Fundación "la Caixa"

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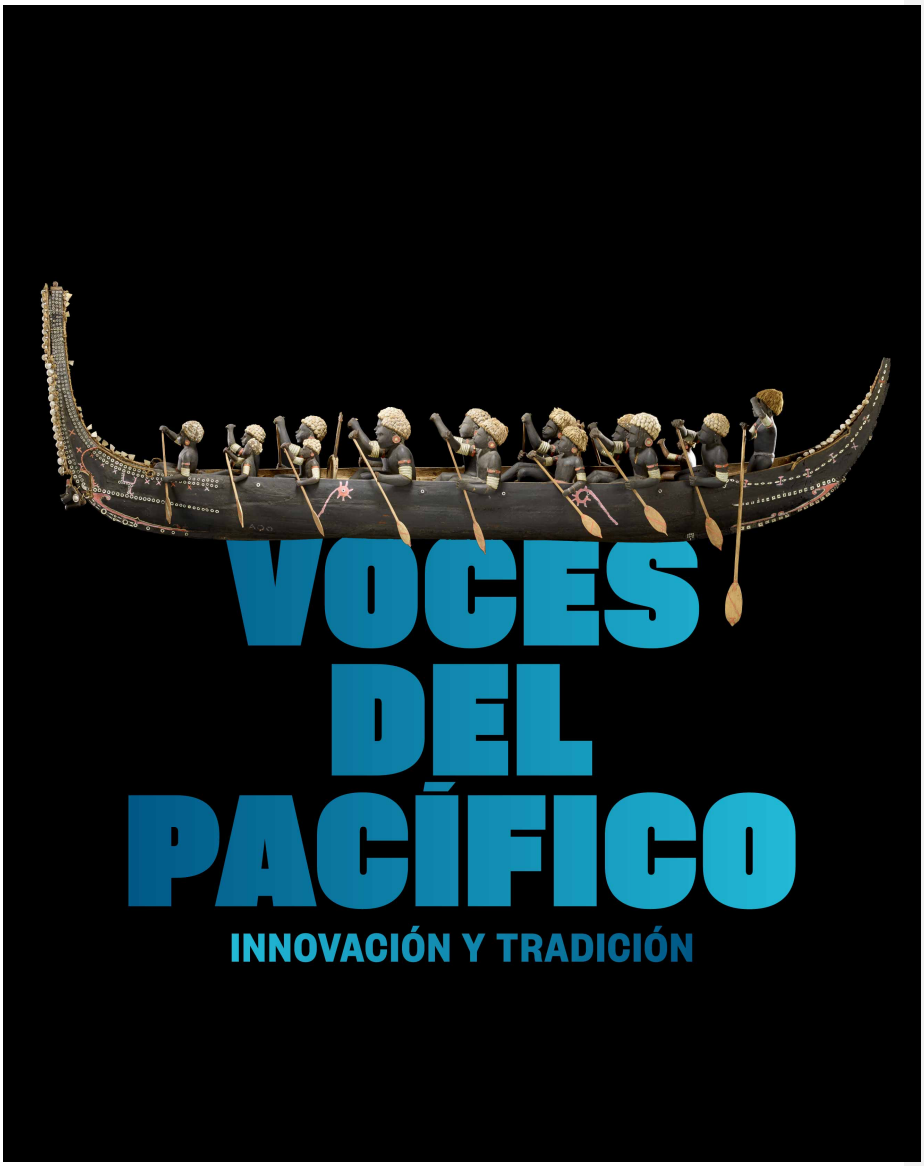
CaixaForum Madrid

From 28 May

to 14 September 2025



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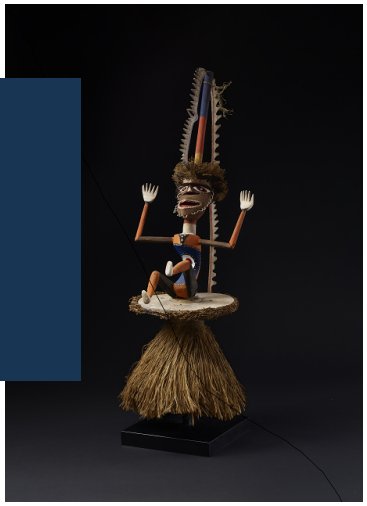
CaixaForum Madrid explores the artistic richness of Pacific cultures



Dance headdress from New Britain, Papua New Guinea. 1980s. Wood, fibre and fern leaf.
© The Trustees of the British Museum

***Voices of the Pacific. Innovation and Tradition* highlights the richness and diversity of the artistic traditions of the inhabitants of the Pacific Islands through 210 objects, the vast majority of which come from the British Museum's collection, one of the most significant of it's kind outside of the Pacific.**

MADRID | 27 May 2025

The director of CaixaForum Madrid, Isabel Fuentes, and Dr Julie Adams, head of the Oceania section of the Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas of the British Museum have, this Tuesday, presented *Voices of the Pacific. Innovation and Tradition*, a comprehensive exhibition showcasing the brilliance and artistic vitality of the Oceanic peoples, which will be on view at the cultural centre until 14 September.

