

## Reviews and Discussion

### The National Gallery Presents Ethnographic Art from Oceania

Review Essay by William H. Davenport  
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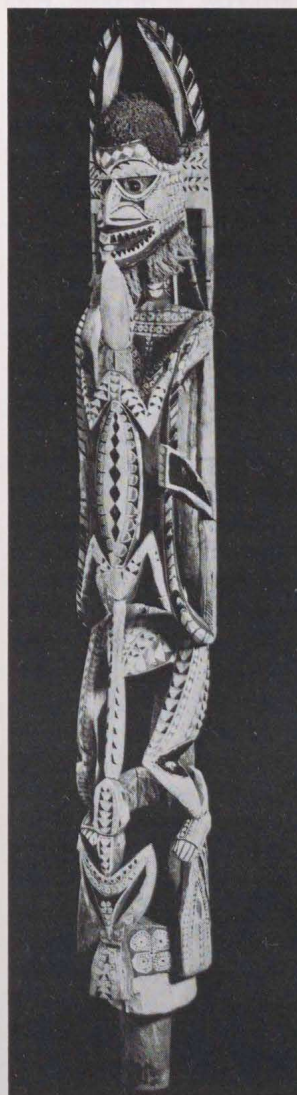
The most ambitious and comprehensive exhibition of ethnographic art from Oceania ever to be presented in the United States—probably the world—was shown at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., between July 1, 1979, and February 17, 1980. The exhibition, modestly titled "The Art of the Pacific Islands," was ten years in the planning, consisted of well over 400 pieces from the three culture areas—Polynesia, Micronesia, and Melanesia—and was lavishly installed on the concourse of the new East Building. An attempt was made to represent every major local and regional tradition of material culture with aesthetic merit and to include as many objects collected during the initial periods of European exploration as possible. In addition, Douglas Newton, the organizer of the exhibition, tried to include worthy pieces from many private collections that have not been shown or published before.

One of the reasons for producing a major exhibition of Pacific Island art, according to J. Carter Brown, Director of the National Gallery, was to acknowledge that exotic art from the vast reaches of Oceania is as aesthetically interesting and important as better-known traditions from sub-Saharan Africa and the New World. In order to accomplish all these goals, materials were borrowed from 56 museums (many of them national museums) and 28 private collections in 12 countries besides the United States. Only the prestige and resources of the National Gallery of Art could command cooperation and participation on this scale.

What does this exhibition of 400-odd objects represent in relation to the collected materials now in museum and private collections? The totality of Oceanian art is best thought of as divided among several pools of materials. One such pool consists of collections from the central and northern island groups, known as Polynesia and Micronesia, plus a few more islands in the southwest Pacific, known as Melanesia. Because these were the earliest islands or parts of islands to be "discovered" and explored by Europeans, and because the cultures and societies of these islands have been enormously affected—sometimes completely obliterated—by colonialism, the material culture traditions which produced the art are dead. All objects from these societies not preserved in collections have long since disintegrated; nothing more is being produced, unless in recent years there have been self-conscious attempts to revive forgotten skills in order

to produce tourist curios or new symbols of cultural identity. In this pool are, perhaps, 10,000 pieces of sufficient aesthetic interest to be considered for inclusion in an exhibition of this sort. About 200 were selected.

A second pool of objects, mainly from the large island of New Guinea plus a few other small islands nearby, all in Melanesia, is much larger and is still growing. The number is increasing as more are being "found" in neglected museum collections and more are being collected from villages that are producing them, because the traditions have not entirely faded, or still have them lying around. There are, perhaps, 40-50,000 objects in this pool from which, again, about 200 were selected for this exhibition. Certainly, one noteworthy success of the exhibition was the selection and presentation of the objects from New Guinea and nearby islands, which, because so many have come to light only in the past few decades, are less well known than those from the pool first described.



**Figure 1** Figure, New Ireland, Papua New Guinea, wood and paint, 133 cm. high, collected before 1894, Barbier-Müller Collection, Geneva.

