

# The Virtual Museum of the Pacific – New Context, New Knowledge, New Art

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## 1. Introduction

Traditional Western museological representations of cultures and art from places outside Europe are increasingly being challenged by new forms of digital narratives. Over the past decade or so, museums have used the web more and more to realise the capacities of digital communication and online technologies to stimulate new audience interactions. These new modes of communication and knowledge creation require new environments for objects that were formerly shown within the authoritative structures of museum taxonomy and display. Interactive online tools used to make museum collections accessible can transform old museological frames of representation into new structures of meaning-making around cultural objects (Figure 1). In online museums, objects in museum collections which have often been stored rather than displayed are made visible and the door is opened to virtual visual investigations for broader audiences as well as for specific communities of interested users.

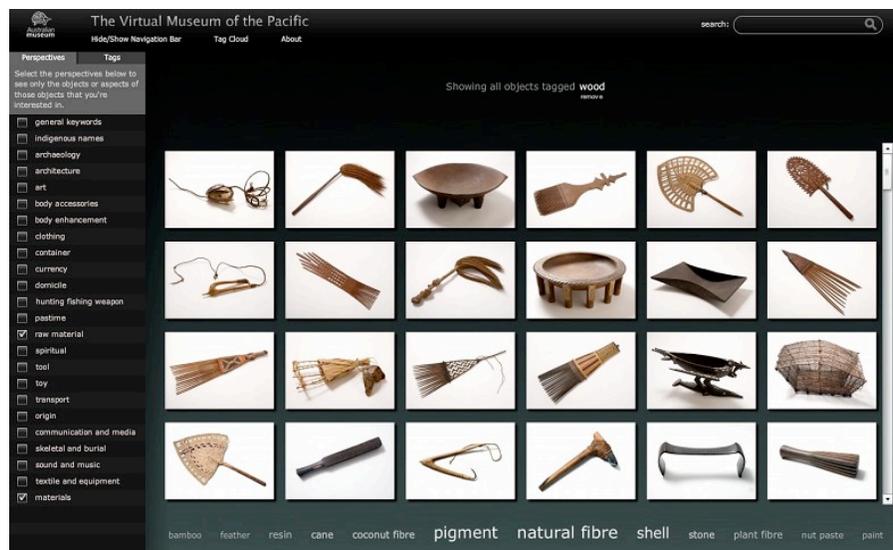


Figure 1: The Virtual Museum of the Pacific – search results for perspectives 'raw material' and 'wood'  
The Virtual Museum of the Pacific (VMP) is an Australian Research Council (ARC) funded partnership research project between the University of Wollongong (UOW) in

collaboration with the Australian Museum which is developing an online system for displaying and accessing the Museum's Pacific Collections. This paper discusses the VMP as an example of an interactive online communication and demonstrates its potential to provide transformative access to the Collections for purposes such as artistic enquiry and rediscovery of objects that may no longer be in use. The VMP project aims to develop into a comprehensive digital ecosystem which incorporates social media connectivity (Eklund, 2009, p.117). It has as its platform Collection Web, a social media web-based digital ecosystem based on formal concept analysis which allows collection managers to manage their own digital library metadata and make collection content visible online. The design stems from more than ten years of research and testing (Eklund, 2009, p.112) and in this pilot it has been applied to 427 selected objects from the Australian Museum's Pacific Collection.

In the VMP, an object is described through a collection of keywords or tags, some of which are shared with other objects. A key feature of the system is that the objects' tags not only describe their meaning but also have an impact on the way a user navigates the collection. This means that object description and the dynamic navigation structure of the online system can be driven by community online interactivity, which impacts on metadata management and tagging and annotating processes (Eklund et al. 2009, p.112; Eklund, 2009). It is likely that user groups' annotations and tags for objects, often referred to as 'folksonomy', will be less formal than the museum-managed taxonomy (Eklund, 2009, p.116). The dynamic, community-derived taxonomies that can be developed through a system such as the VMP will ultimately contribute to the evolution and relevance of the formal taxonomies of museums. The VMP is now in its second stage, which involves community consultation and user testing in order to identify gaps in the technical methodology and tailor the system to the needs of various user groups. This paper discusses an evaluation of the VMP with a key user group, Museum staff, and reflects on the attitudes and ideas that this process revealed.

