki'i hulu manu* (feathered image). It was also becoming clear that even seemingly real names such as Ku ka'ili moku (Seizer of Land, an aspect of the Hawaiian deity known as Ku) had been attributed far outside their original environment,

FIG. 1 (left): Head of an *atua*. Rarotonga, Cook Islands, central Polynesia. Probably 18th century or earlier.

Wood. H: 72.5 cm.
Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge University.

Facing page clockwise from upper left

FIG. 2: Deified ancestor with the name A'a. Rurutu, Austral Islands, central Polynesia. Probably 18th century or earlier. Handed over to the London Missionary Society on Raiatea in the Society Islands, in 1821.

British Museum, London, Oc.LMS.19.
Photo: Barry Le Lievre, National Gallery of Australia.

FIG. 3: Figure from a panel with an unusually strong presence.

Aotearoa (New Zealand). Probably before the early 19th century.

Gordon Sze, New York.
Photo: Barry Le Lievre, National Gallery of Australia.

FIG. 4: Wood figure of a frigate bird covered with 40 *komari* symbols (most likely depictions of women's external genitalia).

Rapa Nui (Easter Island), eastern Polynesia. Probably 18th century or earlier.

British Museum, London, Oc1950.04.12.
Photo: Barry Le Lievre, National Gallery of Australia.

FIG. 5: Female figure, *moai papa* (detail).

Rapa Nui (Easter Island), eastern Polynesia. Probably early 19th century.

Wood, bone, obsidian. H: 64 cm.
Otago Museum, Dunedin, New Zealand.







facing page, installation views, clockwise from top

FIG. 6: Akamata (left) was created in 2004 and Taputu (right) in 2001, both by Eruera Nia, Taputapuatea, Rarotonga, Cook Islands, central Polynesia. National Gallery of Australia, 2010.1182 & 2010.1183.

Photo: Barry Le Lievre, National Gallery of Australia.

FIG. 7: Detail of a figure called Mae'e, positioned standing on hands and toes with head thrown back in a scream. Collected at Hale o Keawe by Lord George Anson Byron, 1825.

Hawai'i, northern Polynesia. Probably 18th century or earlier.

British Museum, London, Oc.1657. Photo: Barry Le Lievre, National Gallery of Australia.

FIG. 8: Male ancestor figure riding the deck of a canoe/penis.

Marquesas Islands, central Polynesia. Probably 18th century or earlier.

Musée d'Ethnographie, Genève. 8937. Photo: Barry Le Lievre, National Gallery of Australia.

FIG. 9: Two figures made from barkcloth (*tapa*) over armatures made from cane.

Rapa Nui (Easter Island), eastern Polynesia. Probably late 18th or early 19th century.

Left: Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, Harvard University, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 70/53542. Right: National Museums of Northern Ireland, Belfast, 1910.41.

Photo: Barry Le Lievre, National Gallery of Australia.

FIG. 10 (top right): Fisherman's god, *oramatua*. Rarotonga, Cook Islands, central Polynesia. 18th or early 19th century.

Wood. H: 42 cm. Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde, Munich. Photo: Marietta Weidner.

FIG. 11 (bottom right): Fisherman's god, *oramatua*. Rarotonga, Cook Islands, central Polynesia. Late 18th–early 19th century.

Wood, black paint. H: 33 cm. British Museum, London. Photo © The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.

often obscuring the original associations and context of an artwork.

I decided to escape from the clutter and nonsense of attributions and went back to the eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century explorer log books, missionary journals, archaeologist reports, and other publications that documented early interactions between people and art objects. This was better, but after a while I felt the need to focus on the art objects themselves, rather than on what other Westerners had written about them, so I made an appointment at the British Museum. Eventually I was introduced to Jill Hasell, who in turn introduced me to the wood figures—the *atua*—of central Polynesia, bringing them to me on a trolley, one by one.