Large displays of carvings such as these were made for a memorial ceremony called *malanggan*. The ceremony was also an initiation for boys, at which the "secrets" of the carvings were revealed to the initiates. Women and uninitiated persons were not to see the sculpture. The complex compositions were dreamed by the carvers, who use most of the same elements and motifs over and over again without special meanings attached. The ceremony is still celebrated in an abbreviated form and in a Christian context.





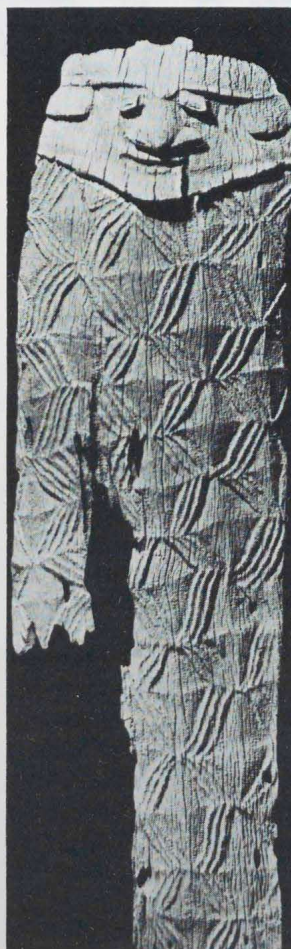
**Figure 2** Mask, New Caledonia, North-eastern area, wood, 44 cm. high, University Museum, Philadelphia.

This is the face piece only of an elaborate construction of human hair, fiber, and feathers. The masks were used in a ritual which seems to have been directed at ensuring the return of rains and the wet season, and the perpetuation of growing things. New Caledonian cultures were among the very first in the southwest Pacific to succumb to European influences and colonial domination.

A third pool, much smaller than the other two, is composed of archeological specimens. Many are surface finds of unknown date, but a few have been unearthed in stratigraphically controlled excavations. Since field archaeology in the Pacific islands is young and a great deal of development lies ahead, the size of the pool will grow. At present there are only about 100 entire objects and a larger quantity of fragments (mostly pottery) in the pool; 20 examples were displayed in this exhibition.

By way of comparison, the total quantity of art from Pacific island cultures is but a fraction of what has come out of sub-Saharan Africa. And Africa continues to produce. This difference is due to the difference in scale of African and Oceanian societies. A tribe, linguistic group, or political division in black Africa may embrace hundreds of thousands of people, while in Oceania most societies have (or had) populations of only a few thousand, sometimes only a few hundred. Moreover, the smaller the society, the more susceptible it is to disruption from outside influences. Hence, drastic change and devastation of tradition are far more evident in Oceanian societies than in black Africa.

Obviously, the character of an exhibition is heavily influenced by the knowledge, taste, and purposes of those who put it together. Douglas Newton, Chairman of the Department of Primitive Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, is a Pacific art specialist who has done field research in New Guinea and also has a distin-



**Figure 3** Door jamb, New Caledonia, wood, 167 cm. high, collected during the second half of the eighteenth century, Barbier-Müller Collection, Geneva.

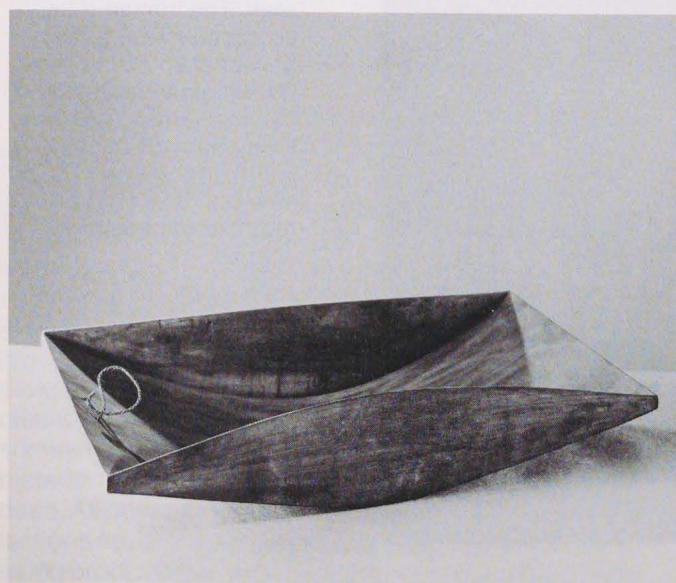
The sacred-men's houses followed a round plan with conical roofs over which towered a spire. The door was ornamented with massive jambs such as this one, lintels, and threshold figures. The human representations were those of ancestral spirits. In New Caledonia the style of carving varied progressively from north to south; in the south human features were often reduced to geometric shapes.





