

A CONTRIBUTION TO THE
DEFINITION OF ART
IN THE TAHITIAN CONTEXT

Jean Daniel Tokainiua Devatine



Illustration by Cecelia Faumuina

Author



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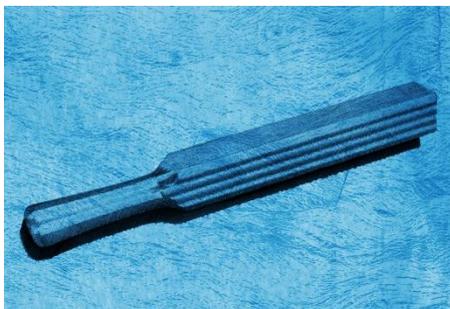
is a Professor at the Centre des Métiers d'Art de la Polynésie française.

He is from Tahiti with ancestral ties to Rotuma and several European countries. A trained anthropologist and visual artist, he has co-authored books and published articles on Indigenous contemporary art from French Polynesia.

His teaching is based on the sharing of knowledge on Oceanian heritage, tangible and intangible, cultural and natural, with young people, in order to enlighten their present times and make them realize the wider world, so as to build a response to challenges that globalization reveals.

His academic engagement is focused, like Indigenous writers and academics before him, on the acknowledgement of an Oceanian consciousness into the expressions of culture and local and current initiatives. This allows him to contribute to the elaboration of a more balanced discourse on the Tahitian world understanding, past and present. His previous and actual research leads him to elaborate works about Tahitian research dance, literature, traditional festivals and visual art.

Front image caption & credit



Name: l'e

Place: Tahiti

Photo: Axel Killian

Artist: Jean Daniel Tokainiua Devatine (author of the paper)

Description: This i'e (tapa beater), made from polished aluminium, is inspired from a traditional Tahitian i'e. It is part of the artist's own art collection and has featured in several exhibitions in Tahiti such as at the Museum of Tahiti as well as in art galleries. Beating the bark of trees was a very

important traditional activity in ancient times that almost disappeared. The artist plays with the codes of traditional representation of heritage and offers a renewed way of perceiving and staging the i'e. He made it a contemporary work by using a modern material that questions our current relationship to the past as well as to art.

A CONTRIBUTION TO THE DEFINITION OF ART IN THE TAHITIAN CONTEXT

Jean-Daniel Tokainiua Devatine

ART OF MOANA OCEANIA – TAHITI (2022, May 10th)

Tahiti is part of a group of 118 islands, of which 76 are inhabited, spread across 5 archipelagoes covering a surface of 5 million square kilometres. It is the location of the capital of 'French Polynesia', Pape'ete, and home to between 70% and 75% of the territory's total population.

'French Polynesia' extends more than 2000 km from east to west and from north to south.

The archipelagoes and their population at the time of the 2017 census are as follows :

- The Society Islands (Ni'a mata'i, including Tahiti, and Raro mata'i): 242,726 inhabitants
- The Marquesas (Henua Enana): 9,346 inhabitants
- The Austral Islands (Tuha'a pae): 6,965 inhabitants
- The Tuamotus and the Gambiers (Mangareva): 16,881 inhabitants

The total number of inhabitants is 275,918.

The population of Tahiti is very diverse, with people originating from each of the archipelagoes settled there for several generations. They continue the cultural activities of their island of origin.

There is great cultural diversity throughout the territory, which is expressed through different languages and life experiences, but also through cultural expression, in particular with crafts or artistic practices.

Historically, and according to current scientific knowledge, these archipelagoes were populated a little before 1000 years CE. The roots of the cultures of these archipelagic populations run deep into what we know today as Western Polynesia, and originate in the cultural grouping known as 'Lapita', around 1500 years BCE. Contact with the East, with the Americas is asserted by oral tradition and acknowledged today.



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We know almost nothing about this past, outside of linguists' work on the reconstitution of proto-austronesian languages, sea crossings, and oral traditions according to which there were transoceanic connections maintained through networks of extensive political alliances, centred on the island of Ra'iatea. This island is situated just over 230 km to the northwest of Tahiti.