## **2. The Virtual Museum of the Pacific: New Contexts for Collections**

The Australian Museum links the 60,000 objects from the Pacific region in its Pacific Collections with various user communities: collection managers, curators and other museum professionals; external researchers or scholars, including private collectors; the general public; and Pacific Island creator and diaspora communities. In April 2010 the UOW research team conducted a preliminary, qualitative evaluation of the VMP with a

key user community – a sample of Australian Museum staff involved in collection management, audience development and display. This has revealed an array of possibilities as well as some limitations. Several members of the Museum staff are convinced that artistic involvement in the further development of this digital collection is not only possible but highly desirable. This shift in control – from professional collection managers to artists in the role of cultural ‘experts’ – potentially poses a significant challenge to the hegemonic discourses that dominate traditional museum practices of collection categorisation, interpretation and display.



Figure 2: Object – close up view – The Virtual Museum of the Pacific - Object – close up view of container from Buka Island, Bougainville

The concept behind the VMP's interactive platform is that each user community has the ability to create its own specific annotations and may, in turn, be influenced by the annotations of other user communities. Furthermore, the VMP facilitates online community interaction using social-media technologies to extend the annotation of objects and making them more relevant (Figure 2). The provision of better access to the Museum's Pacific Collections for a wider variety of stakeholders gives those communities a useful means for accessing and annotating objects that are important to them. These annotations can be uploaded as audio or video files, or as descriptive narratives or conversations. As an interactive system with a polycentric approach, the VMP has the potential to replace or add to the 19th century annotations prevalent in much of the Collection's metadata. The success of the system depends on leveraging the diffusion of language and encouraging a conversation between on-line

communities. This interactive model will enable the development of new visual presences and the creation of cultural knowledge via the contribution of creator communities from the Pacific Island countries and territories. The VMP transfers the act of curatorship from the museum to the viewer, allowing customised relationships to evolve between the viewer and the objects.

### **3. New Knowledge: Digital Collections, Art and the Shifting Debates on Cultural Representations**

The possible impact of the VMP as a tool for knowledge creation as well as artistic exploration is best understood by considering the shifting meaning of collections over time – from a 19<sup>th</sup> century mode of national education and development of scientific knowledge to a 21<sup>st</sup> century way of learning. Access and interpretation of collections, conceived of in terms of public good, are directly linked to changing social and cultural needs. In a 21<sup>st</sup> century environment in which the concept of public good is defined in relation to the postcolonial, social equity and radical developments in communications, collections managers and the museums they work in need to address a shift from Eurocentric, largely bourgeois audiences to the concept of global audience (Krishnabhakdi-Vasilakis, 2009 [b]).

Culture, as traditionally presented in museums, was thought of as a useful instrument in the process of governing social behaviour and was ‘fashioned as a vehicle for the exercise of new forms of power of the bourgeois class’ (Bennett, 1995, p.18; Penny, 2002, p.19). During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as a result of scientific endeavour and the colonial framework of collector societies, collections of objects from exotic places were separated from European objects (Lenoir, 2000, p.730). A collection ‘craze’ followed in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and artefacts acquired from indigenous communities were moved into the ethnographic museum as evidence of the linear-progressive stages of the cultural history of humanity (Penny, 2002, p.96). ‘Salvage anthropology, combined with the passion for possession, often legitimated radical excesses in both the amount of collecting that occurred as well as the method employed by ethnologists and others’ (Penny 2002, p.95). The scale of the Australian Museum’s Pacific Collections is just one example of this kind of acquisitive practice.

At the same time, artists began to use museums as a resource for artistic renewal. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, artists have been interested in ethnographic collections in various

museums and galleries. For example, objects from the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro in Paris and the Völkerkunde Museum in Berlin feature prominently in the works of Expressionists such as the *Blaue Reiter* group. Artists' engagement with the art forms and traditions from non-European cultures they found in museums were influenced by the assumptions of colonialism as well as modernist universalism. In particular, objects from Africa and the Pacific played a role in articulating an aesthetic visual language of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Artist August Macke discerned 'magical' expressions in the shapes of statues from Easter Island and masks from New Caledonia, believing that they captured the essence of an invisible god (Erling, 2000, p.196). The formalist appropriation of artistic expressions of indigenous people ensured that the European viewer's experience of Primitivism was detached from any specific cultural context. The Eurocentric view of so-called 'primitive art' reached its culmination in the controversial 1984 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, "Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern' (McEvelley, 1989, p.140).