**Figure 4** Suspension hook, Yenshamanggua village, Niyaura latmul people, East Sepik District, Papua New Guinea, wood and paint, 97 cm. high, collected about 1914, University Museum, Philadelphia.

Suspension hooks of this kind are elaborated versions of simpler food hooks used in dwellings. The food hook is basically a rat guard, hung from a rafter, to which food in baskets is hung between meals. The decorated forms, such as this one, are made for use in men's clubhouses and represent spiritual beings that are also present in the men's house. The face painting is similar to that used by men in rituals of several kinds that honor the spirits.



**Figure 5** Dish, Wuvulu Island, Western Islands, Papua New Guinea, wood, 47 cm. long, University Museum, Philadelphia.

Dishes and bowls for eating, serving, and conveying food, usually prepared as oily puddings, are used in almost every community of coastal New Guinea and the islands of Melanesia. Each society has its distinctive form. The dishes, or bowls, of Wuvulu are famous for their simple, clean lines, which resemble styles found in Micronesia more than those of Melanesian neighbors.

**Figure 6** Food pounder, Truk, Caroline Islands, Micronesia, coral, 15 cm. high, made in Romonum 1950–1960, University Museum, Philadelphia.

Pounders, or mashers, are used to reduce cooked staples to a soft consistency. Nearly every island group in Oceania has a distinctive shape or form for such pounders. The four knobs on this one are one kind of ornamentation that also designates one hereditary tradition of the specialists who do such skilled work.

**Figure 7** Canoe stem ornament, Truk, Caroline Islands, Micronesia, wood and paint, 42 cm. high, collected 1899–1900, National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.

Ornaments of this kind were attached to both bow and stern of paddling canoes. They were also used to signal the intent—peaceful or aggressive—of a landing crew as it approached a foreign community. Such stem pieces show very little aesthetic variation. The top figures represent a pair of aquatic birds, beak to beak; if there is any signification to the bottom forms, it is not known. Decorative art in Micronesia is rarely figurative and mostly made up of geometric elements which are not iconographically rich.





guished record of exhibitions and catalogs dealing with his specialty as well as ethnographic areas outside of Oceania. Only with his incomparable knowledge of the great European collections, public and private, could such a splendid show of Melanesian works, especially from New Guinea, have been assembled. With very few limitations on transportation costs and exhibition space, Newton chose many large, even monumental, pieces over other, smaller pieces of the same type that perhaps have equal aesthetic appeal. However, he also carefully included the small and the miniature to show how similar formal concepts could be rendered at any scale.

In an art exhibition that covers the entirety of Pacific cultures and in which sculpture is the dominant medium, Micronesia cannot compete. There is little sculpture from these many small societies where the finest artisanship is to be found in the so-called minor arts of plaiting and weaving. Nevertheless, the fact that Micronesia was included is a credit to the planners who wished to present Oceanian art in its entirety.

Assisting with the Polynesian sections were Dr. Adrienne L. Kaeppler, then a research anthropologist at the Bernice P. Bishop Museum, Honolulu, and now at the Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, and Dr. Peter Gathercole, also an anthropologist and Curator at the University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge, England. Both are field researchers and know Polynesian material culture collections around the world. There have been several big and impressive exhibitions of Polynesian art in the past decade, and there are fine permanent and changing exhibitions of it usually to be seen in Honolulu (Kaeppler has done one of these) and London, but the Washington exhibition, bringing together the best and most sensational pieces, both topped anything that went before and matched the dazzling impact of the Melanesian representation.