This network of alliances was still in place when the first Europeans landed in Tahiti in the second half of the 18th century. Trade in goods and services between local populations and Westerners then developed. The goods traded initially consisted of exchanges of food for metal artefacts, including tools, and red feathers which were especially in demand from Tahitians. Trade rapidly extended to the exchange of cultural goods: clothing, fish hooks, sculptures of divinities, furniture, prestige items, jewellery and ornaments, weapons, musical instruments, shells, wood, beche-de-mer, etc. from the Tahitians and clothing, textiles, metal, tobacco, firearms, munitions, glass, alcohol etc. from the Europeans.

A number of major upheavals (demographic, social, economic and political) caused Tahitian culture notably, and later the cultures of the other islands and archipelagoes, to change at a frenetic pace. These cultures were forced to adapt without having time to assimilate the changes taking place, and to follow increasingly rapid technical progress brought in from the outside. This progress gave rise to a double feeling of wonderment and unease, creating ruptures in people's way of life, in their thinking and in their production between one generation and the next.

For example, fewer than 200 years separate the first canon fire from the crew of HMS Dolphin, when the ship was attacked by Tahitians with slingshots on the 17th of June 1767 in Matavai Bay, from the first nuclear explosion in the neighbouring archipelago on the 1st of July 1966... It was not only the nuclear bomb that exploded, but the social, cultural, economic and political structures that were blown up with an intensity unseen until then.

What exists today in museums and is referred to in order to understand the relationship of our elders to the esthetic and the functional, the material and the spiritual, and the social and political in Tahitian and other cultures from the 18th century onward, is the product of just 2 or 3 centuries, as Douglas Newton has pointed out in his introduction to the book *L'Art océanien*.

The cultural productions preserved and displayed in museums or public or private collections are the result of undeniable external influences mixed with visions of the world perpetually elaborated and re-elaborated, which gives them unique and original qualities.

This presentation will first address the question of how cultural heritage is defined locally and how it interfaces with art. We will review the various traditional and contemporary artistic practices.

Second, we will present a selection of contemporary artistic works, by way of illustrating current production in Tahiti. Artists' own words will explain their approach and their interplay with tradition.

We will conclude with a tentative definition of what the term 'art' means in Tahiti, paying particular attention to what separates art today from crafts and from artistic trades.

1) WHAT IS CULTURAL HERITAGE?

Work on a definition of cultural heritage took place in Tahiti in 2006 to try to understand, organise and express clearly the concepts linked to the word heritage and its manifestations. One group was tasked with looking specifically at intangible cultural heritage.

A first stage consisted of examining how UNESCO, and the Pacific Community (formerly South Pacific Commission) have defined cultural heritage. An understanding of these approaches and of local conceptions led the group to adopt a specific definition for French Polynesia.

For UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation), cultural heritage is made up of the following five elements :

- **Oral traditions and expressions**
- **Performance arts**
- **Social practices, rituals and festivities**
- **Knowledge and practices related to nature and the universe**
- **Skills related to traditional crafts**

UNESCO's definition classifies elements belonging to cultural heritage in different domains. This definition, although of interest, needed however to be applied to local examples in order to determine whether it reflected the Oceanian way of thinking about heritage.

It appeared that this way of classifying cultural heritage elements did not correspond to the way in which heritage was perceived. For example, during *Heiva*, the major festival of traditional song and dance in Tahiti, Tahitian dances cannot be classified in only the category 'performance arts'. To the contrary, these traditional dances can be listed in all five of the areas given in UNESCO's definition of cultural heritage. The context of the performance of these choreographic jousts in which various groups take part, originally representing Tahiti's old chiefdoms, includes oral presentations in Polynesian languages and in various poetic genres, themes linked to subjects and knowledge related to the environment, staging with

decors and costumes created using skills from traditional crafts, along with percussion effects produced by instruments made from specific natural materials, etc.

