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**The Legacy of British Colonial Collecting
Practices and Their Role in Shaping Pacific
Cultural Narratives**

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The Legacy of British Colonial Collecting Practices and Their Role in Shaping Pacific Cultural Narratives

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Abstract

Late the late eighteenth century onwards, collecting art and objects became a central feature of European exploration and colonial practices in the Pacific. The ways in which these artworks were collected and circulated influenced European audience's perception of Pacific culture thus shaping cultural narratives. Early representations of Polynesia in Pacific art idealised the landscape aligning it with the Enlightenment movement and comparing it to a distant 'paradise'.¹ However, the desire to frame Pacific societies as primitive in contrast to European civilisation resulted in a reductive view of indigenous cultures portraying the people of Polynesia as 'barbarous', 'excessively ritualistic' and 'ahistorical'. British colonial practices thus fundamentally shaped cultural narratives by taking observations out of their original context and reframing them through a colonial lens. By the beginning of the 19th century missionary art changed European understanding of the indigenous people. As a result, they were reimagined not as savages but rather as individuals in need of salvation. While art has always influenced the way history has been imagined, visual representation became an increasingly powerful tool in shaping European views during this time. As a result, these representations of the Pacific did not merely reflect European beliefs about Pacific culture but helped to produce them.²

Landscape paintings helped to shape early perceptions of Pacific culture for European audiences. The rise of landscape painting paralleled the age of European exploration and colonial expansion. It was initially employed as a form of documentation however, the paintings produced by British artists aboard the HMS Endeavour exercised lasting influence on European ideas about the Pacific. A key example of this is Hodges paintings, 'A view of Maitavie Bay' (Fig.1) and 'A view taken in the bay of Oaite Peha Otaheite' (Fig.2). Tahiti

¹ Britannica, Polynesian culture History, People, Religion, Traditions & Facts

² Geoff Quilley, Re-enacting art and travel – Tate Papers, Tate, (2012),
<<https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/17/re-enacting-art-and-travel>> [accessed 25 November 2025]

provided Hodges with the unique opportunity to present the beauty and exoticism of Polynesia to the English public. Fig.1 depicts Maitavie Bay with calm, glistening waters, rolling hills on the right and a soft pastel blue sky.¹ The indigenous figures on the boat are engaged in relaxed, unhurried activity such as preparing canoes and conversing which suggests that they live a simple existence and live in natural harmony.²

Through these paintings European observers projected ideas of pastoral innocence onto the native people. This was deeply rooted in classical European art, the idea of rural life as simple and harmonious essentially untouched by civilised society. Although Hodges's work appears to suggest an appreciation for the landscape and the indigenous culture, it adheres to the conventional European art style. This is evidenced by the inclusion of European figures such as the nude woman and child positioned on the left side of the composition in Fig 1. Her pose, nudity and maternal framing follow traditional European artistic tropes rather than presenting Polynesia accurately. Similarly in Fig 2. Hodges depicts three female forms bathing in the river to reinforce the landscape as a tropical paradise imbued with sensuality. Therefore, the painting does not document Pacific culture but reshapes it contributing to a romanticised vision of the Pacific as an idyllic paradise and an inaccurate ethnographic portrayal of the Polynesians.³



(Fig.1) William Hodges, A view of Maitavie Bay, Otaheite, c. 1776, oil on canvas, 1372 x 1932 x 32mm, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich London

¹ (n.d.). Royal Museums Greenwich, "[A] view of Maitavie Bay, [in the island of] Otaheite [Tahiti]." <https://www.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/rmgc-object-13410> < Retrieved December 3, 2025,>

² Harriet Guest and Haudere, *Empire Barbarism and Civilisation: James Cook, William Hodges, and the Return to the Pacific* (Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 138 -140

³ Geoff Quilley, *Empire to Nation: Art, History and the Visualization of Britain, 1768–1829* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011), pp. 60-65



(Fig.2) William Hodges, A View taken in the bay of Oaite Peha Otaheite, c. 1775;1776, oil on canvas, 927 x 1384mm, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich London