While it is usually assumed that the works themselves should be the main attraction, the design of this exhibition produced competition. In fact, in some sections the design presented such an overwhelming effect that it was difficult to shut it out in order to concentrate upon one piece or a small grouping of pieces. Movement through the exhibition was along a prescribed course that suggested a tour of the major island groups, region by region. It was a guided tour that commenced with Hawaii in the northern Pacific, as though it were the gateway to Polynesia, and Polynesia had some primacy with respect to the rest of Oceania. From Hawaii one moved south to the Marquesas, followed by Easter Island, the Cook Islands, the Society Islands, and the western Polynesian groups, ending with New Zealand, a zigzag course which made no culture-historical sense, for it was apparently dictated by matters of style and taste of the designers. For each island group a small gallery was constructed, one gallery leading into the next.



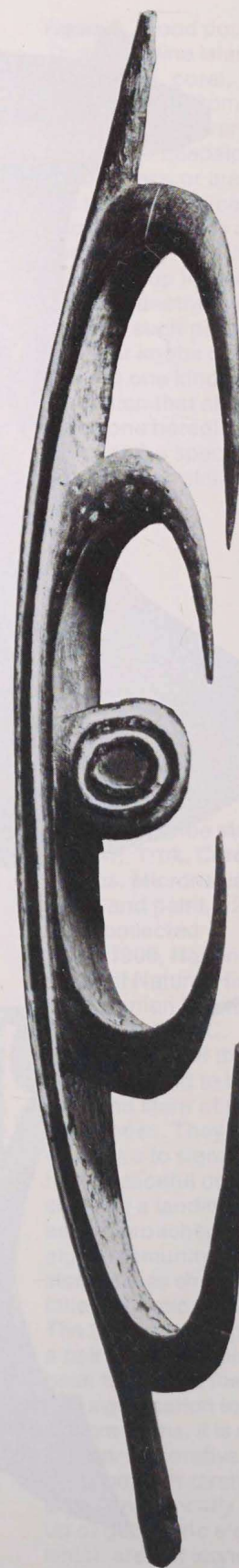


**Figure 8** Head for decorating a sacred flute, Timbunke village, Waliagwi latmul people, East Sepik District, Papua New Guinea, wood, 32.5 cm. high, collected about 1914, University Museum, Philadelphia.

The sounds of flutes and choirs of flutes made of bamboo were associated with the presence of powerful spirits at certain ceremonies. The flutes themselves were not only sacred but were kept out of the sight of females and uninitiated males. The decorative components, however, were not as sacred as the flutes themselves; hence there are many of them in museum and private collections.

**Figure 9** Cult carving, Bahinemo people, Hunstein Mountains, East Sepik District, Papua New Guinea, wood and paint, 108.3 cm. long, Bruce Seaman, Tahiti.

This object was used in a male initiation ceremony in July 1967. The Bahinemo are now Christian and probably no longer celebrate initiations. Characteristic of this area is the "opposed hook" style, the motifs of which in this piece are said to represent birds' beaks and catfish antennae which themselves are representations of natural forces. In other localities nearby, the hooks represent features of the human body.



The tour of the Polynesian islands was followed by a single display unit of archaeological specimens drawn from all over Oceania. This interlude asks the viewer to ponder aspects of time and cultural evolution.

Underway again, the cruise steered to Melanesia, entering it in the south at New Caledonia and continuing northward with calls at the New Hebrides, the Solomon Islands, and major islands lying off New Guinea. The mood of this sequence was somber, the lighting in higher contrast, the art more dream- and fantasy-like.