This is the eighth collaboration between the "la Caixa" Foundation and the British Museum, made possible through the strategic partnership maintained by the two institutions. It has allowed audiences in Spain to enjoy a wide range of exhibitions, including: *The Pillars of Europe. The Middle Ages at the British Museum* – on medieval art and culture; *Agon! Competition in Ancient Greece*; *Pharaoh. King of Egypt*; *Luxury. From the Assyrians to Alexander the Great; The American Dream: pop to the present*; *The Human Image: Art, Identities and Symbolism; Egyptian Mummies: Exploring Six Lives*, and *Revered and Feared. Feminine Power in Art and Belief*.

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Voices of the Pacific. Innovation and Tradition aims to celebrate the creativity and artistic sensitivity of the peoples of the Pacific Islands. Oceanic cultures – and especially their inhabitants – are at the heart of this exhibition, which features a total of 210 objects. In addition to loans from the British Museum, the exhibition also includes two pieces from the Museo de América in Madrid and the Museu Etnològic i de Cultures del Món in Barcelona.

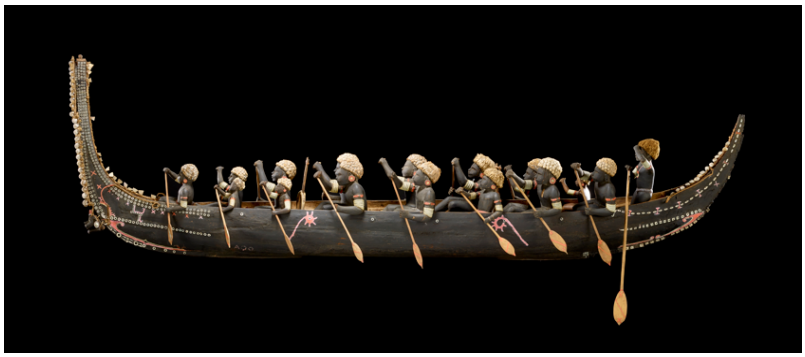
Australia is excluded from the exhibition narrative due to its scale and cultural diversity. Instead, the exhibition focuses on the cultural traditions that unite the inhabitants of the intricate network of Pacific Islands. Rather than being isolated points, these islands have transformed the sea into a highway that connects and unites them, despite the huge area they collectively span.

The Pacific Ocean is vast, covering almost a third of the Earth's surface. Stretching from New Guinea and Palau in the west to Rapa Nui (Easter Island) in the east, and from Hawai'i in the north to Aotearoa (New Zealand) in the south, Oceania encompasses a remarkable environmental diversity. The region includes rainforests and kelp forests, mangroves, coral reefs, snow-capped mountains and turquoise lagoons.

A cosmopolitan, dynamic and innovative outlook

The exhibition reveals the cosmopolitan, dynamic and innovative outlook that connects the inhabitants of the Pacific Islands, from the past to the present day. It presents the experiences of these peoples and communities, aiming to create a connection between the islanders and their artefacts, and the visitors to CaixaForum Madrid.

The inhabitants of the Pacific are regarded as exceptional artists, creating beautiful objects for everyday life using a variety of materials such as stone, wood, fibre, shells and textiles. The ocean that surrounds and connects them has not only been their source of sustenance but also a powerful inspiration for their creativity. Fans and fishhooks, bowls, clubs and canoes – almost everything is crafted with great care and adorned with decorations rich in spiritual and profound meaning.



Ango. Model *tomoko* (war canoe) from Roviana, Solomon Islands. 1900-1920. Wood and shell. Oc1921,1102.1.

