

SAINSBURY  
CENTRE  
for Visual Arts

*Press Release*

UEA  
University of East Anglia

## **Fiji: Art & Life in the Pacific**

**15 October 2016 – 12 February 2017**

Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts at the University of East Anglia, Norwich

Revealing stunning sculptures, textiles, ceramics, and ivory and shell regalia, the ground-breaking **Fiji: Art & Life in the Pacific** opens 15 October 2016 at Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts at the University of East Anglia, Norwich. The largest and most comprehensive exhibition about Fiji ever assembled, it will take the visitor on a journey through the art and cultural history of Fiji since the late 18th century.

This internationally-important exhibition will present both Fijian artworks and a European response to them: paintings, drawings and historic photographs of the 19th and 20th century provide context. These include exquisite watercolours by the intrepid Victorian travel writer and artist Constance Gordon Cumming, and by the Irish naval artist James Glen Wilson, who was in Fiji in the 1850s. Over 270 works of art are being loaned by exhibition partner the Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology at Cambridge, and by the Fiji Museum, the British Museum, the Pitt Rivers Museum (Oxford) and museums in Aberdeen, Birmingham, Exeter, London and Maidstone.

This exhibition results from a three-year Arts & Humanities Research Council-funded project which examined the extensive but little-known Fijian collections in the UK and overseas, and uncovered some significant treasures. Research project leader and exhibition curator Professor Steven Hooper says, “An important aspect of this exhibition is that the many examples of exceptional Fijian creativity on display are not presented as ‘ethnographic specimens’ or ‘illustrations’ of Fijian culture, but as works of art in their own right, as worthy of attention as any art tradition in the world, including Modernism. Remarkable creative imagination is applied to the making of ancestral god images, ritual dishes and regalia, and to the decoration of enormous barkcloths.”

A highlight of the exhibition will be a beautiful, newly commissioned, eight metre-long double-hulled sailing canoe that has been built in Fiji and shipped to Norwich for display. Made entirely of wood and

coir cord, with no metal components, the canoe results from a project to encourage canoe-building skills and is a small version of the great 30-metre-long vessels of the 19th century, the biggest canoes ever built.

Fiji has always been a dynamic place of cultural interactions and exchanges. Since 1000 BC voyaging canoes have transported people and objects around the region, including to Tonga, Samoa and other neighbouring Pacific islands. In the 19th century new voyagers arrived, Europeans, with their new technologies, metal, guns and Christian religion. Sophisticated strategists, Fijian chiefs twice asked to join the British Empire, and a colonial government was established in 1874. Fiji became independent in 1970. Fiji managed the British colonial administration quite effectively, establishing a particularly close relationship with the British royal family, notably with Her Majesty the Queen.

Fiji has also succeeded in maintaining and adapting many of its proud cultural traditions, and today woodcarvers and textile artists continue to produce sailing canoes, kava bowls (for the preparation of the important ritual drink) and impressive decorated barkcloths, some over 60m long, for weddings and mortuary rituals. In the vibrant Pacific fashion scene designers are using barkcloth and other local materials to make gowns and wedding dresses, showing their creations in London and Los Angeles. Contemporary examples of barkcloth fashion and textiles, woodcarving, and intricate boat-building techniques will be included, along with the art of female Fijian tattooing.

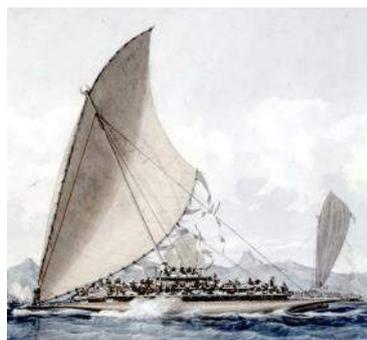
The Sainsbury Centre's large 900m<sup>2</sup> suite of galleries will be used to present Fiji's rich cultural past and its important relationship with Britain. Despite a population below one million, Fiji is known globally as a major rugby nation (winning a first-ever Gold Medal for Rugby 7s at the Rio Olympics this August), and as an alluring destination for travellers, for whom Fijian hospitality is legendary.

The Sainsbury Collection, housed at the Norman Foster-designed Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, at the University of East Anglia, Norwich is world renowned for its works of art from the Pacific, the Americas, Africa and Asia, as well as for its antiquities and modern works by Picasso, Moore, Giacometti and Bacon.

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#### PRESS ENQUIRIES

Press texts – textiles & fashion, tattooing, ceramics, canoes & navigation, collectors / administrators & Scottish connections, James Glen Wilson & the Irish connection, features ideas, background to the exhibition - and images available from [pr@pipparoberts.com](mailto:pr@pipparoberts.com) or [amanda@stucklin.com](mailto:amanda@stucklin.com) alternatively call Pippa Roberts Publicity & Communications on +44 (0)1707 262089 or Amanda Stucklin on 07789 007780.