A pause again at an array of pieces from Micronesia and some odd-lot cultures of Melanesia and Polynesia which happen to have similar sculptural styles. From this association, I suppose, one is urged to think about both stylistic similarities that span vast reaches of open sea and the problems of the diffusion of art forms.



The final leg of the journey took the viewer to the immense island of New Guinea, which was displayed in a commensurately large gallery with seven display groups, each representing one style region such as the North-west Coast, Southeast Coast, and the western half, called Irian Jaya, and ending with some closely associated islands off to the southeast. Nearly half the pieces of the exhibition were mounted in this single space. Major groupings were mounted in the center of the gallery so that as one moved about many foreground and background associations presented themselves. From dozens of angles one or several objects could be sighted against groupings of pieces representing different styles. The possibilities of visually aligning and merging forms were almost limitless. The most monumental works of the show were to be found here, and there were also some of the smallest. The effect was a visual kaleidoscope of exotic forms, colors, textures, and compositions—a climactic cacophony of visual experience. Too, the stunning variety of art displayed here conveyed the ethnographic fact that nowhere in the world are so many different languages and distinct cultures to be found distributed over the landscape as there are in New Guinea.

Reflecting on this exhibition, I am struck—troubled, really—by the visual impression it leaves and the knowledge of how very far from the ethnographic reality the objects are when displayed in a great museum of fine arts. In this exhibition objects were grouped according to some facet of style, and a style facet could be any feature such as form, subject, technique, or use. Larger groupings were partitioned off into geographic lots which, with special lighting designed to dramatize the dominant forms and create moods, gave the illusion that these carefully selected specimens really did belong together. Nowhere, however, is there a suggestion of what knowledge or information the pieces conveyed in their ethnographic setting. Even the labels were reduced to a cryptic minimum of information, as though anything said about the work would detract from the display or from the contemplation of the aesthetic experience. One comes away from the exhibition realizing that the design and production of the exhibition were as significant as the objects in it. What about the productions and settings of rituals and beliefs that enveloped the objects in their own cultural settings? An example: a human sculpture from the Asmat area of West New Guinea, labeled "Figure" (Catalog no. 21.8), a seated man with spindly limbs, elbows resting on knees, hands clasped to an open mouth, and a pointed ovoid head ridged by a long curving nose. Has not something very significant been lost by not knowing that such a depiction is an attempt to see the human male as an insect, a praying mantis in fact, whose reproduction cycle symbolizes Asmat ideas about death and life and to which their headhunting practices are linked? Is it also irrelevant to know that the stunning introductory work of the show, a temple image from Hawaii, is not just an anthropomorphic depiction of

a god, but a god who was conceived as a direct descendant and embodiment of animate physical forces of the universe, which also gave birth to creatures of the sea, of the land, and humans, and that the image was "born" in a ritual as it was installed at the temple? Most of Oceanian art is depiction of myth, supernatural personality, social and natural processes, and social position, or it signifies the expenditure of skill of the artist as an offering. When works such as those shown at this exhibition are displayed in this way, the viewer is permitted to see only form and style. Yet this is art that, for the most part, is not only representational; it is didactic as it stands as testament to the central beliefs and values of the cultures that produced it.

Every object selected for this exhibition has been through at least two stages of removal from its original context. Initially, at the site where it was made or used, a collector obtained objects that could be bought and carried away with the resources available. Almost always pieces obtained were parts of something more complex—an architectural fragment, a piece of sculpture which was but one object among many used in a ritual—and more often than not the ideational, utilitarian, and didactic aspects were entirely left behind. Thus the great bulk of exotic material culture ending up in museums and private collections are fragments of larger cultural entities. The second selection is made when pieces are picked from collections for the exhibition. Many objects are deemed unworthy of aesthetic consideration because we see no art in them; some pieces from the assemblages are left out because only a part is seen as being aesthetic. What the final selection for an exhibition ends up being is a very small percentage of possible objects selected under our criteria of art, and all are fragments of larger material and ideational wholes. Finally, the works are mounted in an architectural setting and exhibit design created by persons who are interpreters of our contemporary ideas of art. A cultural transformation, not a translation, has occurred. Thus, exotic objects are made to seem familiar to us, because they are presented in a way in which we are accustomed to viewing fine art. We, the viewers, are invited to project our cultural values and knowledge upon them, to compare our impressions with others that we recall from other exhibitions. We are experiencing art, but that experience is derived from knowledge of our culture, not from any culture in the South Seas.