In contrast, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century artists such as PhD student Erna Lilje from the University of Sydney have worked with the Australian Museum's Pacific Collections on projects which analyse and critique indigenous agency in the formation of museum collections (Lilje, 2009). Digital collection access models like the VMP can extend interaction between collections and artists from creator communities or artists with Pacific heritage, particularly where a physical visit is not practical. Easy access to the Pacific digital collection encourages rediscovery of ancestral heritage and renewal of cultural traditions among creator communities and artists from diaspora communities. Audio-visual material available online through the VMP, in addition to taxonomic or folksonomic metadata, enriches the possibilities for artistic interaction and renegotiating agency for objects in the collections.

The versatility of the digital collection in the VMP as a model for a social media platform can provide a forum for inclusion of different voices of histories and experiences formerly barred from museological narratives. This reflects a trend towards inclusion in the Museum's current practices. In 2010, in partnership with diverse Pacific communities and Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre at Liverpool in Western Sydney, the Museum developed the *Body Pacifica* project which was shown at the Powerhouse from July to September. Staff from the Australian Museum's Cultural Collections and Community Engagement team collaborated with Casula Powerhouse staff and five contemporary

artists to reflect upon their experiences working with the Pacific Collection. The Pacific artists exhibited specially commissioned works to complement the collections. Performance artist Latai Taumoepeau combined an old Ngatu from the collection in her installation piece 'PORTAL-ITY 39 Tolu Hiva' (Figure 3) with intersecting fishing lines, creating 'a chamber for metamorphosis' which is 'concerned with the invisible transformation of an individual or community around the rite of passage in the Tongan funeral ritual' (Taumoepeau, 2010). The Museum's contribution to this cultural event was a selection of more than 35 objects from its collections as well as archival photographs. The VMP was presented as an online pilot at *Body Pacifica* with the goal of encouraging audiences to try out this new means of engaging with the Pacific Collections. Given the significant population of people with Pacific Island heritage living in Western Sydney likely to visit the *Body Pacifica* exhibition and its associated events, this was an ideal opportunity to present the VMP to specific potential user communities. At the time of publication, an evaluation and user-testing process is being conducted with a sample of these community members.



Figure 3: Latai Taumoepeau. PORTAL-ITY 39 Tolu Hiva – installation at the 'Body Pacifica' exhibition at Casula Powerhouse, Sydney 2010

#### **4. Evaluation by Museum Staff**

In the recent evaluation of the VMP with Museum staff, sixteen people who work in departments ranging from collection management, senior management, education, anthropology, natural science, web design and exhibition design explored the usability and potential of the VMP as a social platform for collections access; they were selected on the basis of having had some exposure to the VMP. The process consisted of a demonstration of the pilot, a 'hands-on' trial by the participant and an interview.

Participants were asked to comment on technical issues, particularly the navigation of the VMP application, and to give their prospective views on the VMP as a virtual domain of the Museum's Pacific Collections.

The evaluation found that one of the major challenges for using a virtual platform such as the VMP to create meaningful learning experiences relates to audience expectations, accessibility, and the textual and visual presentation or layout of the content. Another major area of concern is linked to establishing culturally specific protocols for the public display of objects. In terms of the overall design of the VMP, issues surrounding transcultural representations are pivotal.

Museum staff identified the importance of intellectual rights, cultural sensitivity (e.g. certain ceremonial items can be deemed unfit for public view) and consultation with creator communities and individual traditional protocols to avoid neo-colonial attitudes in the virtual representation of cultural objects as pressing issues. These are significant for traditional exhibition and collection access platforms, but the tensions around them are heightened in considering a digital or online environment, given concerns about mass and uncontrolled dissemination of information and images. Involving artists and designers in the further development of the VMP as a social media platform presents an opportunity. For example, in order to communicate the VMP's aims and contents effectively, as well as in accordance with cultural protocol, Museum staff pointed out the need for collaboration with designers and artists from Pacific communities. Staff were enthusiastic about the potential to transfer agency from museum managers to creator communities through the capacity for annotating objects. They felt that the possible involvement of artists in the further development of the visual presentation of the VMP would provide an additional challenge to the narratives and images of traditional museological practices.

