

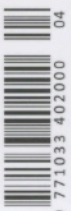
Issue 290 / June – July 2016

ART MONTHLY

AUSTRALASIA



AUS\$14.95
NZ\$16.00



Pacific bumper edition

artmonthly.org.au

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Return and revival in 'He Nae Ākea: Bound Together'

Mārata Ketekiri Tamaira, *Honolulu*



Top:
Ahu'ula (feather cloak), late 18th century,
plant fibre, feathers, 145cm length, 220cm width; gift of Lord St Oswald, 1912;
image courtesy Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington

Opposite:
Mahiole (feather helmet), late 18th century,
vine, plant fibre, feathers, 34 x 16 x 31cm; gift of Lord St Oswald, 1912;
image courtesy Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington

The sun pierces the canopy of the ancient forest creating a play of dappled light on the lush undergrowth below. All around a clamour of bird calls can be heard as scores of winged denizens dart between the trees, their glossy plumages a blur of primary colours – yellow, red, green. A gentle rain begins to fall and is suffused by a single shaft of sunlight. As each bird flies through this unity of elements – water and light – the feathers on their small beating wings transform into an array of resplendent rainbows.

This is the imaginary scene that is going through my mind when I first encounter 'He Nae Ākea: Bound Together', which opened in March 2016 at the Bernice Pauahi Bishop Museum in Honolulu. While only two items are on display in this exhibit, the weight of their history carries an aura of solemn gravitas – although over 200 years old, they are still alive with the potency of the man who once wore them. The articles of attention are a magnificent *ahu'ula* (feather cloak) and a *mahi'ole* (feather helmet), both the personal belongings of Kalani'ōpu'u, a renowned eighteenth-century Hawai'i chief who became known as 'Fierce Island-Piercer' after his warring exploits across the archipelago. The pieces represent an exquisite example of Hawaiian feather work and, together, comprise the sum total of tens of thousands of small feathers that were procured from native birds and painstakingly knotted into plant-fibre meshwork by skilled artisans.

The body of the warrior chief's cloak is crescent in shape and the surface is a vibrant combination of yellow and red feathers derived from three native birds: the 'ō'ō and mamo (yellow) and the 'i'iwi (red). The colours have been strategically arranged to create geometric motifs, including two triangles, a solitary crescent and a curious irregular shape that looks to be two crescents fused on top of one another. The meaning behind these motifs continues to pose an enigma for contemporary scholars. The high-crested helmet is made from the feathers of the 'i'iwi and 'ō'ō birds – the yellow of the 'ō'ō providing a prominent point of reference that brings visual definition to the curved crest, which resembles a breaking wave.

Garments such as these were the sole property of the Hawaiian ruling class and served as symbols of their divine and sovereign power. When used as battle regalia they were an awe-inspiring sight – a sight best encapsulated by the Hawaiian proverb 'Ka wela o ka ua [Heated rain]'. The proverb is a veiled reference to the capes and helmets that were worn by warrior

chiefs on the battlefield and that appeared as 'little rainbows' when the hot rays of the sun hit the rain-moistened surface of the feathered ensembles. (My waking vision of the birds on entering the exhibit space is perhaps an echo of this *mise en scène* of long ago.)

The exhibition is significant for the fact that it signals both the return of two important cultural icons to their home of origin, and the revival of cultural pride for Native Hawaiians who view the artefacts as a salient part of their history and identity. The treasures first left Hawai'i in 1779 after Kalani'ōpu'u gifted them to British explorer James Cook (who less than one month later met his demise at Kealakekua Bay, Hawai'i). In the intervening 237 years, the cloak and helmet have resided on foreign shores – first as part of a private collection in England and then in New Zealand where they were incorporated into the collections of the Dominion Museum, the antecedent to the Museum

of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa. In 2013, head administrators from Te Papa Museum, Bishop Museum and the Office of Hawaiian Affairs (OHA) brokered an agreement to bring the valuable belongings back to Hawai'i. As it stands, they are currently on loan to the Bishop Museum for 10 years with the possibility of an extension (or, as many hope, full repatriation).

As has been witnessed across the globe in general but in the Pacific in particular, the return of indigenous antiquities to their homelands is squarely situated within the politics of contemporary decolonisation efforts, and the treasures on display at the Bishop Museum are no exception. OHA Chief Executive

Kamana'ōpono Crabbe made the important observation that the homecoming of Kalani'ōpu'u's cloak and helmet represents for Hawaiians 'a cycle of reviving our dignity, our cultural pride and our vibrance'.¹ In this way, Kalani'ōpu'u's cloak and helmet are as much about the present and future as they are about the past. And while they are themselves bound together through a complex shared history that spans over two centuries, they also function to bind together Native Hawaiians by catalysing in them a shared sense of pride, patrimony and self-determination.



1. Radio New Zealand, 'Hawaiian treasures welcomed home', 18 March 2016; see www.radionz.co.nz/international/pacific-news/299305/hawaiian-treasures-welcomed-home, accessed 4 April 2016.