Cultural heritage is thus not expressed in separable categories and does not correspond to the UNESCO conception.

Using less separable categories, the Pacific Community (formerly SPC) has put forward 2 domains making up cultural heritage:

- **Traditional knowledge** (knowledge inspired, created, or acquired for traditional economic, spiritual, ritual, narrative, decorative or recreational objectives, handed down through the generations, and considered to belong to a group and to have originated within that group)
- **Expressions of culture** ('tangible or intangible forms of expression or of representation of traditional oceanian knowledge'. This should be understood to mean, among other things, names or titles, folktales, songs, riddles, stories and melodies sung in narratives, art and crafts, musical instruments, sculptures, paintings, engravings, pottery, terra cotta, mosaics, wood or metal work, jewellery making, basket making, carpets, woven mats, costumes and textiles, music, dance, theatre, literature, ceremonies, ritual representations and cultural practices, figurative forms, parts and details of drawings and visual compositions and architecture)

This definition corresponds more closely to what is understood in Tahiti as 'cultural heritage'. It highlights traditional knowledge and the realisation of this knowledge. While grateful to those who worked on this at the SPC, there was a need to define the particular perception of cultural heritage in Tahiti.

The task in Tahiti consisted in establishing first of all a list of elements pertaining to cultural heritage, especially intangible, to which a classification system had been applied according to choices then available. Three major domains emerged, as follows:

- **Traditional intangible heritage**, consisting of:
 - **Oral heritage** (languages, oratory, stories, genealogies, values, names of places, communities and people, elements of the world and more generally, everything related to conceptions, practices, and knowledge within the domain of orality)
 - **Heritage relating to skills** (techniques, knowledge needed to accomplish projects both intangible and tangible. For example, knowing how to play a melody, how to play a musical instrument and how to make a musical instrument)



- **The associated material and physical heritage** (all the tangible elements associated with intangible cultural heritage: historical, legendary, natural monuments, everyday, artistic or sacred objects, elements of the animal, vegetable and mineral world)
- **Contemporary intangible heritage** (whatever is linked to more recent practices and not to tradition properly speaking, and is an acquired heritage and for the most part is still in a formative stage)

From these considerations there has emerged the following synthesis which provides a definition of intangible cultural heritage:

'Are considered to be intangible cultural heritage any expression handed down between generations in oral, audiovisual, written, gestural, or any other form, related to the arts, sciences and techniques, beliefs, customs, daily life, collective events from historic and contemporary times and whose value is recognised.'

This definition is formulated and conceptualised in a very open way and provides two important considerations that are clearly expressed.

The first consideration is that tangible and intangible heritages cannot be separated and flow mutually from each other. It is easy to see that a tree carries within itself the potential to become a canoe, for example. It is perhaps less obvious to say that the idea of a canoe carries within it the interest and the potential of a tree. Intangible cultural heritage carries within it tangible cultural heritage, whether human or of natural origin. It is as much the expression as it is the source. Humans mark with their gaze and a name all the realities that enter into their field of vision. Does a mountain not exist and take on a unique character because a human, on seeing it, names it and thereby gives it an existence, making it the scene of stories and events and a place of resources that he uses, modifying his original ecosystem in order to find a concrete solution to his needs ? For this reason, there is no intellectual frontier between nature and culture.

The second consideration is to give contemporary cultural realities that use languages, skills and techniques arising from an interconnected and globalised world, whether they be ancient or very new, the status of equivalent expression to be handed down between generations. It follows then that this inclusive vision of cultural heritage allows us to highlight the fact that recent or current heritage has a heritage interest on the same basis as heritage from a time and from conceptions inscribed in tradition.

We will now consider traditional and contemporary Tahitian artistic practices and what underpins them. Artistic practices are part of heritage in that they are testament to ways of life from yesterday and today.