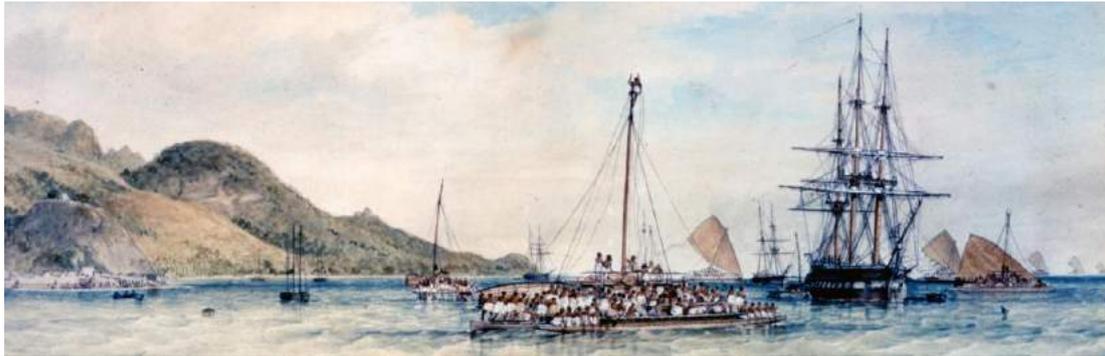
## *Fiji: Art & Life in the Pacific*

12 March-7 August 2016, Sainsbury Centre, Norwich

### Background Information

#### A research-based exhibition

This exhibition is one of the main outcomes of a research project *Fijian Art: political power, sacred value, social transformation and collecting since the 18th century*, funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) from 2011 to 2014. It was a collaborative endeavour of the Sainsbury Research Unit (SRU) at the University of East Anglia, Norwich, and the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA) at the University of Cambridge. Led by Professor Steven Hooper (SRU) and Dr Anita Herle (MAA), project members undertook extensive research on Fijian collections in the UK and overseas, with the aim of bringing these substantial but hitherto little-known collections into the academic and public domains. Artefacts, archives and pictorial material, including photographs, are being brought together to allow fresh perspectives on the art and history of Fiji.



*Feejeean and Tongese Canoes Getting Under Weigh at Levuka, Fiji, near HMS Herald, James Glen Wilson, 1855*

#### History

The islands now called Fiji were first settled about 1000 BC by voyagers from the west, probably from Vanuatu. During the subsequent 3000 years further migrations occurred and the population had expanded to over 120,000 by the late 18th century, when Fiji was briefly visited by Captain Cook and Captain Bligh. After the mutiny on the *Bounty* in 1789, Bligh was chased by Fijian canoes and was fortunate to escape. The 19th century saw the arrival of European traders, missionaries and planters, and after the first request in 1859 to join the British Empire was turned down, Fiji eventually became a British colony in 1874, with Sir Arthur Gordon as first Governor. He and others based at Government House, including Baron Anatole von Hügel and the redoubtable lady traveller Constance Gordon Cumming, were avid collectors and turned it into a kind of museum. Much of this material was eventually sent back to Britain, hence the substantial collections at Cambridge, the British Museum and elsewhere. There is also a major high-quality collection in Fiji Museum in the capital, Suva. Although pre-Christian images, ritual objects and weapons ceased to be made after conversion to Christianity and the cessation of warfare during the 19th century, other traditions, such as canoe building and barkcloth making, have continued as part of a rich traditional cultural life.

#### Themes

Major themes of the exhibition are:

- the creative adaptability of Fijians in the production of artworks
- the great skills exhibited in their manufacture
- the important roles artworks played in exchange relationships, both among Fijians and with outsiders, notably Europeans

Many objects were made to be transacted; therein lay their power. This accounts for the collections that lie largely hidden in UK museums. The exhibition will reveal the richness of these collections, which will be displayed not as 'illustrations' of Fijian culture but as artworks with which the visitor can engage directly, as with any European work of art.

#### Exhibition Content

**Artefacts:** Fijian artworks are visually impressive and beautifully made; they include figure sculptures in wood and ivory, shell and ivory regalia and ornaments, many forms of bowl, elegant headrests, weapons (many of which are strongly sculptural), pottery, canoes and large painted barkcloth textiles, which can be over 60m long (a 15m-long piece will be exhibited). Some of these types of artefact ceased to be made in the 19th century, whereas others (especially those not explicitly connected with pre-Christian religion) have continued to be made to the present day, including enormous barkcloths.

**Pictorial material:** 19th and 20th century paintings and drawings will be included, notably:

- Beautiful 1850s paintings by Irish artist James Glen Wilson, who was commissioned into the Royal Navy as an officer for the survey voyages of *HMS Herald* in the western Pacific. He settled in Australia after his voluntary discharge from the Navy in 1859.
- 1870s watercolours by Constance Gordon Cumming, a remarkable Victorian globetrotter and prolific travel writer who was taught by Sir Edwin Landseer and produced more than one thousand watercolours. She published travelogues about Hawaii, North America, China and Sri Lanka, but her best-known books were *At Home in Fiji* (1881) and *A Lady's Cruise on a French Man-of-War* (1882, resulting from an invitation to join a French ship that called at Fiji).
- Photography dating from the 1860s to the present day is also included.