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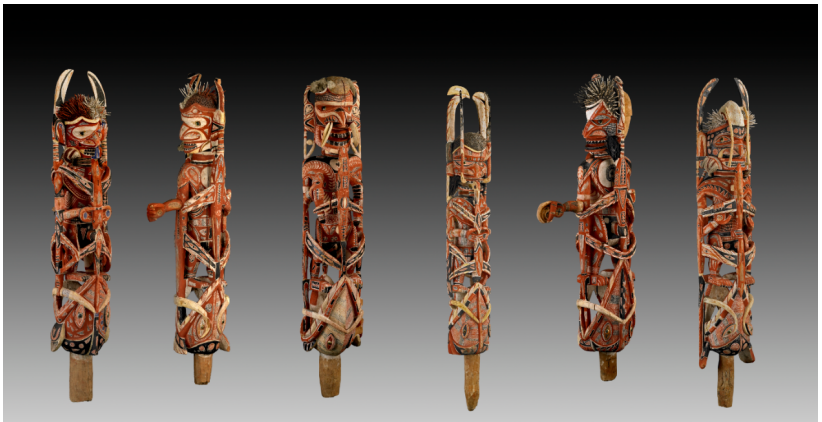
Experts in long-distance travel

Pacific islanders have long been recognised as expert long-distance voyagers, leading cosmopolitan lives well before Europeans arrived in the region. They are also especially noted for their ability to continually create and adapt their artistic forms in response to changing circumstances. This creative resilience is clearly reflected in the way they face the challenges of the 21st century.

The exhibition features both historical artefacts and works by contemporary artists that showcase the richness of Oceanic art. Among the historical and modern pieces are ceremonial paddles and exquisitely carved basalt ancestor figures.

In fact, a quarter of the total number of pieces was created in the last 50 years. Contemporary Pacific artists maintain a connection with the work of their ancestors by preserving and reviving traditional practices such as weaving, carving and tattooing. In some cases, they use their art to draw attention to the challenges facing the region as a result of climate change. Although many indigenous people now live in cities such as Auckland – or even further afield in places like Los Angeles – most retain strong ties to their islands of origin.

The arts of Oceania have inspired admiration in Europe ever since Spanish and Portuguese explorers first sailed across the northern Pacific in the 16th century. Contact with Europeans brought increasingly significant changes to the ways of life of the islanders.



Canoe *malangan* figures from New Ireland, Papua New Guinea. 1800-1900. Wood Oc1884,0728.1-2,7,9&49. © The Trustees of the British Museum

George Nuku: a wake-up call about climate change and a celebration of life

At the end of the exhibition route, visitors will encounter an installation by Māori artist George Nuku, who has travelled specially to CaixaForum Madrid to assemble *Bottled Ocean 2123* – a piece set one hundred years in the future. The work presents

his vision of what could happen to our planet. Sea creatures such as turtles, rays, sharks and jellyfish inhabit an oceanic world flooded with plastic. Entirely made of plastic, the installation is both a wake-up call about climate change and a celebration of the life of the seas that connect us. It is filled with marine creatures crafted from plastic bottles and bathed in vibrant light and colour. While it presents evidence of environmental destruction, Nuku also offers a transformative vision of waste that prompts visitors to rethink their relationship with plastic. George Nuku is internationally renowned for his art installations made from plastic bottles.

The exhibition is structured into **seven thematic sections**, each represented in the museum by vividly coloured walls, with a unique design for each theme:

1. ***Introduction***

2. ***Innovators***: this section explores how these cultures have adapted to migratory movements and European colonisation through their skill and ingenuity in incorporating the use of new materials in the manufacture of objects.

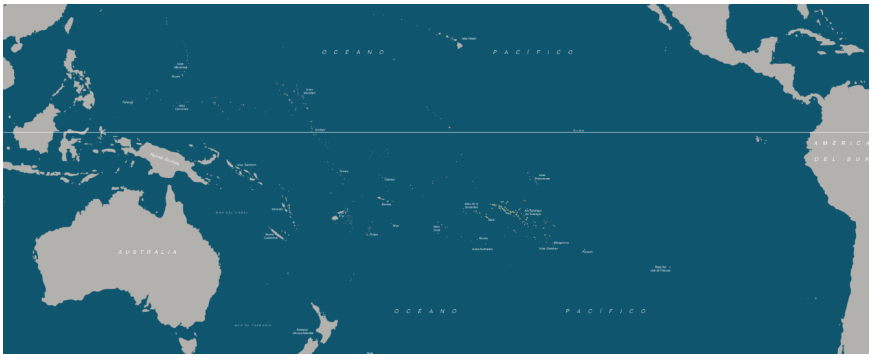
3. ***Weavers*:** focuses on the craftsmanship and intergenerational cultural significance of woven textiles.

4. ***Dancers*:** highlights dance as one of the most celebrated forms of artistic expression in the Pacific Islands.

5. ***Warriors*:** centres on art that reflects the conflicts these cultures have faced throughout history, from past wars to the current struggle against the threat of climate change to many of the islands.

