

# CURIOSITIES & COMMODITIES

## OCEANIAN OBJECTS FROM TWO WORLD'S FAIRS

BY ADRIA H. KATZ



New Caledonia engraved bamboo: detail showing French soldier (top) and chief's house with carved door posts and roof spire. UPM object # 2003-32-6. Photo by Jim Millisky.

In the fall of 2003, the Oceanian Section of the Penn Museum acquired materials from New Caledonia and the Philippines that had been exhibited at two great world's fairs: the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1900 and the St. Louis Louisiana Purchase Exposition of 1904. These objects came to us via the Philadelphia Commercial Museum, which, instrumental in organizing both fairs, was able to acquire many displays after they closed.

### NEW CALEDONIA IN PARIS, 1900

At the 1900 Exposition, New Caledonia, a French Pacific colony rich in natural resources, had its own small pavilion at the top of the Trocadero Gardens. The framework of the pavilion consisted of iron sections constructed by Gustave Eiffel, whose famous tower had dominated the Paris skyline since the Exposition of 1889. Inside was a single room, 38' long, down the center of which, on a low table, ran a relief map of the main island (La Grande Terre) on which were marked the locations of mines and sites of commercial interest. Surrounding the table were cases containing exhibits of natural products,

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and on the walls were arrays of spears and clubs, many of which are now at the Penn Museum.

In another building, devoted to dioramas, visitors could view an exotic “Scene Ethnographique—Nlle Caledonie Tahiti,” which featured two of the tall spires that traditionally topped the conical roofs of New Caledonian chiefs’ houses. These two spires, brightly painted and probably made expressly for display at the Exposition, are now in the Penn Museum. Elsewhere, objects from New Caledonia and other French Pacific colonies appeared in commercial, agricultural, and ethnographic exhibits. Many of the 125 New Caledonian and 77 Tahitian objects that came to the Museum still have their original exhibit labels and tags.

At the close of the Exposition, Lucien Bernheim, owner of a New Caledonian mine and recipient of a gold medal in the mining category, paid to have the New Caledonia pavilion disassembled and moved to Noumea, New Caledonia’s capital city, to become a public library bearing his name. Today this building, with Eiffel’s metal framework magnificently



“Scene Ethnographique,” Paris 1900 (Courtesy of Douglas Stewart), with one of two New Caledonia roof spires. UPM object #2003-32-11. Photo by Jim Millisky.



Building in the Philippine reservation at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, with American organizers of the Exposition William P. Wilson, William H. Taft, Gustav Neiderlein (above) and Philippine organizers (below). *Courtesy of the St. Louis Public Library.*

exposed, serves as an art gallery within the library complex. Gustave Neiderlein, Scientific Director of the Commercial Museum, who had been closely involved in the Exposition, was well positioned to claim colonial materials for Philadelphia. After helping the French government organize exhibits for a permanent colonial museum, he reportedly was given roughly half of the remaining collections.

#### THE PHILIPPINES IN ST. LOUIS, 1904

The next big world's fair was the Louisiana Purchase Exposition of 1904 in St. Louis. One of the most popular features of the fair was the 47-acre section devoted to the Philippine Islands, a territory acquired by the United States six years earlier in the Spanish-American War. Former Philippine Governor William H. Taft appointed the Commercial Museum's Director William P. Wilson as head of the Philippine Exposition Board, and he, in turn, recommended the appointment of Gustave Neiderlein as Director of Exhibits; Neiderlein went to the Philippines in October 1902 to oversee the assembly of the Philippine materials for display in St. Louis.

The entrance to the Philippine Reservation was across a bridge into the Walled City, in which were displayed objects captured by or surrendered to the Philippine Constabulary, plus gifts and loans from various individuals. Beyond lay the main exhibition buildings, among them buildings devoted to Agriculture, Forestry, and "Manufactures." Displays in Manufactures included 163 baskets, 230 pieces of pottery, and, on the walls and ceiling and in cases, 748 hats. An Ethnology Museum housed collections made by Albert E. Jenks for the Bureau of Ethnology. According to a contemporary guide to the fair, objects displayed in the first three buildings were "native products" of Christianized peoples, while those in the Ethnology Building were "materials made and used by the pagan and Mohammedanized people of the Archipelago." Around the periphery of the reservation were five villages—living exhibits representing the presumed progression from savage/pagan (Negrito, Igorot), through Muslim (Bagobo, Moro), to civilized/Christianized (Visayan).