Traditional objects created as part of heritage are objects with a utilitarian function fulfilling material needs (seats, neck-rests, orator's batons, pestles, dishes, adzes, images of divinities or ancestors, etc.). Close observation of heritage objects, whether they be tools, objects of prestige or everyday use, reveals their refinement. The esthetic aspect of a piece seems to be an integral part of its nature. This aspect is thus not separable from its function, its appropriateness, or even of its efficiency.

While all created objects are remarkable, some are nevertheless remarkable to a greater degree, and have become masterpieces of Oceanian art, like sculptures such as the Atua A'a from Rurutu (Austral islands) or Rao, the divinity from the island of Mangareva (Gambiers). In Tahiti and the Society Islands. The characteristics of ancient objects are described as follows by the Director of the Centre des métiers d'art of French Polynesia (CMAFP), Viri Taimana, an artist et well-informed connoisseur of heritage objects, taking the example of seats and neck-rests:

'In this archipelago, the shapes of the artefacts are very refined, almost minimalist. The strength and the elegance of the surfaces are enhanced by finely-worked lines, for example around the edges of the neck-rests or the stools. These show a balance between a structure designed to offer a seat that is so delicate that it discourages use, and a construction in a single, brilliantly executed piece intended to be comfortable to sit on. The constraints in play with regard to this substance can only be successful through an understanding of the material, a thorough knowledge of the tools used, and the precision of the craftsman. It is often the case that a technique tested in one domain is then applied in others.'

Traditionally, the most ancient artistic practices in Tahiti are the beating of tapa cloth (*tutu*, *tutuha'a*), weaving (*firi*, *fatu*), basket-making (*rara'a*, *ha'une*), sculpture (*tarai*), engraving (*nana'o*), tattooing (*tātau*, *tā*, *papa'i*), drawing (*tāparau*). These practices then found other applications, such as in the making of costumes, in statuary, in ornamentation, architecture, naval construction, the making of instruments, containers, fishing equipment, arms, etc.

Traditional artistic practices from the 19th century onward assimilated the making of *tifaifai* (a sheet of fabric with sewn appliqué work or patchwork), a practice that has become a significant one and continues today, or the making of ukuleles.

Beginning in the 20th century, and particularly in the second half of the 20th century, contemporary artistic practices have increased in number and kind, with photography, film-making, jewellery, video and digital arts and street art.

As is clear from this listing of artistic practices, those borrowed recently from other cultures have been assimilated into traditional Tahitian practices (eg: the making of *tifaifai* and ukuleles). In times to come, the same will happen with contemporary artistic practices.

We should investigate, then, contemporary practices in Tahiti and how they interface with ancient, traditional ones.

2) EXAMPLES OF CONTEMPORARY POLYNESIAN ARTISTIC CREATION IN TAHITI

We shall now consider contemporary artistic practices in Tahiti. We will let our Indigenous artists speak for themselves and will seek to understand the philosophy that leads them to visualise and create contemporary works of art. To this end, we will first present the CMAPF, an establishment dedicated to the arts and artistic expressions of French Polynesia, that trains representatives of the new French Polynesian artistic scene in Tahiti. Finally, we will present a selection of works by artists and art students displayed in an exhibition in Tahiti and Los Angeles.

The CMAPF is a public institution subsidised by the government of French Polynesia. It is located in Pape'ete, on the island of Tahiti. It was created in 1980 and opened in 1982 to enable young people from throughout French Polynesia who were educationally disengaged and failing at school, to find a different life in the fields of Polynesian art, such as wood sculpture, engraving on mother-of-pearl, basket-making, weaving and drawing. The institution built a solid reputation for itself from the early years by offering high-quality crafted objects. Since the 2006 appointment of Viri Taimana as Director, the CMAPF has been and is recognised as the leading educational establishment offering a multi-year training programme leading to a diploma in Polynesian visual arts (artistic skills and plastic arts).

The CMAPF's teaching philosophy is to renew Polynesian heritage by taking a progressive approach to materials, forms and colours through the use of more modern techniques. Theoretical and practical teaching begins by learning about works from the cultural heritage of the various archipelagoes of French Polynesia. These form the base of the institution's teaching. They define what knowledge students need to acquire to enable them to be aware of and to project themselves into a world that reflects them and is meaningful.

