

'Social Lives' of Objects

The oldest collection of Pacific Islands artifacts in North America assembled by one person, the P. G. T. Black Collection had gone largely undocumented among anthropologists until Rochester professor Robert Foster undertook a project to share the objects with a wider audience. Foster is studying the more than 6,000 objects at the Buffalo Museum of Science to learn what they reveal about early encounters between Pacific Islanders and European traders, missionaries, officials, and tourists. "They're not inert," Foster says of the objects. "They have what I call 'social lives'—and new meanings continually get attached to them." (Numbers in parentheses represent the museum's catalog IDs.)



Man's Head MILNE BAY PROVINCE, MUTUAGA

A carving by Mutuaga, the only late 19th-century carver well known to collectors today (C11025).



Lime Spatulas MILNE BAY PROVINCE, MUTUAGA

Also by Mutuaga, the carved spatulas—for spooning a mix of crushed betel nuts and lime powder, a stimulant—are rubbed with lime powder for white pigment (C8335, 8337, 8339).



Pacific Ocean



Mask NEW IRELAND, CREATOR UNKNOWN

A *tatanua* mask—named for the dance in which it’s used—has hair made of plant fiber and eyes from snail shell (C8068).



Frigatebird SOLOMON ISLANDS, CREATOR UNKNOWN

Made from painted wood, the ornamental carving depicts the famous tropical ocean bird in flight (C11813).

Bougainville Island

SOLOMON ISLANDS

Solomon Sea

Santa Cruz Islands



Widow’s Cap MT. VICTORY AREA, CREATOR UNKNOWN

The hat, made from seeds of the plant Job’s tears, would be worn with a bodice from which a widow would remove a seed each day for a year as a symbol of mourning (C11139).



Fishing Net SANTA CRUZ ISLANDS, CREATOR UNKNOWN

Complete with Black’s original identification tag, the implement is lined with thorns to ensnare fish (C8133).