6. ***Carvers*:** encompasses both objects made for everyday life and ceremonies, as well as ancestral tattoos.

7. ***Travellers*:** showcases the complex navigation technologies developed by these peoples based on their deep understanding of the natural world.



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Welcome to the Pacific Islands

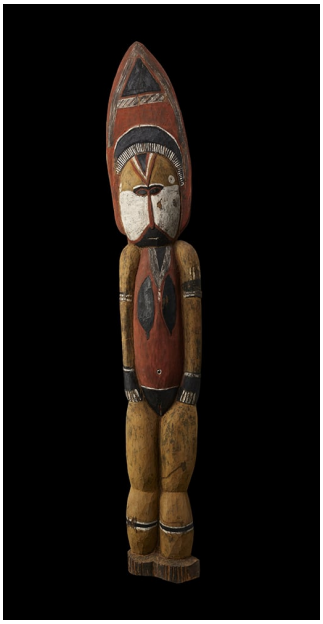

Figure from a ceremonial house, from Sarikim in Papua New Guinea. 1970s. Wood and ochre. Oc1980,11.79. © The Trustees of the British Museum

A large-format map showing the many islands scattered across the Pacific, along with a dozen figures – all of them creative objects made by Pacific Islanders – welcomes visitors to the exhibition. In addition to these objects, most of which feature human faces, photographs of contemporary artists from the Pacific Islands who are participating in the exhibition are also on display. Altogether, they serve to initiate a meaningful dialogue with voices from across the Pacific.

This introductory section presents over a dozen pieces from various islands across Oceania, highlighting the region's creative diversity. Among them is a notable **female figure from a ceremonial house in the East Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea**. These houses, built for initiation ceremonies of young men, could reach up to 21 metres in height and housed hundreds of carved figures representing specific clan spirits.

After the arrival of Christianity, the construction of ceremonial houses went into decline, and by the 1960s hardly any remained standing. In the early 1970s, the tradition began to be revived as Papua New Guinea moved towards independence. This figure is one of 159 of its kind that were sold in 1980 to curators from the British Museum.

Also striking is the **Moái *kavakava* sculpture**, like the previous figure, of unknown authorship. In this case, it was created by the inhabitants of Rapa Nui (Easter Island), who produced impressive wooden and stone sculptures believed to be incarnations of their ancestors. This wooden figure, typically worn around the neck on a fibre cord, is a moai *kavakava*. Its distinctive appearance, with pronounced ribs, evokes the skeletal body of a deceased relative. These figures often feature elongated earlobes and eyes made of volcanic glass.

Moái kavakava from Rapa Nui, Easter Island. 1800-1900. Wood, bone and obsidian. Oc,+3287. © The Trustees of the British Museum

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For the inhabitants of the Pacific Islands, travelling by canoe was a common practice, so paddles were important personal belongings. On some islands, they were placed in graves alongside their owners so they could use them in the afterlife. Sometimes specially decorated for this purpose, paddles were also used in ceremonies where large groups of dancers, arranged in formation, would wave and spin them in synchrony.

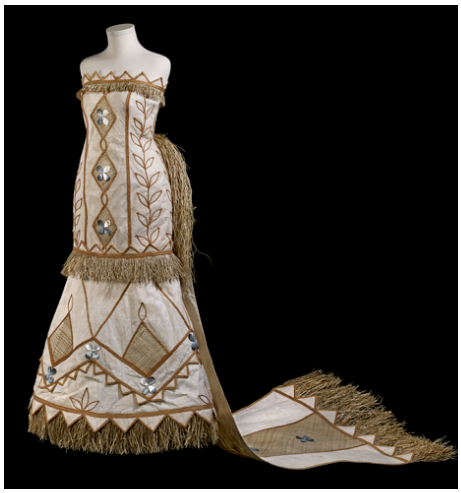
Although these **ceremonial paddles are from Buka**, they originate from New Ireland, 400 km away. In the 19th century, men from Buka were taken as forced labourers to plantations in New Ireland, and it is likely that they took this type of paddle with them.

Ceremonial paddle from Buka Island, Papua New Guinea. 19th century. Wood and pigments. Oc.149. © The Trustees of the British Museum

Innovators

The second section, *Innovators*, explores Oceania as a sea of islands – a dynamic space where people have always been on the move. Historically, contact between the islands was common, as islanders travelled to forge relationships and acquire valuable objects and resources. These interactions inspired artists to experiment with new materials and techniques.

With the arrival of Europeans in the 16th century, exotic materials such as glass, wool and metal began to be incorporated into traditional objects. Later, from the early 19th century onwards, European exploration ships in the Pacific were gradually replaced by whaling vessels and ships carrying missionaries and colonial officials.



