

“THIS IS NOT A WEAPON”

Reappraising clubs from OCEANIA

by Steven Hooper



René Magritte encouraged us to be aware that things are not always what they seem. In addition to an image of a club not being a club, a club in the hand is not always a weapon. Yet for more than two centuries, Europeans have classified a range of remarkable sculptures from Oceania as weapons, and specifically as clubs, *massues*, *casse-têtes*, *keules*, *clavas*, *bastoni*, and equivalent terms in other European languages. One result of this classification has been a negative association with war and violence, or with savagery, although it is hard to fathom how one could consider a hand-arm used in individual combat more savage or brutal than the indiscriminate European machines of destruction such as machine guns, hand grenades, or

FIG. 1 (above):
Two-handed club, *siriti*.
Fiji. 18th–early 20th century.
Wood. L: 152.5 cm.
Donated by Augustus Wollaston
Franks in 1872, who acquired it from
dealer William Cutter.
British Museum, London,
inv. Oc.7612.
© The Trustees of the British Museum.

bombs. Joseph Banks in 1770 compared Maori “weapons” to dress swords—plenty of swagger but not much action—and although the Maori certainly used their *taiaha* and *hoeroa* in combat, this observation is perceptive because most of the time they were for conspicuous display and signalling status.

A reappraisal of “clubs” is long overdue. They are often the most numerous artifacts that survive from pre-Christian and precolonial cultures in Oceania. The storerooms of ethnographic museums around the world, including museums in the Pacific, are full of them, sometimes hundreds of them, hanging on rack after rack or lying dormant on shelves. Relatively few are on display, and until now there has never been a comprehensive exhibition or publication dedicated to them. At best, they have played a minor supporting role in regional or cultural surveys. The *Power & Prestige* project, initiated by the Fondazione Giancarlo Ligabue in Venice in partnership with the Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac in Paris is taking some first steps to rectify this neglect of clubs. The exhibition and publication of

the same name attempts to address the full complexity of the artworks that are obscured by the name “club” and bring them from the shadows of storerooms into the light of greater public and scholarly appreciation.

Fundamental to the project has been a mission to challenge European assumptions about clubs and to engage with indigenous understandings of their significance and of the complex roles they played in the societies that produced them—and the roles they continue to play as important items of heritage. Starting with the question, “What is a club?”, our inquiries have been guided by the additional question, “Why did people go to such trouble to make these extraordinary sculptures, with their wide variety of forms and decorations, if all that was needed as an efficient weapon was a well-balanced stick?” The short answer is that clubs are far more than weapons. A longer answer is revealed in the exhibition and book, where they are presented as sculptures, as performance and costume accessories, as exchange valuables, as symbols of authority, and as embodiments of divinity. They often were made in

FIG. 2 (below):
Installation view of *Power & Prestige* at the Palazzo Franchetti-Istituto Veneto di Scienze Lettere ed Arti in Venice, through 13 March 2021.

© Fondazione Giancarlo Ligabue.



a religious context, because no human endeavor could be successful without approval and assistance from gods, spirits, or ancestors.

It is perfectly clear that if Pacific Islanders wanted to make ergonomically efficient hand-held weapons, they could do so and often did. Some Fijian clubs are straight, about one meter long and one kilogram in weight, similar to a standard baseball bat. In the hands of an athletic person, this optimizes speed, maneuverability, and effectiveness. But many clubs from Oceania are two, three, or four kilograms in weight, and one in the exhibition is even nine (FIG. 1). Some types are more than three meters long, and they are not spears. They were not thrown. Still others are asymmetrical, unbalanced, and awkward. The variety of forms and sizes is bewildering in its range and complexity. There is no evidence that people in Oceania were any more belligerent than those elsewhere in the world. Disputes and violence, sometimes on a large scale, took place, but this is, of course, typical of human behavior rather than exceptional. Many clubs were created as combat equipment, or they were made in the form of combat equipment, but many were probably never used in fighting and performed other cultural tasks for which



FIG. 3 (far left):
Émile Lasalle (1813–1871),
Engraving of an inhabitant
of Nuku Hiva, 1843.

After a drawing by Louis le Breton
(1818–1866), created in Nuku Hiva
in August–September 1838 during
the Dumont D'Urville Expedition.
It is probably a composite image
combining representations of a
tattooed man and that of a club,
the latter of surprisingly small
proportions.



FIGS. 4a and b (center left):
Janiform club, *ïu*.
Marquesa Islands.
Late 18th–early 19th century.
Wood. L: 140 cm.
Ex Anthony Meyer, Paris (acquired in
England in the 1950s).
Ligabue Collection, Venice.
© Collection Ligabue, photo: Hughes
Dubois.