**A double-hulled sailing canoe:** A highlight of the exhibition will be an eight metre-long double-hulled canoe which has been an exciting recent heritage project in Fiji. Made only of indigenous renewable materials (wood, coconut fibre cordage and a pandanus-leaf mat sail), it is a small version of the great 19th century voyaging canoes that were over 30m long and could carry 150 people. Local canoe-builders combined their specialist knowledge of building outrigger canoes with study of a 100-year-old 13m-long double canoe in Fiji Museum to produce a beautiful vessel that was sailed in the 2015 Hibiscus Festival canoe races on Suva Harbour, and is being shipped to Norwich for display.

**Large barkcloths:** Several barkcloths from the 19th century with stunning painted designs (one over 15m long) will be shown together with contemporary examples, including one 5m x 2m cloth with dramatic black and white lozenge designs that would grace any European painting exhibition.

## Lenders

|   |   |
|---|---|
| Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery (Birmingham)            | Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (Cambridge)                    |
| British Museum (London)                                 | Pitt Rivers Museum (Oxford)   |
| Fiji Museum (Fiji)                                      | Royal Albert Memorial Museum (Exeter)                                 |
| Horniman Museum & Gardens (London)                      | The Royal Collection: HM the Queen                                    |
| Kings Museum, University of Aberdeen Museums (Aberdeen) | Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, University of East Anglia (Norwich) |
| Maidstone Museum & Bently Art Gallery (Maidstone)       | Sainsbury Research Unit, University of East Anglia (Norwich)          |

## Exhibition Curators

**Steven Hooper** is Professor of Visual Arts and Director of the Sainsbury Research Unit for the Arts of Africa, Oceania & the Americas (SRU) at the University of East Anglia. He became passionate about the arts of the Pacific region as a result of growing up in the 1950s-60s in his grandfather's private museum, the 'Totems Museum' in Arundel, Sussex. It was filled with objects brought back from the Pacific and elsewhere as a result of Britain's naval, missionary and colonial relations with far-flung places. His grandfather, who collected as a hobby, had never visited the Pacific, so Steven determined to go there to study the cultures that had produced these remarkable things. As a Cambridge PhD student he initially spent over two years in 1977-79 doing anthropological research on Kabara, a remote island in eastern Fiji where canoes, bowls, barkcloths and other traditional things were still made, and which had retained a rich traditional culture. After finishing his PhD he has worked as an academic and maintained close ties with Fiji, leading AHRC-funded projects on Pacific art, including the *Fijian Art* research project (2011-14), which was based in the UK but partnered with Fiji Museum. In August 2015 he was in Fiji sailing on, and filming, the double-hulled canoe that has been specially made for this exhibition.

**Karen Jacobs** is Lecturer in the Arts of Oceania at the Sainsbury Research Unit. Her PhD focused on the Kamoro region of West Papua and culminated in her book *Collecting Kamoro* (2012). She has been involved in funded research projects focusing on the arts of Polynesia and Fiji and related exhibition projects. She has an interest in aspects of collecting, body ornaments and clothing, cultural festivals, contemporary Pacific art and missionary collections. She is co-editor of the 2015 book *Trophies, Relics and Curios? Missionary Heritage from Africa and the Pacific*.

**Katrina Talei Igglesden** is currently a PhD student at the Sainsbury Research Unit, focusing on the transformation and adaptation of *masi* (Fijian barkcloth) when encountered in urban contemporary contexts. She is particularly interested in *masi* designs and how they relate to cultural identity when extended into non-traditional pathways, such as the Fijian 'high fashion' scene. She also examines and actively participates in the reactivation of Pacific textiles in relation to their contemporary relevance to the body, how they are cared for and displayed in museums, and how they can co-exist within themselves as both animated beings and museum objects.

### Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts at the University of East Anglia, Norwich ([scva.ac.uk](http://scva.ac.uk))

The Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts is an inspirational public art museum situated on the campus of the University of East Anglia (UEA) in Norwich. One of Britain's leading institutions for the display of the arts of all nations, the gallery was placed in the UK's top ten cultural attractions by the *Independent on Sunday*. Gifted by Sir Robert and Lady (Lisa) Sainsbury to the University in 1973, the Sainsbury Collection includes the most important collection of ceramics by Hans Coper, the largest collection of early works by Francis Bacon in Northern Europe, and multiple works by artists such as Henry Moore, Giacometti, Picasso, Jacob Epstein and Lucie Rie, all of which are displayed alongside a world renowned collection of works of art from the Pacific, the Americas, Africa and Asia, as well as antiquities. The Sainsbury Centre is housed in the first public building designed by Norman Foster, a world-renowned example of 20th century architecture which was awarded Grade II Listed status in 2013. The Centre integrates spaces for viewing art with facilities for recreation, teaching and research within one light-filled space, with views of the surrounding landscape.

### Sainsbury Research Unit ([www.sru.uea.ac.uk](http://www.sru.uea.ac.uk))

The Sainsbury Research Unit (SRU), based in the Sainsbury Centre, is for the study of the arts of Africa, the Pacific region and the Americas, providing high-quality facilities and a specialist research library for its staff, postgraduate students and visiting scholars.

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