Paula Chan Cheuk. Wedding dress made from barkcloth, 2014. Aotearoa (New Zealand) Paper mulberry barkcloth, pandanus leaf, coconut fibre, mother-of-pearl shell and *harakeke* (New Zealand flax). 2014,2032.1.a-c. © The Trustees of the British Museum

A highlight of this section is a wedding dress by designer Paula Chan Cheuk, who was born in Samoa and is of Samoan and Chinese descent. She is renowned for her wedding dresses made from barkcloth, known in Samoa as *siapo*. Chan Cheuk was the first designer to adapt this traditional material to create contemporary garments. For island women living far from their homeland, wearing a wedding dress made from bark cloth is a way of expressing their enduring connection to their culture.

"For me, it's important to incorporate the Pacific perspective into everything I do [...] Young women today always think about their culture and want it to be part of their lives [...]. I love to see that young people respect and continue their culture," says Chan Cheuk.

In four distinct sub-sections, the exhibition delves into the following themes and showcases a wide variety of creations:

- *Indigenous innovation* which, despite variations in design and materials from place to place, retained a shared cultural significance.

- *Innovation under pressure*: this section explores the changes in migration and ways of life following the arrival of Europeans and invasions by other island peoples. These newcomers imposed their worldview, which had a profound impact on the lives, freedoms and traditional arts of the island populations. By the late 19th century, inhabitants of the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu were often forcibly recruited to work on plantations in Australia, New Caledonia and Fiji, a practice known as "blackbirding".

- *Incorporating new influences*: after coming into contact with Europeans, the inhabitants of the Pacific Islands quickly adopted exotic new materials and incorporated them into existing objects, blending the new with the traditional. Today, that spirit of innovation continues, with contemporary Pacific artists working with new techniques and materials while also referencing elements of the past. Others are embracing new artistic formats and participating in the global contemporary art scene. Their works are exhibited around the world, from the Venice Biennale to the New York gallery circuit.

- *The British Museum as a source of inspiration*: the British Museum's collections from Oceania have become a source of inspiration for contemporary artists. In some cases, they study objects created by previous generations to rediscover lost techniques. In others, they create new works in direct response to specific historical pieces. At times, they work within the museum galleries or in its storage areas, transforming the Museum itself into a space for innovation.

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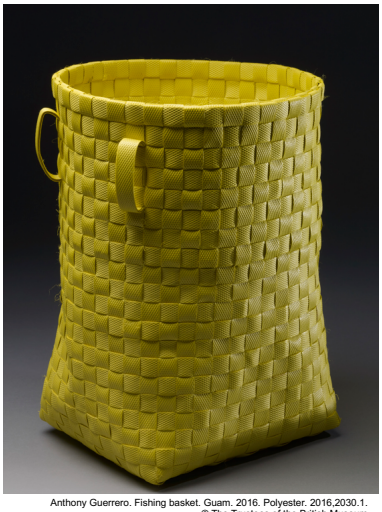
Weavers



Anthony Guerrero. Fishing basket. Guam. 2016. Polyester. 2016,2030.1. © The Trustees of the British Museum

The third section, *Weavers*, focuses on textiles as highly valued objects throughout Oceania. They are given as gifts during important life events such as births, deaths and weddings. The most precious textiles become heirlooms, passed down from generation to generation. Traditionally, women were responsible for textile production and for teaching the girls in the family the art of weaving and plaiting, as passing on these skills was a way of ensuring that the next generation could continue to make textiles.

When European clothing and fabrics were introduced to the region, the role of indigenous textiles declined. However, weaving traditions have been revived on many islands. Today, hats, fans, baskets and mats are popular items among tourists, and making them provides some women with a source of income to support themselves and their families.

Comentado [LS1]: Whilst a woven basket, this image is of an object which is in the Warriors section, as is the coconut fibre armour below. Please can you select images from the Weavers section instead to illustrate these points?

New styles and fashions

This section highlights that fashion plays an important role in textile production, and in the Pacific Islands, new styles and designs are constantly emerging. Textile makers, no longer bound by the traditional pressure to reproduce certain styles, are continually innovating and incorporating new materials and techniques into their work.