**FIGS. 5a and b (left and
right):** Staff club, *taiaha*.
Maori; Northern region (?),
New Zealand, Aotearoa.
Early 19th century.
Wood, *Haliotis iris* shell (*paua*), fiber,
dog fur. L: 193 cm.
Ex private UK collection.
Ligabue Collection, Venice.
© Collection Ligabue, photo: Hughes
Dubois.



FIG. 6 (above):
View of three clubs
presented in *Power &
Prestige*.
Left to right: Easter Island, SS.CC
Rome; Marquesas Islands, private
collection; and Easter Island, private
collection.
From *Power & Prestige: The Art of
Clubs in Oceania*, Skira, Fondazione
Giancarlo Ligabue, pp. 6–7.

they symbolized power, status, and divinely sanctioned authority.

Let us take, as an example, the famous *ïu* clubs from the Marquesas Islands (*ïu* rather than 'u'u is now the standard orthography approved by the Académie Marquisienne). The combination of faces, eyes, and other anthropomorphic and zoomorphic features has fascinated visitors, researchers, and collectors ever since these clubs were first encountered in the late eighteenth century (FIGS. 4a and b). These features are all set on a top-heavy sculpture of around 2–4 kilograms in weight that is a masterful realization in tropical hardwood of intersecting convex and concave planes. But what is known about the use of these clubs? Beautiful illustrations of them, held by splendidly tattooed warriors, were produced in the early nineteenth century (FIG. 3), but when reliable eyewitness accounts of warfare and fighting in the Marquesas Islands are examined, such as those by William Crook, Edward Robarts, and David Porter, they are not mentioned. Constant reference is made to skirmishing with short spears and slingstones (Robarts was injured by a slingstone), and to expeditions along mountainous forest paths that were not suited to cumbersome heavy “weapons” such as the *ïu* and the long paddle-shaped *parahua*. The only direct mention of the use of an *ïu* is by Porter in 1813, who records one being used by a chiefly warrior to dispatch a fallen enemy. It seems likely that they were seldom used in hand-to-hand combat, but were parade staffs of senior warriors, whose name, *toa*, is the same as the tough *Casuarina equisetifolia* wood from which *ïu* were made. They could be used to deliver a coup-de-grâce but were primarily impressive swagger sticks for use by those in command, and were adorned with images and symbols that proclaimed an active relationship with divine ancestors, whose protective powers were invoked before any expedition.

Far to the west, in New Britain, a similar pattern is evident. In cultures noted for the beauty and fine finish of their clubs, the Tolai, Sulka, and Mengen (FIG. 7), references to their use in combat are hard to find. Wilfred Powell, who was there in the 1870s, went on war expeditions, including a reprisal raid approved by the Methodist missionary George Brown following the murder of several Fijian missionaries. Although



Powell illustrates several fine clubs in his 1884 book, *Wanderings in a Wild Country*, his eyewitness accounts of fighting mention only spears and stones. As in the case of the Marquesas Islands, the finely made “clubs” appear to have played a greater role in self-presentation and displays of authority than in actual combat.

With these and other examples in mind, *Power & Prestige* explores the culture of clubs in Oceania, which does not always, or even often, involve fighting. Perhaps the overriding message of the exhibition is that clubs are first and foremost sculptures. Enormous care and skill were involved in producing them. As a survey of museum storage racks will show, not every club maker was expert, but many of them were, and when they were good, they were very, very good, and they created extraordinary works of art that merit appreciation on a world stage.



FIG. 7 (left): Bulb-headed club. Sulka or Mengen; New Britain, Bismarck Archipelago, Papua New Guinea.

Late 19th–early 20th century.
Wood. L: 131 cm.
Bart van Bussel Collection, acquired in the 1980s.
© Hughes Dubois.

FIG. 8 (below): Dance wand, *koka*. Buin, Bougainville, Papua New Guinea. Second half of the 19th century.

Wood, pigment. L: 99.6 cm.
Collected in 1889 in Buin, Bougainville; donated by Admiral G. Hand in 1900; British Museum, London, inv. Oc1900,-.65.
© The Trustees of the British Museum.

FIG. 9 (below): Dance staff, *napa*. Santa Cruz, Solomon Islands. Late 19th century.

Wood, fiber, nut shells, pigment.
L: 97 cm.
Ex Julius Konietzko (1886–1952), Hamburg.
Bart van Bussel Collection.
© Hughes Dubois.





FIG. 10 (left): God staff.
Mangaia, Cook Islands.
Late 18th–early 19th century.
Wood, coconut fiber, human hair.
L: 91.4 cm.
Ex London Missionary Society, acquired
in 1911.
British Museum, London,
inv. Oc, LMS.42.
© The Trustees of the British Museum.