Up until the 20th century, museums and galleries represented culture from a Western hegemonic position. However, postcolonial and postmodern discourses on globalisation and 'perceptions of cultural pluralism, multiculturalism and cultural diversity' are increasingly contesting museological representations of heritage and authorial discourse (Pieterse, 2005, p.163; Said, 2003, p.1060). The premise for the VMP as an interactive web forum pivots around this agency: 'While curators become facilitators, audiences become involved in the processes of manifestation and negotiation of their own cultural heritage' (Vinod Daniel quoted in Australian Museum). The evaluation has shown that the online collection of the VMP provides scope for greater off-shore exposure, including to the communities from where the objects originated. However, if creator community participation in the processes of knowledge creation through interactivity is to be achieved through the VMP, staff perceive a need to revise what they view as the VMP's Anglo-centric, text-dependent approach and include more indigenous terms with reference to language groups. Also, culturally sensitive material should be identified in accordance with specific cultural protocols.

Museum staff also found it most important to develop visual guides for the task of inviting the diverse user groups to explore and to think about what a Pacific Welcome is and how it best reflects the multiplicity of cultures and peoples (Figure 4). Creator communities and other user groups, they found, needed to be part of the development of the VMP into a user friendly and effective tool for them. This means that the VMP navigation should be part of a story, a curatorial aspect that should be developed in close collaboration with members of creator communities and with exhibitions and other means of accessing collections. One step towards realising of these aims is to involve artists and designers to produce films and audio material of performances by dancers and artists, as well as the embedding of Pacific iconography in the model's websites to create the 'right' context.

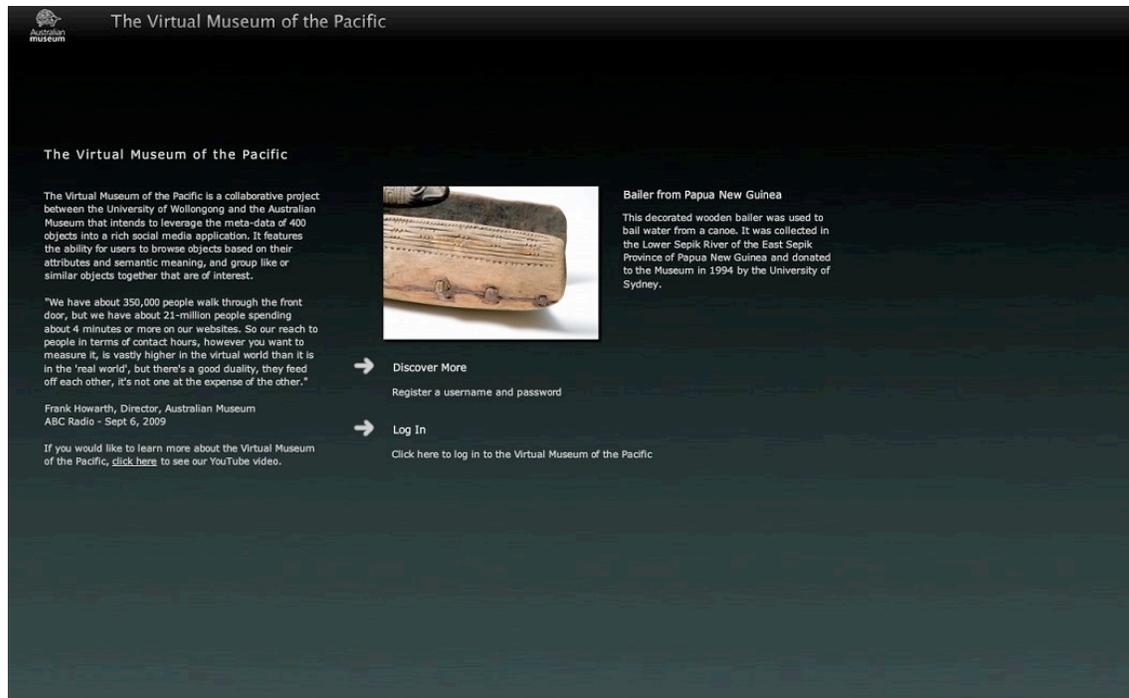


Figure 4: Virtual Museum of the Pacific - Log in screen

Many saw the potential of the VMP as a tool to blend traditional and museological knowledge by developing, together with the creator communities, object descriptions based on traditional knowledge and indigenous names alike, effectively combining museum taxonomy with the folksonomy of user groups. This was seen as crucial to improve existing metadata as well as to expand the VMP's usability to a broader audience.