Full coconut fibre armour from Kiribati. 1800-1900. Coconut fibre Oc1922,1009.1-3, Oc1922,0221.81-82. © The Trustees of the British Museum

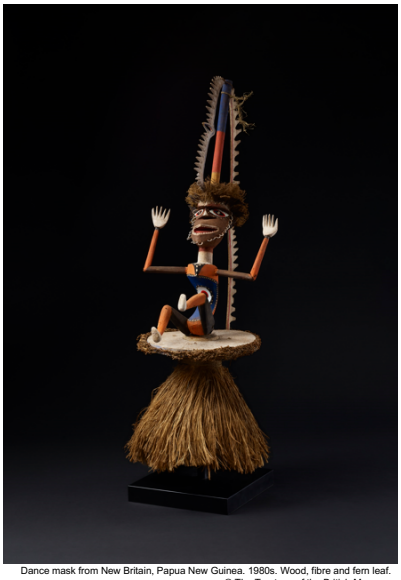
Women often create textile pieces specifically to give as gifts to friends and family, and everyone wants to keep up with the latest trends. In addition, tourism has brought new opportunities to some islands, enabling some people to make a living through weaving.

Dancers

Comentado [LS2]: Please can you use an image of one of the dance mannequins - maybe Tahiti? It's a shame not to have any images for this section.

Cris, en la versió anglesa aquesta imatge s'havia desplaçat a l'àmbit següent, per això et diu que en aquest àmbit falta una imatge. Ara l'hem recol·locada al seu lloc. Va bé?

The fourth section delves into dance as the most celebrated form of artistic expression in the Pacific Islands. The graceful Hawaiian *hula*, the energetic *'ori Tahiti* and the rhythmic *meke* of Fiji are dances admired worldwide and taught in dance schools in cities as far afield as London, New York and Tokyo. For islanders



Dance mask from New Britain, Papua New Guinea. 1980s. Wood, fibre and fern leaf.

living in the diaspora, dance is a way to connect with the traditional culture of the island from which they are geographically separated.

Annual dance competitions, such as the *Merrie Monarch Festival* in Hawai'i, attract thousands of dancers and large audiences. Meanwhile, for some indigenous youth, hip-hop has become a new way to express their connection to traditional culture.

Throughout Oceania, great importance is placed on the appearance of the dancers: the shine of their skin anointed with coconut oil enhances their beauty, the sway of their skirt emphasises their hip movements, and the plumes of their feathered headdresses add to the elegance to the choreography.

Ankle ornaments jingle and provide percussion, while drums set the rhythm for the dancers to follow. In the islands of western Oceania, the sound of the drums is believed to be the voices of spirits and supernatural beings.

Warriors

Comentado [LS3]: The image below is actually part of the Weavers section, not Warriors. Please could you use the coconut fibre armour above instead?

The fifth section, *Warriors*, focuses on the frequent conflicts among inhabitants of the islands, often fought over control of land and resources. In some parts of the region, such as New Guinea, confrontations took the form of positional battles, and offences were avenged by inflicting injury or death on members of the opposing group. Disputes could last for years, with any attack triggering the need for retaliation.

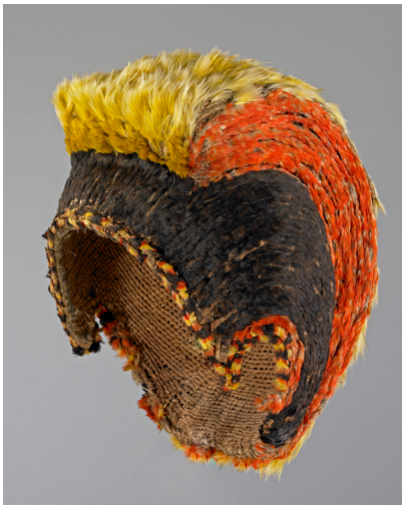
During the colonial period, many Pacific Islanders resisted the seizure of their lands, and some warriors – such as the Māori chief Hone Heke – became famous for their refusal to submit.

In the 20th century, the Pacific and its peoples were drawn into international conflicts, and during the Second World War the region became a major theatre of war. After the war, the United Kingdom, the United States and France conducted nuclear weapons testing in the area, causing significant and lasting harm to both people and the environment.

Today, Pacific communities face challenges such as climate change, population growth, the enduring impact of colonisation and the long-term consequences of nuclear testing.

This section includes the following sub-areas:

- *Dazzling the enemy*: Traditionally, warriors from the Pacific Islands wore attire designed to impress. Their entire appearance was intended to dazzle and intimidate the enemy. Warrior outfits served as physical protection, while garments made from materials considered sacred or the tattoos that covered their bodies provided spiritual protection.
  The objects on display in this section, from Kiribati, Hawai'i and the Marquesas Islands, reflect the tremendous efforts made to ensure that warriors were protected in battle.