The catalog is every bit as ambitious and spectacular as the exhibition. In it are three essays, by Newton, Gathercole, and Kaeppler, and more than 250 pages devoted to the listing of the pieces, together with abstracts from documentation about them and black-and-white photographs. In addition there are 13 color plates and 2 additional color photographs used for cover and frontispiece.



The introductory essay, "Continuities and Changes in Western Pacific Art," by Douglas Newton is an attempt to see all the regional art traditions of Melanesia in some historical perspective. In order to do this he gives a very condensed resumé of the current hypotheses about culture history of the western Pacific as drawn from recent archaeological excavations as well as from ethnographic and linguistic distributions. He also discusses historical documents that bear on art. The problem is, there are not many archaeological and historical data on the art—not yet, anyway. It is a fine job of summarizing material that can be interpreted several ways. As an introduction to current scholarly ideas about culture history in the western Pacific it is excellent, and it is well referenced for those who wish to pursue the matter more deeply.

Peter Gathercole's essay, "Polynesian Cultural History," does for Polynesia what Newton does for Melanesia. The important difference, however, is that the culture history of the central Pacific is shorter, less complicated, and far better worked out by archaeologists than it is for the western Pacific islands. Again, this is a very appropriate summary for the exhibition, and Gathercole provides key references to more detailed studies for the reader who wishes to get more deeply involved.

Adrienne L. Kaeppler's essay, "Aspects of Polynesian Aesthetic Traditions," gets close to the heart of the matter: the differences between art and aesthetics from our point of view as contrasted with Polynesian orientations which we think of as aesthetic. One of her most telling points is that material culture—objects, that is—is neither the only nor the most important way in which Polynesians expressed ideas and values about the cosmos and society. This essay is a reminder that art in Pacific island societies, even when defined and presented in terms of our cultural conceptions, is not confined to what can be hung and mounted in a museum gallery. This essay is also a signal contribution to a small but growing literature on comparative aesthetics.

Considering the catalog separately from the exhibition but alongside other art books on the Pacific, this volume deserves special mention. For the person not already familiar with but eager to learn something about Pacific island art it is the best place to begin. It is the only book that will try to place the art objects in the contemporary view of culture history as currently interpreted by archaeologists. Other books will give culture historical backgrounds, but they will be based upon diffusionist and highly subjective methods of historical reconstruction. The considerations of what constitutes style similarities and dissimilarities are well supported by the objects and tend to be explained in less emotional terms than is usual in writings of this kind. There are good maps, the photographs are excellent, and, of course, there is the fact that so many of the pieces are illustrated here for the first time. Unfortunately, some small but glaring errors have crept into the catalog. The editors have assured

**Figure 10** Temple image, Hawaiian Islands, wood, 198 cm. high, the Peabody Museum of Salem, Massachusetts.

Large images of this sort were set up at the important temples which were dedicated to the major deities and supported by the political system. Often groups were arranged around an altar, each image representing a different aspect of the god. Each major god was attended by a special hereditary priesthood. In 1819 the political sponsorship and recognition of the major deities came to an abrupt end. Temples were abandoned and images were destroyed. The next year missionaries from New England arrived to convert the political leaders to Christianity. Only three of these large images survive today.



this reviewer that all have been noted, and in a soon-to-be-published revised edition the errors will be corrected.

On the other hand, an overview as gained in this volume has definite limitations. Only brief mention of the social function of art is made, even though all three authors mention some aspects of it. Similarly, iconological and symbolic aspects are touched on—most cogently by Kaeppler—but they are downplayed in favor of considerations of style. After all, the exhibition was about style and history, and the catalog is the enduring artifact of that effort.