Once they have been familiarised with objects from Polynesian cultural heritage, students are gradually encouraged, through teaching support, to propose contemporary works that demonstrate a link to a Polynesian cultural heritage of their choice. Exhibitions selling student work and themed exhibitions featuring the institution's teaching staff and former students are a mechanism for disseminating this renewed creativity to the public, for giving these new talents media exposure and encouraging former students to explore new pathways. The avowed objective is to demonstrate the vitality of Oceania's cultures today, to make them widely known and to have them endure through time.

In this way, artistic creativity allows the production of updated visions of the artist's experience of the world. This renewal of his or her connection to the world is based on traces of the past, which a posteriori allow the continuity in the forming of Oceanian minds, from ancient times to today, to be revealed.

Enriching Oceanian cultural heritage is a way of contributing to the work of the ancestors and of honouring the ones whose then contemporary productions have become the cultural heritage of today. Enriching Ocaeanian cultural heritage is a way of contributing to the work of the ancestors, and of honouring those whose work, contemporary in their time, has become today's cultural heritage. Down through the generations, creatives have had to do what their ancestors did with their own ancestors in their time, because heritage evolves over time.

In creating their own works, artists are leaving a message of hope, the promise to make their cultures endure, cultures in which they have an essential role to play.

We will now present the works of established and emerging artists from the Tahitian scene.

Heipua TEKURIO



Ta'amu Haga
Digital photograph
95 x 135 cm
2013

'It's not every day you see someone tied to a coconut palm, it grabs your attention. This image tells the story of my great-grandmother, who was saved from the tidal wave at Hikeru in 1906 by her father, who tied her to a coconut palm. The work refers to an event from my history but also, more generally, to the strength of family ties, or again to our tie to the land, our foundation: te niu, the coconut palm.

At the same time, I wanted to make people reflect on the measures to be put in place for islanders living where they have no mountain to shelter them in case of natural catastrophes.



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I am not thinking necessarily of my own island, I'm thinking of all the ones around it. I'm thinking of the little islands of the Tuamotus.'

Steve TEROU



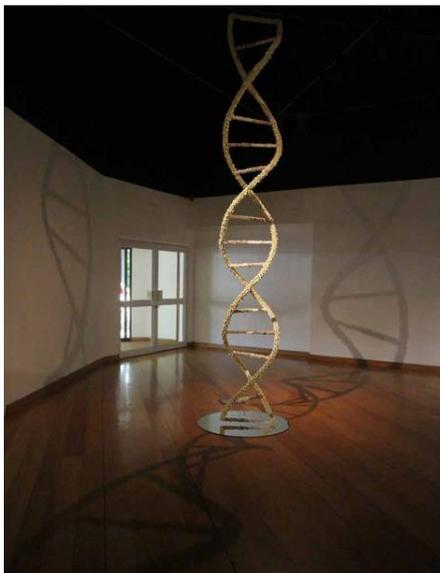
Bleu pêche
Mother-of-pearl, nylon
80 x 61 cm
2013



Upe'a
Mother-of-pearl, nylon
61 x 38 cm
2013

'The maritime world and fishing activity are represented on these necklaces (which are not necessarily intended to be worn). Two Polynesian methods of fishing are featured: net fishing and longline fishing.'

Jean-Pierre TSING



ADN 18
Shells, steel, nylon, mirror
400 x 80,5 cm
2013

'I was much struck by the film 'Aux enfants de la bombe' [To the children of the bomb] that I saw at the Festival international du film documentaire océanien 2013 [FIFO, International



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Festival of Oceanian Documentary Films]. There were nuclear tests in French Polynesia over a number of years, but it was only on seeing this film that I really understood what had happened. I wanted my art work to refer to the genetic diseases that developed in some children whose fathers worked on the test site. My father worked there and I am afraid that there may be consequences for my health or the health of my children, because there is genetic transmission.