Mahiole hulu manu (feather helmet) from Kaua'i Isalnd, Hawai'i. 1700-1800. *'I'iwi, mamo and ō'ō feathers*, pandanus root and *olonā* fibre. Oc, VAN.236.

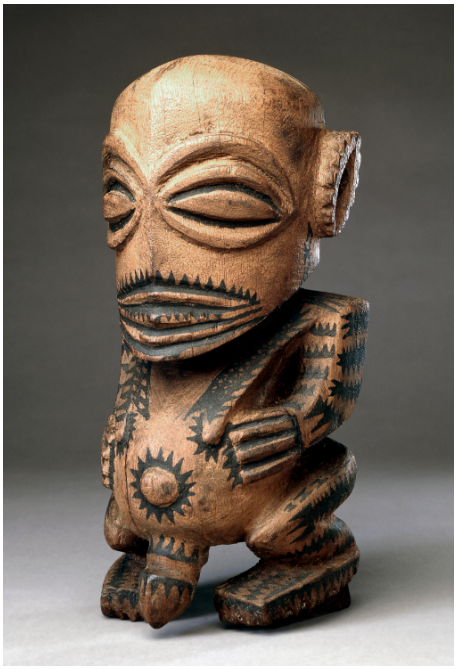
- *Clubs*: In Oceania, clubs served a wide variety of functions. They could be used in dances, brandished as a symbol of status during speeches, or carried in warrior parades. Clubs involved in great feats could even be given their own names and biographies.
  When first contact occurred, Europeans often mistakenly believed these clubs were solely weapons, a misunderstanding that reinforced the stereotype of Pacific Islanders as "warlike".
- *Pride and resistance*: European colonialism has shaped the lives of virtually all the inhabitants of the Pacific Islands. In some areas, islanders fiercely resisted the seizure of their ancestral lands.

  In the 20th century, they supported the Allied forces and fought in both World Wars, even forming special military units such as the Māori Battalion, which earned an outstanding reputation.
  Today, Pacific peoples are on the front line of the fight against global challenges like climate change. A powerful example is the youth-led movement 350 Pacific, whose slogan is "We are not drowning, we are fighting".

Carvers

The sixth section highlights the important role of carvers in society, creating both essential everyday objects and those used in rituals and ceremonies. Historically, carving was carried out by men, with knowledge passed down from generation to

generation. Today, people of all genders create works that reflect a complex and changing world.



Fisherman's god, from Rarotonga, Cook Islands. 1750-1850. Wood. Oc.9866.

Traditional Pacific tattooing involves the use of sharp combs dipped in ink and tapped into the skin using a small mallet. Because of this technique, the tattoos are often described as "carvings in the skin", although contemporary tattoo artists work with both traditional and modern tools. The most talented artists are in high demand and work around the world, tattooing a wide range of clients, including top athletes and celebrities.

Many carvings were created to honour the relationship between islanders and their gods and ancestors. Offerings were made before beginning the work, and the successful outcome of the piece was believed to depend equally on divine blessing and the skill of the carver.
On some islands, sculptures of ancestors were treated as if they were living beings. In New Guinea, highly elaborate objects were created for specific ceremonies, such as funerals. Once their ceremonial function had been fulfilled, the carvings were no longer considered useful and were left in the forest, where they would naturally decompose.

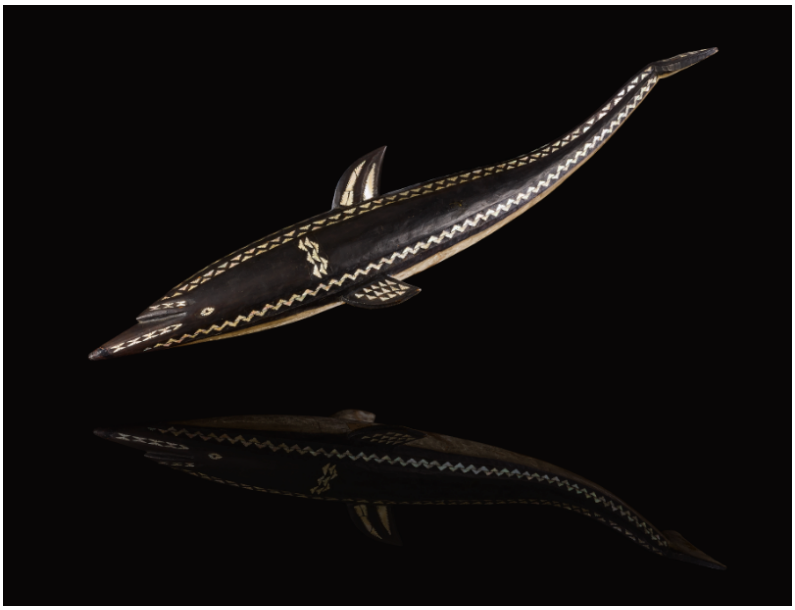
Carvers in the Pacific Islands created monumental structures and ocean-going canoes, but also produced highly delicate items such as shell ornaments. Before the arrival of metal, the islanders used stone tools for large-scale work and shark bones or teeth for more precise tasks.