I was privileged to have around ten minutes with each of these Polynesian god figures, the few “heathen idols” that had escaped destruction in the iconoclasm that swept throughout Polynesia in the early nineteenth century. They had not been tampered with since they were lodged in the BM's collection around 100 years ago. I gently sniffed the two-hundred-year-old dust in the cracks in the wood (it was respectful sniffing, you can be assured). To my surprise, the smell of each figure was as unique as its visual appearance. It was a sunny autumn day, and a soft light was streaming through the storage windows, illuminating the BM's great Rarotongan male figure as a masterpiece of serenity. I half expected one of these old gods to let me know that it was still there, but nothing showed itself.

The more the exhibition developed, the more I felt the need to work with a Polynesian colleague. Vairea Teissier at the Musée de Tahiti made me understand that she wanted the “view from the interior.” This was not going to be easy, since I was not Polynesian. At the time I did not understand that I was already working with a Polynesian colleague as my main partner in this project—a Tahitian *atua* who was at least 200 years old.

My relationship with this *atua* had started when I began to visit the Bishop Museum in Honolulu in 2004. I wanted to find out more about the story behind each Polynesian work of art and the Bishop was the obvious place to begin. Its records had been developing for well more than a century through generations of scholars and curators. Betty Kam granted me access to the files and DeSoto Brown and his team helped me with the archives. I settled in swiftly, knowing I had only a few days to understand a huge amount of information. Taking a break, I went down to the Polynesian gallery, where I found an old Tahitian male figure carved in wood (fig. 13). I liked the look of him and photographed him from a number of angles.

The next year I returned to the Bishop Museum and al-





FIG. 12 (upper left):
Double-headed figure.
Tahiti, Society Islands,
central Polynesia.
Early 19th century.
Wood. H: 59 cm.
British Museum, London.
Photo © The Trustees of the British
Museum. All rights reserved.



FIG. 13 (upper right):
Male *ti'i* figure.
Tahiti, Society Islands,
central Polynesia.
18th century or earlier.
Wood. H: 58.4 cm.
Bishop Museum, Honolulu.
Photo: Dave Franzen.

though I still did not know what my focus was, I was following my instincts. Taking a break from my work on the files, I went downstairs to see the Tahitian figure again. Around the corner and there he was. He saw me and smiled in recognition. I stood there and felt a bit flustered, for experience told me that wood didn't smile. After ten minutes or so with the figure I went back upstairs and asked if I could see his file. Kamalu duPreez brought it to me and I could see an article written by Peter Buck (Te Rangi Hiroa) in 1939 in which he mentioned that "The wooden images [from Tahiti] termed *ti'i* (*tiki*) were used by sorcerers as a resting place for their familiar spirits" and he referred to Plate VII, which was a photograph of my Tahitian friend ("Mangarevan Images," *Ethnologica Cranmorensis* 4: 1939). I wondered where he got his information and whether my friend had smiled at him as well.

This was something I was reticent to acknowledge. Although it was apparent that the figure was smiling and interacting with me, there was also the possibility that I was quietly sliding off the rails of sanity. And what was a sor-

cerer's familiar spirit, anyway? I'm not a sorcerer, so why was it smiling at me? These were troubling but intriguing thoughts.

Mahiriki Tangaroa, curator of the National Museum of the Cook Islands, advised me just to accept what was happening and to focus on the places of interaction between the people, the art objects, and the *atua*. This made sense to me, for it brought me back to the land, to central Polynesia, and to the reality of *atua* in their natural habitat.

When I could get funding, I visited places in Polynesia, meeting people, visiting *marae* (sacred clearings), and trying to understand what the people were telling me when they were talking about *atua*. It became clear that two centuries ago Christianity had hijacked a number of *atua* concepts, including the name *atua* itself, which had come to refer to the Christian god in many parts of Polynesia. I also found that a large number of Polynesian people thought that *atua* were evil spirits—another legacy of the early missionaries and their evangelizing.