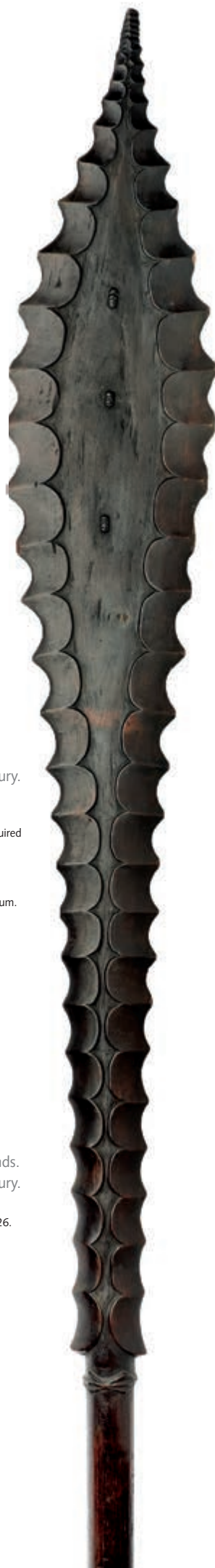


FIG. 11 (right):
Pole club, *akatara* with
scalloped blade and small
figures. Atiu, Aitutaki,
Mitiaro, or Mauke (?),
Central Islands, Cook Islands.
Late 18th–early 19th century.
Wood. L: 241.2 cm.
Acquired from George Laing in 1926.
National Museums of Scotland,
Edinburgh, inv. A.1926.65.
© National Museums of Scotland.

It is hoped that this initial reappraisal of clubs will encourage others to go further. There is much historical and art-historical research to be done, including by descendants of the original makers of one, two, three, or even four centuries ago—we do not know how old some ancient-looking clubs may be. Radiocarbon tests could reveal some surprises. As a start, the project is working with Jean Mason, the director of the Cook Islands Library and Museum, and with local carver Henry Tavioni to experiment with *Casuarina* wood to understand the techniques that were used more than two hundred years ago to produce the beautiful scallop-edged clubs called *'akatara* (FIG. 11). As I write, the first wood samples have just been taken out of the black mud of a taro swamp after two months of immersion, and they have partially absorbed the dark color. We await with interest the results of the four-month and six-month samples, which Henry will then carve to see how they perform under the adze and chisel.

Power & Prestige:

The Art of Clubs in Oceania

Palazzo Franchetti, Venice

16 October 2021–13 March 2022

www.fondazioneiligabue.it

Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, Paris

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FIG. 12 (far left): Club.
Pentecost Island, Vanuatu. 19th century.

Wood. L: 98.5 cm.
Michel Thieme Collection, Amsterdam.
© Hughes Dubois.



FIG. 13 (left): Leaf-shaped club.
Solomon Islands. Second half of the 19th century.

Wood fiber. L: 133 cm.
© Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac,
inv. 70.2014.15.1.



FIG. 14 (left): Short club, *patu parāoa*. New Zealand, Aotearoa.

Whale bone. L: 50 cm.
Probably collected during Cook's expeditions.
Acquired in the late 18th or early 19th century
by Edward Daniel Clarke. Transferred in 1887 to
the Jesus College Library.
Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology,
University of Cambridge, inv. D1887.6.
Photo © Josh Murfitt.



FIG. 15 (left):
 Club with rounded head.
 Loyalty Islands, New
 Caledonia. First half of the
 19th century.
 Wood, fiber, flying fox fur.
 L: 65.5 cm.
 Acquired in 1911 from the Rev.
 James Hadfield of the London
 Missionary Society.
 National Museums of Scotland,
 Edinburgh, inv. A.1911.99.
 © National Museums of Scotland.



FIG. 16 (right):
 Broad-bladed club, *culacula*. Fiji.
 First half of the 19th century.
 Wood. L: 118 cm.
 Ligabue Collection, Venice.
 © Collection Ligabue, photo: Hughes Dubois.

FIG. 17 (far right):
 Two-handed club, *talavalu*. Samoa.
 First half of the 19th century.
 Wood. L: 113.5 cm.
 Private collection, Belgium, acquired in 1965
 from London dealer Fred North.
 © Hughes Dubois.



FIG. 18 (below): Dance staff.
Buka, Papua New Guinea.
Late 19th–early 19th century.
Wood, pigment. L: 92 cm.
Donated by Allain G. Pallier to the
Musée de l'Homme in 1985.
Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques
Chirac, inv. 71.1985.52.2.



From a discussion with Inti Ligabue, president of the Giancarlo Ligabue Foundation, a few days before the opening of the *Power & Prestige* exhibition.

Tribal Art Magazine: How did you get the idea for this exhibition? Was it, like some of your other past projects, inspired by the collection your father, Giancarlo Ligabue, put together?