None of the participants felt that the VMP was in competition with the exhibitions in the Australian Museum's space, but rather they saw it as a complementary, additional tool to attract interest in the Pacific Collection, particularly in view of a general trend in museums around the world to digitise collections and increase their virtual presence. Some staff thought the VMP, in its current form, would work best within a museum exhibition context rather than as a web based forum due to lack of cultural context in its presentation. However, artistic collaboration from the creator communities in the web layout could help amend this. Management staff pointed out that the VMP should eventually be 'owned' by the virtual communities, while the Museum monitors the process of developing the VMP into a social media platform. The staff saw the involvement of Pacific Islander artists in the architecture of the digital museum as the right step forward.

Generally, there was a consensus on the great potential for the VMP to become a social media platform, once technical problems were addressed as well as audiences clearly identified. Without exception, the participants commented positively on the aesthetics of the layout and the photographs, highlighted in comments such as 'very beautiful', 'professional' and 'pleasing'. Several participants felt the need for a full-scale view of the selected and magnified object. Museum staff, particularly from anthropology, website management and natural science departments would not use it professionally, as they have the more comprehensive EMU database as collection management tool. However, education, administration and exhibition department see the VMP as a very helpful and attractive tool to work within their field, which is in general, more audience directed. Concerns were raised in regards to the Eurocentric set up of the current VMP.

Overall, participants felt the VMP could make a useful addition to the Australian Museum's representation practices and capacity for generating knowledge, once the issues of terminology and accessibility are resolved. Furthermore, the need to make parts of the collection visible to the public that otherwise would remain in storage was almost unanimously pointed out as a progressive museum strategy and in accordance to international developments. Here, the possibility for creator communities to participate actively in creating knowledge opens up not only the preservation of traditional knowledge for their respective communities but also provides the Museum with the opportunity to update its mostly 19th century annotations and descriptions. Specific aspects of how to develop the VMP into a useful tool for creator communities will be explored in the next phase of the project, which involves working with communities in the Pacific and members of the Pacific diaspora communities in Sydney, which are concentrated to some extent in south-western Sydney. *Body Pacifica* at Casula Powerhouse exhibition marks the beginning of that phase.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has outlined a preliminary evaluation of the potential impact of a digital ecosystem, using Collection Web, on modes of knowledge creation and cultural representation for museums. Responses from Australian Museum staff highlighted that after resolving issues of technical and linguistic accessibility, the VMP's scope for social tagging shows great potential, particularly in relation to how users may interact with objects in terms of their knowledge base as well as contribute to ongoing taxonomic

definitions. The VMP offers a potentially significant means of access to the Museum's Pacific Collections, increasing their visibility to a range of local and international audiences who might have a vested interest in this cultural material. Artists from creator or diaspora communities are already exploring cultural material in the collections and staff from the cultural section of the Museum emphasise the importance of collaboration with artists from the creator communities in the further development of the VMP. The next phase of the VMP project will build on community consultation to address specific needs and gaps in methodology and develop it into a social media platform. The inbuilt facility for annotation by communities of users and the consultation and practical involvement of artists from the Pacific region potentially challenges traditional museum practices by facilitating the development of culturally relevant folksonomies and by providing user groups with individualised ontological relationships for object discovery and annotation. Artistic interaction with objects in the environment of the VMP has the potential to be innovative, distinct from modernist appropriations of objects in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century and pivotal in making the VMP culturally accessible and relevant. At the same time, artistic exploration of collections can re-contextualise and create new knowledge about objects. This means the semantic and associative navigation possibilities of the VMP can feed into ideas for artistic creation. Realising this is the next step for this project.

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