Object type: Currency roll (tevau)
Culture/Location: Santa Cruz, Solomon Islands, Melanesia
Dimensions: 6 x 15 5/8 x 16 3/4 in x 27 ft long
Materials: Feather, bark, shell, fiber, resin and bead
Institution: Bowers Museum, LA 2001.74.14

Object type: Bamboo flute (kaur)
Culture/location: Vanuatu, possibly Ambrim
Dimensions: Length 36 $^{1}/_{4}$ in, width 1 $^{3}/_{8}$ in
Materials: bamboo
Institution: Museum of Fine Art Boston 2002.206

This intricate currency roll, also called *tevau*, measures 27 feet long when unrolled. The roll consists of fiber, shells, and feathers taken from scarlet Honeyeaters and grey Pacific Pigeon birds. Three different specialists, who earn their positions as artists through birthright, perform three different tasks to complete the roll. The first specialist gathers feathers of around 300 birds, the second attaches the feathers to shell plaques, and the third attaches the plaques to fiber. Just one currency roll takes between 500-600 hours to create. Currency rolls originated in Santa Cruz and were only produced there, but were traded throughout the island chain (Grabski, 2016.) There are eleven different grades of this roll- the value is placed on the amount of red feathers, the brilliance of the feathers, and width of the plates themselves (Beasley 386, 1936.) H.G Beasley calls this monetary system “very highly developed and specialised” (Beasley 386, 1936.) These rolls hold immense amounts of value, and were typically gifted during weddings as part of a bride price, along with other dowry gifts (Bowers Museum, 2006.) This currency roll was used as part of a ceremonial gift exchange, one of the two different parts of indigenous Melanesian commerce.

Trading objects with social and religious significance was a large part of building intercultural connections between ethnic groups in pre and post contact Melanesia. Indigenous Melanesian commerce can be divided into two groups: ceremonial gift exchange and commercial trading (Görlich 1998, 284). Interpreting the context in which ethnic groups exchanged items denotes which category each exchange belongs to. In Melanesia, art was produced for many

reasons- one being maintaining social relationships. Objects were created in a specialized production, and then traded throughout extensive networks to maintain social standing and relations. Görlich argues that ceremonial gift exchange is a “metonymic or metaphoric extension” of the giver. Outside of maintaining social relationships, objects were traded for material and commercial purposes, similar to Western economic trading. The flute, also called a kaur, hails from Vanuatu- possibly Ambrim. The flute is carved from wood, measures 36 $^{1}/_{4}$ inches tall and possesses carved triangles alternately painted light brown. Although this work hails from Vanuatu, it deviates from typical indigenous Melanesian art in that it is carved from a permanent material, and its’ design is reserved in comparison to counterparts. The flute also differentiates itself in its purpose. Flutes such as this one were traded between ethnic groups in Melanesia, to be used by initiated men in their respective secret societies. The rights to the flute came with rights to every aspect of the ritual the flute was used for, including music, dance, and purpose (Harrison 141, 1991). Flutes such as this were part of commercial exchanges between ethnic groups throughout Melanesia and were traded specifically for other materials. Ethnic groups did not take commercial exchange lightly, and it often lead to violence. For example, men from Nafri village taught a ritual for mens’ societies using bamboo flutes to the chief of Ayafo in exchange for beads produced in Ayafo. The chief implemented this ritual in his mens’ society without handing over the beads. The two communities resorted to violence and soon enough the chief handed over the goods- ten beads, an ancient ring, and several drums, ending the strife (Harrison 141, 1991).

I decided to compare these two objects to showcase the depth, intelligence, and complexity behind Melanesian commerce in order to combat the ethnographic present, or the portrayal and viewing of non-Western cultures as it was prior to missionary contact. This commercial history is a clear testament to the intelligence, community, and resourcefulness of each respective ethnic group. When studying cultures that our Eurocentric backgrounds have primed us to consider tribal and primitive, we tend to view them with unconscious disdain- looking at them as less intelligent and civilized than us. Growing up in the American public school system, I was under the impression that colonized countries needed our intervention to steer them in the “right” direction. Over the duration of this class, I slowly unraveled the imagescape and preconceived notions I had regarding Oceania. By studying pre-contact indigenous traditions, we can create a better understanding of non-Eurocentric cultures as different yet well-developed societies, functioning outside of capitalism and our ideals. As a whole, we need to understand that Westernizing foreign countries does not mean improving them. Our collective imagescape of

indigenous cultures as fresh soil in which to plant and grow new hotbeds of Western society needs to be altered. We ought to seek a tolerant and welcoming understanding of disparate cultures. By comparing these two objects, I hope to raise questions about the true abilities and intelligence of societies we have always considered below us.

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