



*Cape of Voyages*,  
giclée print of an  
original printed  
feather collage,  
2016.

# Feathered friends

Artist **Rebecca Jewell** tells **Julie Adams** how the Oceania collections have influenced the work she has recently donated to the Museum

Rebecca Jewell is an acclaimed printmaker and collage artist who has been inspired by the British Museum's Oceania collections for over 30 years. Her work addresses the subjects of voyaging, collecting, cataloguing and exhibiting, as well as questions relating to the hunting and trapping of birds for their feathers. Her art is a thoughtful engagement with the legacies of collecting, in terms of both its impact upon flora and fauna and upon the Indigenous communities from whom objects originated.

In 2019 Jewell offered to donate a selection of her work to the Museum. Working together in her studio, we identified 40 pieces that spoke directly to objects in the collection. She then carefully documented and registered them all, ensuring that this important

body of work can be studied and appreciated for generations to come. Here, Rebecca reflects upon the role the British Museum has played in her artistic practice:

'My interest in the Pacific began in 1982 when I travelled to Papua New Guinea and lived there for a year with an anthropologist and his artist wife and their four young children. We stayed in the heart of the forest with the Gamugai people in the Western Highlands, near Mount Hagen.

The Gamugai hunted birds for their feathers, and they made the most extraordinary and beautiful feather headdresses from birds of paradise, parrots, lorikeets, eagles and cassowaries. I saw many of these birds in the wild, and I was also lucky enough to see a *moka* exchange ceremony where the people wear their most stunning feather headdresses, oil and paint their bodies, decorate their pigs and dance and sing for many days and nights. This trip was a life-changing experience and gave me a fascination for feathers.

On returning from New Guinea, I went to Cambridge University to study social

anthropology. After graduating, my first job was as a curator at the Museum of Mankind (the former Ethnographic Department of the British Museum). Having always been keen on drawing, I also worked on two Museum publications, *African Designs* and *Pacific Designs*, for which I produced over a hundred illustrations.

In 1998 I enrolled at the Royal College of Art and completed a PhD which focused on feather artefacts from the Pacific. A large component of my thesis was looking at how artefacts were constructed, 'taking them apart' through drawing, in order to see how they were made: the 19th-century writer and artist John Ruskin advocated drawing as a process of learning how to see, not of learning how to draw.

One aspect of my work can be seen as reinterpreting ethnographic artefacts, through the lens of an artist. However, over time, the fact that I am a Western-trained artist working with non-Western material culture has increasingly raised questions: is my work appropriation or appreciation? Veneration or exploitation? Through discussions with anthropologists, museum curators and

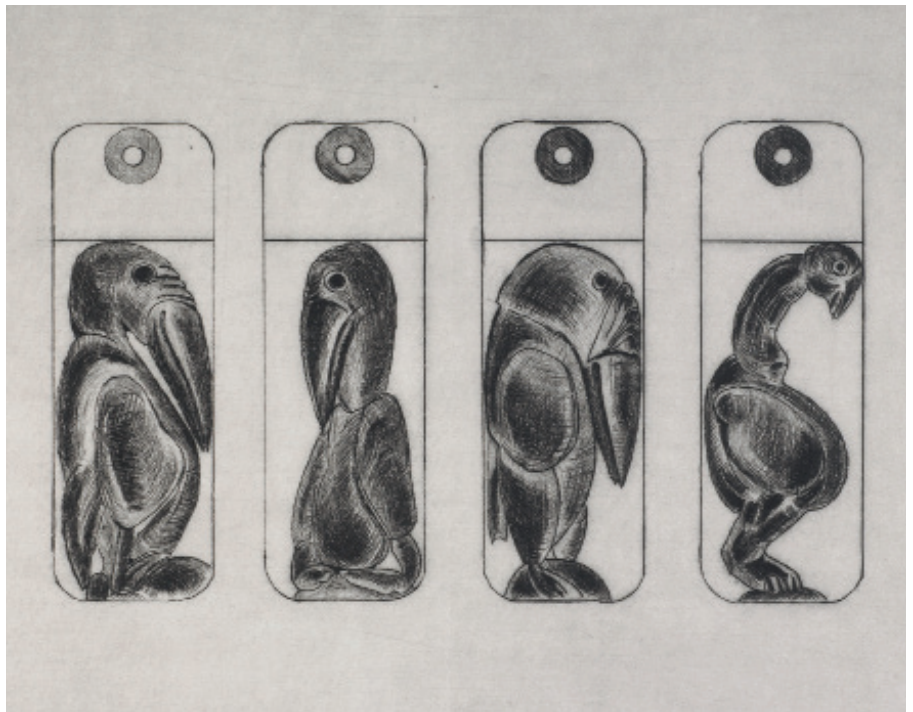
members of Indigenous communities, I have concluded that it is all of these things. Objects have their own stories, not just from their origins and making, but also their collection, exchange, gifting, journeys, migrations and sometimes plundering and theft. My art is about doing justice to those stories as well as becoming part of those stories.

Every artist strives for originality in their work. In 2010, when I was Research Fellow at Sir John Cass School of Art (now known as the School of Art, Architecture and Design), I had a ‘eureka’ moment. I had been inking up feathers and printing directly from them, but I decided to experiment to see whether I could print directly onto them. It worked and this technique has become the main component of my art practice; I print onto feathers and collage them to create artefacts/images.

In *Cape of Voyages*, the ‘cape’ is based on a Hawaiian feather cape shape and design. The feathers have printed onto them the names of ships and voyages that went to the Pacific in the 18th and 19th centuries, and which brought back artefacts that are now in the Museum. The piece represents objects exchanged and appropriated by early European explorers to the Pacific, objects which now reside in museums around the world. It’s about the voyages of collection, but also about the feather capes which themselves were highly valued by Hawaiian chiefs and collected by Europeans.

The etching *Sepik Birds*, drawn onto labels, represents the idea that artefacts (in this case carved wooden figure heads from Papua New Guinea) become objects labelled and catalogued in the Museum. The ink and watercolour drawing of a feather ornament shows how the white cockatoo feathers and the red parrot feathers have been split down the middle to help make them bob about when the ornament is worn.

The donated works can be viewed on [Collection online](#). More of Rebecca Jewell’s work can be seen at [www.rebeccajewell.com](http://www.rebeccajewell.com). Her teaching website is [www.drawnfromnature.co.uk](http://www.drawnfromnature.co.uk)



*Sepik Birds*, etching, showing four museum labels with a stylised bird image on each, 2007.



Watercolour drawing dated 2002 of a feathered ornament from Redscar Point, collected on HMS *Rattlesnake*. The original object is in the British Museum.