It is well to remember that at the same time the oldest pieces included in this exhibition were being collected and brought to Europe, about two centuries ago, they were considered to be "curiosities," the intriguing productions of savages. They were certainly not art, which could only be produced by civilized peoples. The first systematic collection of ethnographic exotica and scientific specimens also marks the beginning of natural history museums, but it was another century before art museums were founded, and still a few decades more before some artifacts were considered worthy of transfer



**Figure 11** Female figure, Ha'apai Group, Tonga Islands, whale-tooth ivory, 12.7 cm. high, Raymond and Laura Wielgus collection.

Whale ivory figures of humans were made and used in both the Tonga and Fiji Islands, which, although having different cultures and languages, had economic and political relationships before European intrusion into the area. The precise use and significance of the figures is not known, although some seem to have been neck pendants. In both societies whale-tooth ivory was among the most valued materials, and objects made of it were associated with persons of high rank and transactions of great social value.



from natural history to art museums. Since then the very concept of art in our culture has undergone such drastic revision that the inclusion of certain artifacts from non-literate societies among collections of fine art from Europe and Asia is no longer controversial. These changes are linked, too, to our changing conceptions of the nature of man. Two centuries ago primitive peoples were thought to be lesser humans in comparisons with civilized peoples. Now we believe in the universality of human nature, and according to our cultural definition of the nature of man, he/she is, among many things, an aesthetic being, and that is what exhibitions of this kind are fundamentally about. They are the visual proof of our late-twentieth-century cultural assumptions that art is universal to man. One knows that such an assumption would have been rejected by artists, patrons, and connoisseurs of the eighteenth century. One wonders what eighteenth-century Hawaiians would think about their religious images and symbols of political rank being placed alongside effigies and idols from many cultures they never knew existed. My guess is that they too would reject the entire idea.

**Robert Rosenthal, ed.** *Skill in Nonverbal Communication: Individual Differences.* Cambridge, Mass.: Oelgeschlager, Gunn, & Hain, 1979. xviii + 270 pp. No price (cloth).

**Reviewed by Robert E. Kraut**  
Cornell University and Bell Laboratories

We all know people who seem especially skilled at non-verbal communication, flashing their emotions at will or divining ours even better than we can. The essays in this collection promise to reveal some of their secrets, telling us how to measure who is nonverbally skillful, showing us who they are and how they achieve their skill, and demonstrating the consequences of their skill for social interaction. This book fails to live up to its promises, and I was left doubting the value of the individual difference approach to nonverbal communication that Rosenthal and his fellow authors advocate. My skepticism stems from both the structure of individual differences in non-verbal behavior, which the book reveals, and important limitations in the scope of the book itself.

Friedman's introductory essay argues that individual differences in nonverbal communication should be thought of as an ability akin to intelligence rather than as a personality trait like extroversion. Abilities can be directly sampled by tests that have intrinsic meaning, while measures of traits require complex and controversial inferences about how items are related to underlying dispositions. In addition, Friedman claims that individual attributes thought of as abilities predict behavior more strongly than do attributes commonly thought of as traits (Mischel 1968).

The rest of this volume belies the simplicity and power which the ability concept tries to bestow on nonverbal skill. If success at nonverbal communication were an ability like intelligence, then one might expect it to have a simple structure like the general factor in intelligence, perhaps with subskills overlaid on the general factor. Unfortunately, nonverbal skill does not appear to be structured so simply. At a minimum one must distinguish between skill at transmitting nonverbal messages (encoding) and at reading them (decoding). Research by DiMatteo and other research reviewed by DePaulo and Rosenthal in the present volume shows that these two dimensions of nonverbal skill are only slightly related (mean  $r = .13$ ).

Even within these two subareas, skills do not appear to be general. It is true that people whose spontaneous expressions of emotions are easy to read also exhibit expressions which are easy to read (Cunningham 1977; Zuckerman et al. 1976). However, success at both encod-