Among the 500 Philippine objects in our collection from St. Louis are ones whose original labels identify them as having been exhibited in the Walled City, and in the Departments of Manufactures, and Fish and Game. The contributing military officer, private individual, school, or municipality is usually identified, and sometimes the name of the maker. A few objects—for example, stained and torn Bagobo clothing, and a Bagobo girl's beaded basket—clearly were acquired from residents of the Bagobo village.

Just before Neiderlein left for the Philippines, Wilson wrote him a confidential letter in which he said that his understanding with Taft was that "the collection prepared for St. Louis should be preserved as nearly intact as possible, and presented

New Caledonia  
"Tabou" or "Fetiché  
Canaque," Paris  
1900. UPM object  
#2003-32-44. *Photo  
by Jim Millisky.*



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Bird's-eye view of the Philippine Exposition, with bridge to Walled City in right foreground. *Courtesy of Special Collections, Haverford College*

to the Philadelphia Museums [the Commercial Museum] at the close of the Exposition... If other parties should be entitled to share in these benefits, see that a sufficient quantity is obtained to satisfy all” (September 5, 1902). In 1904 Neiderlein was part of the four-member committee charged with distribution of the exhibits.

The ethnological materials collected by Albert Jenks were sent back to the Philippines. In a letter to a representative of the Smithsonian Institution, A. S. Lowshe, chairman of the committee, acknowledged that “The disposition of the Ethnology material will of course be a disappointment to all but the Board is compelled to act under direct instructions of the Philippine government with regard to same” (December 22, 1904). The remaining materials, including the objects from the Christianized peoples, were up for grabs. Wilson’s declaration of priority was remembered, but there was a competing claim from the Smithsonian Institution. The collections were eventually sent to the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in New York, with instructions that duplicate collections be sent to the Smithsonian Institution and the Commercial Museum. Smaller collections were sent to the University of Iowa and the Milwaukee Public Museum.

### NEW CALEDONIA AND THE PHILIPPINES AT THE PHILADELPHIA COMMERCIAL MUSEUM

At the Commercial Museum, New Caledonian, Tahitian, and Philippine objects were displayed in large geographic/cultural areas incorporating both commercial and ethnographic exhibits. The “Polynesia” section included an ethnographically themed case with framed text panels, labels, and contextualizing photographs, crowded with New Caledonian architectural carvings, Tahitian fiber skirts and bark cloth ponchos, and a large Austral Islands ceremonial paddle. Most of the identifiable objects in the photograph on page 31 are now at the Penn Museum. In the Philippines section a manikin operating a hemp-heckling [combing] machine was displayed next to cases of hemp samples in various stages of preparation and manufacture.

### IMPORTANCE OF THESE COLLECTIONS

Decades later, after the Commercial Museum became the Civic Center Museum, registrar Jean M. Dempewolf wrote in response to an enquiry about the collections

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CLOCKWISE: Model sun hat with bamboo rim (UPM object #2003-32-74), with its original label from "Manufactures" (Department D). Photos by Jim Millisky. "Bagobo Child" with beaded basket. UPM object # 2003-31-25. Courtesy of Missouri History Museum, St. Louis. Polynesian display, Philadelphia Commercial Museum ca. 1910. Courtesy of Independence Seaport Museum. Philippine hemp exhibit, Philadelphia Commercial Museum ca. 1910. Courtesy of Independence Seaport Museum

that "our best materials come from the French colonies and our collection from New Caledonia is perhaps the most outstanding" (August 29, 1960). At that point she may have already been contacted by then Oceanian Section Associate Curator William Davenport, who in 1964 borrowed 17 carvings from "this impressive collection of New Caledonian sculpture" for an exhibition at the Penn Museum (see "Sculpture from La Grande Terre," *Expedition* 7.1 [1964]: 2-19).

Since the 100th anniversary of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in 2004, objects displayed in various parts of the Philippine Reservation, and the people who lived in the Reservation's Philippine villages, have become the focus of lively scholarly interest. Taken together with materials at AMNH, the Smithsonian, the University of Iowa, and the Milwaukee Public Museum, the collection at the Penn Museum contributes to an in-depth view of how Philippine cultures and manufactures were presented to the world in St. Louis in 1904. ●

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