More travel, more people, and a few more interactions

with an inexplicable “presence” associated with the sculpture. Each time this happened I got a fright because something in the object seemed to be entering me, not with violence, but with a noticeable presence. Sometimes it would enter through one arm and go back out through the other. Other times it would enter through an arm, perform a loop-the-loop in my body, then travel down my right leg. Sometimes it was like looking at a work of art through the rangefinder lens of an old camera, where suddenly there were two images of the same wood figure, shifting slightly apart. Polynesian people who were with me when this was happening understood that I was being entered by *vairua*, or spirits. Although it was very unnerving, these *vairua* didn’t seem to want to kill me. Perhaps they just wanted me to know that they were there. Or perhaps they were attracted by the “scent” of those who had entered me in the past. The first time it happened in the presence of a number of other people, I got really spooked and, although I was told that an *atua* showing itself like this was not abnormal, I didn’t like it. That evening I walked through the streets of a Polynesian city full of tourists clutching their plastic *tikis*, but I felt lonely and empty with eel-like spooks (for lack of a more precise term) swimming through me.

It became clear to me that *atua* were what the exhibition was going to be about, that its focus would be defined by my attempt at understanding what these spooks were. I had come to realize that I wasn’t mad because other people—especially Polynesian people—similarly experienced these spooks or at least accepted their reality. However, I also met Western people who owned Polynesian art objects, had lived with them for years, and had never experienced anything unusual. Trying to understand *atua* became an exercise in trying to define the nature of reality—if enough people accept something as real, then it is real. Understanding *atua* was also about understanding the nature of perception. Were these spooks the Polynesian “gods” that initially had so eluded me? I didn’t know, but it was a possibility I couldn’t dismiss.

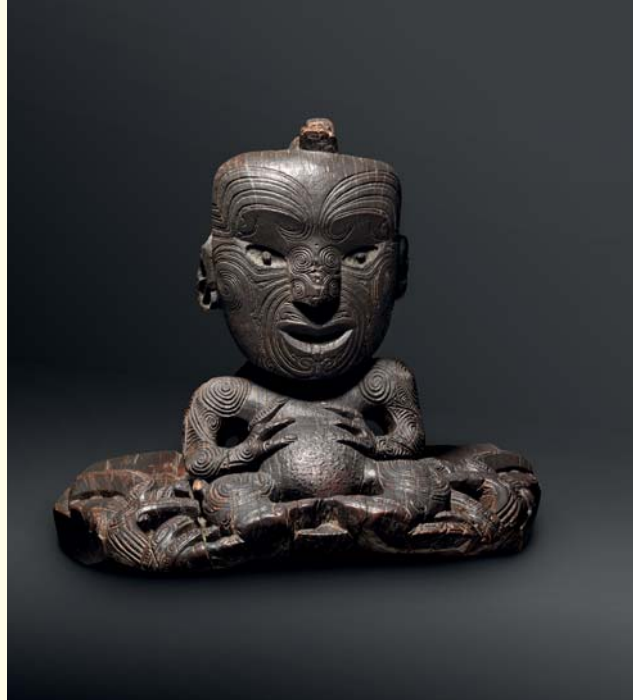


FIG. 14 (above): Warrior Chief Te Rauparaha, fixed in his canoe. Maori, Aotearoa (New Zealand), southern Polynesia. C. 1835.
Wood. H: 43.5 cm.
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

FIG. 15 (below): Ancestor figure. Maori, attributed to Raharuhi Rukupo, Manutuke district near Gisborne, east coast of the North Island, Aotearoa (New Zealand), southern Polynesia. 19th century.
Wood. H: 79.7 cm.
National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.



were more inclined to accept what I was talking about, while men were more skeptical. I had to be very careful with my language, remaining true to my experience with the Tahitian *atua* while at the same time maintaining a firm grip on reality as it is understood in the West. As I wrote the catalog, I began to understand many of the common patterns regarding *atua* throughout Polynesia, especially those of deified ancestors and of *vairua*.