In some parts of the region, the role of the master carver was comparable to that of a priest or ritual expert. In fact, they could not begin work until the proper ceremonies had been performed and offerings made to the gods.

On many islands, everyday meals are served on leaf platters that are quickly woven and used immediately. In some places, for weddings and funerals, large wooden bowls are specially carved to serve food to the many people who gather for such banquets.

In certain regions of Oceania, kava is consumed – an intoxicating substance made from the roots and stems of the *Piper methysticum* shrub. When served during formal ceremonies, kava is typically presented in beautifully decorated carved vessels.

The European fascination with Pacific Island tattoos began from the very first encounters. Sailors were so eager to be tattooed that islanders would come aboard the ships and work day and night to meet the demand.



Carving of a dolphin, from Ulawa, Salomon Islands. 1850-1900. Wood, mother-of-pearl shell. Oc1944,02.1315. © The Trustees of the British Museum

Voyagers: the ocean within us

The inhabitants of the Pacific Islands are among the most skilled voyagers ever to have crossed the world's oceans, exploring and settling across a region that covers more than a third of the Earth's surface. To travel these vast distances, different communities developed complex technologies based on a deep understanding of their environment. Navigators could read the sea and the sky, both day and night, as they journeyed across the waters.

The first settlement in the Pacific took place on the island of New Guinea, when it was part of a larger landmass known as Sahul. Travellers arrived in Sahul over 60,000 years ago, coming from islands further to the west. Aotearoa (New Zealand) was the last major landmass to be settled, around 800 years ago.

Fishhook from Mangaia, Cook Islands. 1750-1850. Wood. Oc.LMS.30.

Long before Europeans arrived in the region, the peoples of Oceania were already living cosmopolitan lives. For the islanders, the sea functioned as a communication channel that connected them, across distance and linguistic diversity, with relatives, friends and neighbours, as well as with strangers and enemies.

Challenges for the future

The inhabitants of the Pacific have faced major challenges to their traditional way of life. Today, climate change, rising sea levels and water pollution threaten the very existence of the islands.

In some low-lying countries, people are faced with the prospect of having to migrate. Artists, academics, poets and writers are working to raise awareness about the region's vulnerability to climate change, but they also face the future with strength and creativity. At this point, the exhibition presents the aforementioned installation by artist George Nuku, who remarks in connection with his work *Bottled Ocean 2123*:

"Plastic has divine qualities. It condenses light and water, the very forces of life. You could say that plastic is an ancestor. It comes from oil, which in turn comes from the remains of ancient forests, from dinosaur bones, from millions of years of compressed earth. So, in fact, plastic is probably the oldest thing we handle on a daily basis. But for me, it's also like the future. I walk the streets picking up bottles, and it's like finding treasure.
"Plastic is part of our existence, it floods and surrounds us. It's in every grain of sand on every beach. It's in the blood of whales and polar bears, in yours, in mine, in everything and everyone. How can we not have a theological, philosophical or cultural relationship with such a material?
"Let's be realistic: with what we've done to the planet, we're standing on the edge of a cliff, staring into the abyss. With my art, I want to encourage people to take a step back."

An invitation to visitors to reflect on environmental challenges

The exhibition includes a mediation project aimed at bringing the art and culture of Oceania closer to the wider public at CaixaForum Madrid. To this end, it connects the exhibition's messages with the environmental challenges faced by the inhabitants of the islands, and does so from a contemporary perspective. Today, the Pacific Islands are among the first ecosystems at risk due to rising sea levels.

The project features four interactive spaces that explore the innovation and solutions developed by Oceanic cultures to address future challenges. These distinct areas, situated throughout the exhibition, showcase various approaches and methods employed by these cultures to combat environmental challenges. At each of these points, questions are posed to visitors designed to encourage them to reflect and to foster a deeper connection with these pressing concerns.

Voices of the Pacific. Innovation and Tradition

CaixaForum Madrid

Place	Paseo del Prado, 36 28014 Madrid
Telephone	+34 913 307 300
Website	https://caixaforum.org/es/madrid/
Times	Monday to Sunday and national holidays, from 10 a.m. to 8 p.m.

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