Moreover, these paintings suggest a sense of European superiority where indigenous cultures were romanticised but were also deemed as incapable of self-governance. For example, Banks describes Tahiti with the phrase “Oh how fortunate, if only they knew their blessings”. This suggests that the Tahitians lived in a kind of ‘natural paradise’ but lacked self-awareness to appreciate it. This is further reflected in Fig.1 and Fig.2 which subtly suggest that the natives exist in a ‘state of innocence and unreflective simplicity’. Hodges also hints at the themes of European dominance, hierarchy and empire. In Fig.1, he contrasts the Va’a (the Tahitian boats) in the foreground with the European ships in the centre of the painting. As well as this, there is a European settlement visible in the background on the left of the painting which represents the remnants of Cook’s old fort from his first voyage in 1768. Therefore, this painting suggests that improvement in the Pacific is coming about with the central assistance of the admiralty expedition which subtly justifies European intervention and control. This also demonstrates the Europeans attempts to integrate themselves into the Pacific and force their beliefs onto the Polynesian people.¹

Furthermore, these paintings informed the European theory of human development. Important thinkers used artwork from the Pacific to support their model of social evolution whereby societies progressed from the unsocialised state of the hunter-gatherer, to a pastoral in the nomadic stage and finally to the most civilised state called the commercial nation. European observers positioned Pacific people at the lower end of this hierarchy, assuming that indigenous societies lacked any historical awareness of their own. They believed that the Polynesians existed in ahistorical state of nature or in a prehistorical condition labelled as ‘savagery’. At the same time, when Europeans did attempt to place the Polynesians within a historical narrative, they did so in a way that they existed in the periphery of European history.

¹ (n.d.). Royal Museums Greenwich, “[A] view of Maitavie Bay, [in the island of] Otaheite [Tahiti].” <https://www.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/rmgc-object-13410> < Retrieved December 3, 2025,>

This reinforced the cultural narrative that European society was superior to indigenous cultures which were static, primitive and overall less developed.¹



(Fig. 3) John Webber, A Human Sacrifice in Morai in Otaheite, 1781, wash and watercolour, 24.7 x 46.7cm, State Library of New South Wales

Between Cooke's first voyage and third voyage the cultural narrative shifted from depicting Polynesia as a peaceful paradise to portraying indigenous people as depraved and benighted savages. This change is evidenced in John Webber's engravings from Cooke's third voyage in 1776. His work 'A Human Sacrifice in Morai in Otaheite' (Fig. 3) was widely recalled by Europeans and fuelled missionary ambition to reform and 'civilise' the indigenous people. In Polynesia human sacrifices were performed to restore their community and bring abundance during times of hardship. It often involved hanging the sacrificial victim from their lips and disembowelment before the burial. The Europeans interpreted this as immoral and proof of cultural backwardness.²

Webber's engraving depicts the victim bound in the centre surrounded by attendants and drummers on the left. The altar displays the remains of dogs, pigs and other skulls used in earlier sacrifices. Behind the seated chief are two men digging a hole in preparation for the burial. On the right-hand side, Cook is stood alongside his crew witnessing the ceremony.³ There is a deliberate gap between the European figures on the right-hand side and the rest of the figures. The Europeans appear well-lit and are depicted as detached, rational spectators in contrast to the natives who are depicted in the shadows and are presented as superstitious and excessively ritualistic. The compositional division reinforces the idea of hierarchy and highlights how European travellers framed Polynesian religious practices as primitive spectacles in need of reform.⁴ Although, Webber's depiction of the Tahitian people has been executed with a degree of sympathy this work overall confirms 'savagery' to the European audiences. Also, it must be stated that Webber's work which was originally intended as an

¹ Geoff Quilley, *Empire to Nation: Art, History and the Visualization of maritime Britain, 1768–1829* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2011), pp. 60–65.

² James Cooke, *The voyages of captain James Cook*. (1842). (Vols. 1 and 2, p. 175).