The link between the piece and the shells is that in Oceanian countries, some shells have monetary value. During the years when nuclear tests were being carried out, life was easier: there was money and there was work.'

Raufara NANAI



'These works invite the observer to rethink certain representations of Polynesian heritage, which museums currently present to us in a state of nature.'

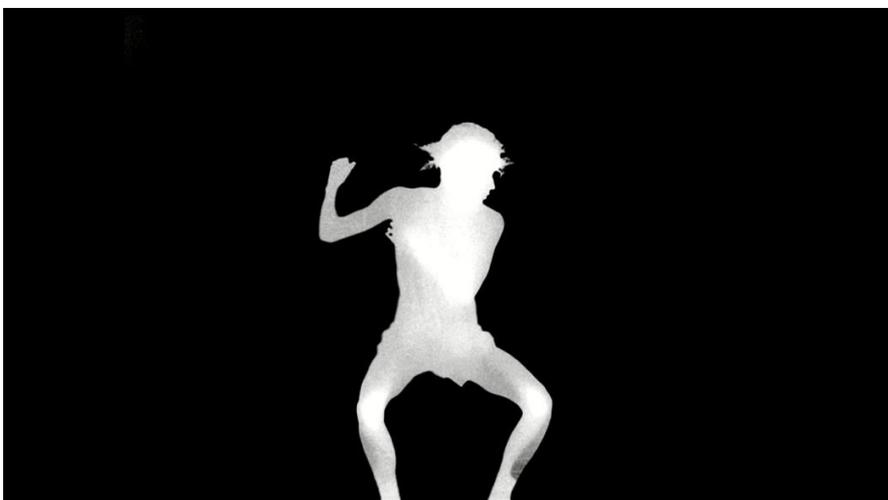
Left to right:

Wa'Za, Wood, acrylic, 27 x 27 x 97 cm, 2012

Wi'Zi, Wood, acrylic, 33 x 33 x 188,5 cm, 2012

Wo'Zo, Wood, acrylic, 41 x 31 x 135,5 cm, 2012

Chad POROI



Eata ori
Video
Vivo Performance:
Libor Prokop
2'03 min
2013



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‘Hip Hop dance is my passion, especially Popping. My idea was to create a fusion between traditional music, using the vivo, a wind instrument. The visual effect of the silhouette reinforces the poetic aspect of my dance.’

Hihirau VAITOARE



‘Some heritage works are very ancient. For me, the making of a contemporary work that echoes heritage is meaningless unless we rethink it with today’s tools that relate to our experience.’

I have tried to express a current and personal vision inspired in me by the drawing of the ‘Anaa cosmogony attributed to Paioire. To represent my world with the tools of today meant using something that was characteristic of it at the time when I was working on my project. I had everything I needed to hand: digital technology, photography, the CMAPF students.’

Mon monde (My world)
Video
1'07 min
2013

Lovina MARAE



M. Tapu (II) (III
detail)
Digital
photographs
Each 41 x 27 cm
2013

'My model is Monsieur Tapu, a homeless man who is known to many people in Pape'ete. I wanted to reference the people who are often forgotten and sidelined, to say that we must not ignore them.'

Christina TIMAU



Hoihoia
Plaster and clay
38 x 24 x 32,5 cm
2013

'My sculptures represent the fragility of women, of their bodies. I started from my own past. Through my own story, I am referencing all those women who have suffered, who have been abused, battered, all the suffering that can be inflicted on a woman. I want to tell these women that they are not alone and that it is always possible to rise up again. This piece allowed me to try to find a way to rise up again. I want it to help others in their turn to rise up again.'

We can see that the themes dealt with by artists in Tahiti cover a wide range and echo in many ways what it means to live in Oceania. Their approaches make use of traditional and contemporary media, reflecting directly on heritage objects, and representing life experiences; sometimes they show technical mastery, sometimes the opposite, in order to better express a particular feeling.

CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, based on the information presented above, we shall attempt to define the characteristics of what we call 'art' in French Polynesia today, and especially in the Tahitian context.