Inti Ligabue: It was different this time, because my father never collected Oceanic prestige staffs. My interest in the type of objects that are the subject of this exhibition is the result of a personal predilection for their formal qualities, which I developed in recent years as the result of a series of acquisitions of ever-increasing importance. However, it's obvious that my father has a lot to do with my desire to produce an exhibition devoted to these South Seas creations. He awakened me to the world of non-European creations when I was a child, and he allowed me to accompany him on his research expeditions. One of the first trips we took was to Easter Island. I discovered a magical people there, and I saw the *moai* figures and the *ua* staffs for the first time. My fascination led me to buy a contemporary example of an *ua*. A year later, we went to the Marquesas Islands to do research on the *tikis* of Hiva Oa Island. Both of these experiences affected me deeply and strongly sparked my imagination. As a good native of Venice—the city of illustrious maritime explorers—I may have been predestined to succumb to the charms of the material culture of the Pacific navigators.

But to reply to your question more concretely, the point of departure for this project was actually a conversation I had with my friend Alex Bernand, a great connoisseur of this type of object. He immediately offered to help me get started with turning this idea into an exhibition, and together we went to meet with Steven Hooper, whose enthusiasm was also a determining factor in getting the project underway. We later spoke about it with Emmanuel Kasarhérou, the president of the Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, and proposed to him that we develop it in partnership. I'll take advantage of the opportunity I have here to thank him publicly for his confidence and his involvement.

T.A.M.: What would you want to highlight regarding the work involved in producing *Power & Prestige*?

I.L.: Without a doubt, its complexity! Every step of the work involved in bringing it to fruition was a pleasure, but the task was quite challenging at times. We had to deal with major logistical issues because of the large number of works we had to gather together—126 to be exact—and their many locations. They come from five countries—Italy, France, the United Kingdom, Belgium, and the Netherlands—and twenty-one private and public collections. Their widespread locations also complicated the task of photographing them for the catalog. Getting top-quality photographs that would do the pieces justice was a high priority for us, so we engaged Hughes Dubois, whose talent and abilities are proven and well-recognized. He had to do a lot of traveling.

T.A.M.: The restrictions imposed by the pandemic must have added significantly to these logistical problems....



I.L.: Absolutely, and so did Brexit! The entire team at the foundation experienced difficulties as a result of the fuel shortages in the United Kingdom. We are awaiting some seventy works from there in the coming days, and they are among the most important ones—twenty-five from the British Museum, seventeen from the National Museums of Scotland and sixteen from the Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. The stakes are high!

We are confident that we will be able to find solutions to these problems, but they should serve as a reminder that the success of an exhibition depends not only on artistic or intellectual considerations, and that practical questions can play a determining role as well.

T.A.M.: *What, for you, is Power & Prestige's most important achievement?*

I.L.: I am proud of this project for many reasons. First of all, I feel privileged to have produced the first major monographic exhibition of Oceanic art in Italy. There was only one



FIG. 19 (above):
 “Sword of state,” Palau, Micronesia. Second half of the 19th century.
 Wood, shell, adhesive. L: 81 cm.
 Acquired in 1875 from a descendant of Captain Henry Wilson of HMS *Antelope*, which visited the islands of Palau in August of 1783. Wilson returned with gifts acquired in Palau, including this sword.
 British Museum, London, inv. Oc1875,1002.3.
 © The Trustees of the British Museum.

other, a more general show, *La Terra dei Moai*, which was seen in Milan in 1994 and produced by my father and Giuseppe Orefici. I am also pleased that a project initiated by a small Italian foundation like ours was able to solicit and secure the support and collaboration of a major and prestigious international institution like the Musée du Quai Branly.

The academic research that was conducted by Steven Hooper, which the catalog describes admirably, also seems particularly noteworthy to me. The many different ceremonial, political, and military functions that these objects, generically—and restrictively—identified in English as “staves” or “clubs” are thoroughly analyzed, and the wealth of their symbolic attributes is made abundantly clear.

There is one last aspect of the show that that I want to mention, and that is the innovative nature of its presentation. We avoided a classical approach to the display of the works, shown against a wall, and instead gave them life with subtle lighting techniques and a specific way of basing them that we developed with Luca Facchini, who had many excellent ideas. The question of how to present the works was of paramount importance to us. It is very difficult to get these objects to stand, and we had very little time between their arrival in Venice and their installation in the exhibition's venue in the Palazzo Franchetti to implement solutions to this problem. These solutions had to meet the requirements of lending museums for the security and safety of the pieces. We spent many hours with Luca analyzing the pieces and trying out our ideas. The result was approved by the curators of our partner institutions, and I think we can congratulate ourselves on having come up with original and inventive new museum-presentation techniques.



FIG. 20:
 Inti Ligabue, president of the Fondazione Giancarlo Ligabue, the originator of *Power & Prestige*.
 © Fondazione Giancarlo Ligabue.