This Polynesian reality became clear when the first crates arrived in the quarantine room at the National Gallery. I looked closely as the first of the pre-Christian Polynesian artworks were taken out and laid carefully on a table. One was a Tahitian wood figure. Lively and mysterious, she made her presence felt almost immediately. I realized at once that the reality that Polynesian people had been talking about was valid and that most Westerners did not or could not acknowledge it.

Once an exhibition becomes part of a museum’s schedule, it develops a life of its own, and dozens and eventually hundreds of people become involved. Key people become the funders (thank you, funders), the director (Ron Radford), those who produce the catalog (Kirsty Morrison), exhibition designers (Patrice Riboust), registrars, and conservators. With only a few exceptions, most institutions we approached wanted to lend to this exhibition. I wanted to borrow not just pretty artworks or “masterpieces,” but pieces that were known to have been associated with *atua*. Every



FIG. 16 (left): Installation view: unique group of four figures (three males and one female). The penis on each of the male figures is depicted where the umbilicus would be located. The dominant male is in effect both having sexual intercourse with the woman upside down beneath him, while at the same time she is his mother, connected to him by their umbilical cord. Aotearoa (New Zealand). Probably 18th century or earlier.

Kunstkamera (Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology), Russian Academy of Sciences, St. Petersburg, 736.120. Photo: Barry Le Lievre, National Gallery of Australia.

FIG. 17 (right): Installation view: very interactive stone *ti'i* figure found near the mouth of the Vaitepiha River at Tautira, on the southeast coast of Tahiti, central Polynesia.

Musée de Tahiti et des Îles, Punaauia, Tahiti. 83.10.01. Photo: Barry Le Lievre, National Gallery of Australia.

piece was to have direct relevance to this central theme and was chosen because of its ability to embody and project spiritual force.

To ensure that we would have no problems with the *atua* we were bringing into the building, we again sought advice from Mahiriki Tangaroa, who suggested that we appoint one of the NGA's Polynesian *atua* to be the "boss" of the exhibition. To achieve this we should introduce this particular *atua* to the indigenous spirit world of Canberra. In April 2014 Paul House and Bill Tompkins, two of the

Aboriginal custodians of the land on which the NGA is located, sang and welcomed the Maori Te Rauparaha to their world. This private ceremony took place within a special viewing room located deep within the National Gallery. Te Rauparaha, in the form of his canoe figure, was especially pleased with the honor. Maori elder Graham Anderson of the Tainui Confederation stood beside Te Rauparaha to speak on his behalf. This welcome was followed by special treatment accorded to Te Rauparaha during the installation of the *Atua* galleries. He was the first figure to

be installed and was given a special place in the center of the gallery so that his presence could not be missed. The most important of the opening ceremonies were made by Polynesian representatives standing beside Te Rauparaha.

This sort of involvement by representatives of different cultural groups is not unique to this exhibition. The National Gallery has been working in a collaborative relationship with indigenous peoples since before the institution first opened in 1982. *Atua* is the latest in a series of exhibitions that have resulted from the interaction between NGA staff and indigenous people in Australia and the Pacific region. These interactions are much more than expressions of courtesy and respect. With each exhibition, both the descendants of the people who created the art objects and the museum staff understand more about the role an art museum can play in understanding and supporting a threatened cultural world. Understanding can come about only through involvement, and support can be achieved through understanding the needs of the people, the artworks, and the *atua*.

Atua is an exhibition and a catalog that started as an exploration into the unknown, into a world we Westerners ignore. We see the artworks of Polynesia as beautiful creations, but we frequently neglect the reality for which they were created. Now, looking at the published catalog and walking through the exhibition, I realize that a Westerner can indeed bridge the gap and come to a real understanding of their workings. That said, I'm not sure this is necessarily a good and worthwhile thing to do, for in my experience these *atua* can be quite active given the right situation, and interacting with them can be a frightening experience. More than anything else, however, they require respect and protection, for although they are gods, today *atua* are rarely encountered and almost forgotten.

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