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It is not possible objectively to judge traditional artistic practices in the same way that we judge contemporary artistic practices. This impossibility should be seen as arising from the context in which they are observed and of our inability to make valid judgements of past conceptions through a current, distorting prism. Heritage works are encountered in museums, at auctions reaching high prices or in non-specialist publications in the field of traditional arts. Contemporary works of art, on the other hand, are to be found in galleries and at more affordable prices or in publications which allow more information to be given about the artist's intentions. More difficult access, lack or scarcity of information about the creative context, the artists and the time or place of their creation mean that amateurs and professionals interested in traditional artistic practices are limited to a distant and inevitably fragmented understanding of them, even though they do attempt to mitigate this. Traditional objects give rise to wonderment and astonishment in their observers, as they reflect on the skills and ingeniousness of their creators. For someone of Oceanian origin, feelings of pride and connection accompany every moment of privilege spent in observing them. Traditional works are considered to be traces left by one's ancestors. The extreme care and finesse used in these ancient works are recognised and commented on. However, if these are made today, like the copies of ancient works displayed in the souvenir shops in Pape'ete, that are called 'curios', they are probably better described as handcrafts or craftwork. The mystery surrounding the object and the context of its creation, require us not to apply modern artistic ideals that it would be pointless to associate with it. Traditional works are nevertheless labelled works of 'art'. The position of the great international museums in not considering traditional works of 'first societies' as ethnographic objects, but instead as works of art is not without significance either.

Some heritage works have in fact acquired the status of artistic masterpieces. By definition, masterpieces are exceptional and for that reason, rare. When we look at them, we have to admit that they are formally different from the more numerous 'simple' works of art that embody and allow us to define styles. Masterpieces bear no relation to any style and are by nature unclassifiable. That is probably the key characteristic of a contemporary work of art elevated to the rank of masterpiece. It cannot be compared to a pre-existing work.

Polynesian art as it is understood today in Tahiti in its participation in globalisation, is pursuing a double goal. Contemporary Polynesian art in Tahiti derives from an individual and personal consciousness, that of the artist. Artists are focussed on their practice and are not signing up to the transmission of a tradition or of technical skills. They report to no one. They are expressing a feeling. At the same time, they see themselves in their relationship to the world and their environment through their relationships to their contemporaries, which also link them to their ancestors and their heritage. We have touched on this; currently Polynesian art is also developing in continuity with ancient or recent heritage, in that it is giving expression to life experiences and to social, political and/or economic realities in a very broad sense.

Contemporary Polynesian art is an extension of heritage and will come to be a part of it in the future. Somewhere there is an awareness of a task to be accomplished which will allow society and future artists to grasp its evolution and to attach their work to a base, to a solidly anchored foundation. Artists create for today, but also with the perspective of leaving their testimony for generations to come. The journey begun by the ancestors cannot stop, it continues so that Oceanian cultures may endure through time and space.

In conclusion, then, the expression of a feeling, of a reflection, and the effect of giving rise to feelings and reflections in the person who is looking at the works lies at the heart of the artist's practice today. The traditional object is perceived more as fulfilling utilitarian and esthetic functions. Unlike ancient traditional objects, the contemporary work of art may be inscribed in a continuity or, on the other hand, it may reject the esthetic and plastic qualities of the work and its accompanying skills in order to reveal more of the idea or concept, which are more important than the material and/or the technical skills. A work of art is not confined to being an instantly functional and esthetic object on a material plane. Its usefulness may be expressed in the form of a visible object whose functional aspect can only be seen in the abstract, in terms of its ideas. Art is the result of an approach that requires written texts to interrogate, explain and understand (oneself), to determine and disseminate the reasons behind its creation. Journalists, art critics, curators, gallery owners, collectors or enlightened amateurs show interest, observe, read, compare and publish. This written dimension is thus a characteristic which allows a work to be raised to the level of art. Art explains the world and produces a renewed vision of it, whereas crafts or craft skills tend more to simply produce the object, although they may also renew it.

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