³ (n.d.). National Library of New Zealand, *Human Sacrifice - French Polynesia*, from <https://natlib.govt.nz/records/22652567>, [Accessed December 11 2025],

⁴ Ben Politt, *The cost of sympathy: Towards a visual economics of john webber's 'atlas.'* (2017). *Object*, pp. 61–65, <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.2396-9008.024> [Accessed December 1 2023]

honest depiction of Pacific culture was reworked by European printmakers for commercial edition prints.¹ These alterations exaggerated the violence and spectacle of the ritual contributing to this distorted view of Polynesian culture.



(Fig.4) Robert Smirke, The Cession of the District Matavai, c.1798, oil painting, 2145mm x 3055mm x 158mm, National Maritime Museum, Greenwich London

Furthermore, the spread of evangelical Christianity into the Pacific helped to reinforce the narrative of the 'unredeemed savage' as an object of both pity and disapproval.² Missionaries were not interested in documenting or understanding Pacific culture but were more concerned with countering the romantic fantasy of Tahiti that earlier artists such as Hodges had created.³ By 1796 this shift was well underway as missionary ships such as the *Duff* travelled to Tahiti. Following the death of the ship's captain, the London Missionary Society commissioned Robert Smirke to paint 'The Cession of the District of Matavai' (Fig. 4). He was asked to recreate the interview which took place with the Chief of the Island of Otaheite soon after the arrival of *Duff*.⁴ This painting shows the attempts made by missionary organisations to shape cultural narratives by presenting the Tahitian people as 'primitive' and 'unenlightened'.

Smirke creates a scene with a clear social hierarchy where the European missionaries are positioned in visibly elevated positions and are dressed in formal attire which convey moral authority and benevolence. In contrast, the natives are shown kneeling at a lower level and some of the figures are almost cowering which suggests that they are childlike and dependent.

¹ n.d.). National Library of New Zealand, *Human Sacrifice - French Polynesia*, from <https://natlib.govt.nz/records/22652567>, [Accessed December 11 2025],

² Bernard Smith *European vision and the south pacific, 1769-1850: A study in the history of art and ideas*, (1985, Yale University Press New Haven and London) pp. 317

³ Steven Hooper *Pacific encounters: Art & divinity in Polynesia, 1760-1860*, 2006, (University of Hawaii Press), pp. 24-30

⁴ Bernard Smith, *European vision and the south pacific, 1769-1850: A study in the history of art and ideas*, (Yale University Press New Haven and London, 1985) pp. 145

Smirke also depicts the Tahitian chief as weak and submissive rather than as an assertive political figure engaged in negotiation.¹ This creates the impression that missionary intervention was welcomed and that the Tahitians willingly ceded land to support the Christian cause. In this scene the indigenous people are no longer represented as 'noble savages' but as docile children awaiting the blessing of a higher (European) civilisation. While the natives were taken as exemplars of 'hard primitivism' this was reframed in the early 19th century by the missionary cause creating the idea that the natives could be perfected and transformed into a Christian citizen obedient to the laws of God and European authority.²

Conclusion

Overall, British exploration of the Pacific produced a range of detailed observations of indigenous life, and accounts of the region's abundant natural resources. The observations documented through art evoked strong emotional responses in European audiences. This artwork resembled work from the Romantic movement with reverence for nature's beauty and their idealising the landscapes as idyllic, peaceful and untouched. As a result, European observers of Polynesia initially viewed the Pacific with a sense of awe and wonder imagining it as a natural paradise found in classical literature. However, this early idealism gave way to theories of social evolution which ranked societies according to race and increasingly identified indigenous people as radically different from Europeans. Later artistic work emphasised these differences and shifted the cultural narrative. This means that the natives were no longer portrayed as just 'creatures of nature' but rather as primitive, violent savages in need of guidance and redemption.³ Moreover, through selective representation, artists helped to fuel ideas about European superiority and hierarchy. This is evidenced by how they incorporated missionary ideas into the national narrative by presenting conversion and the spread of evangelical Christianity as consensual between the Polynesians and the Europeans. This shows that the artwork emerging from these voyages were not neutral records but active agents helping to construct enduring narratives about the natives, overall shaping Europeans' view of the Polynesian people as 'noble savages' in need of moral reform.

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³ Jane Samson *British imperial strategies in the pacific, 1750-1900*. Routledge. pg. xxiii

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