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ARTICLE

Marketing, Narratives, and Consumer Desire within Auction Catalogs of Cultural Objects

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Abstract

This article uses the lens of commodity theory and, in particular, the scarcity effect to consider ways that consumer desire is reflected within auction catalogs for cultural objects. Taking Brodie and Manivet's (2017:3) assertion that "auction sales do not offer a clear window onto the broader antiquities trade" as a motivating initial hypothesis, I find that auction catalogs do represent marketing material that can provide at least a blurry window onto the needs, wants, and desires of consumers acting within the market for archaeological and heritage objects. Consumer motivation at an auction is notoriously difficult to assess externally and has long represented a gap in the analysis of public antiquities sales. Failures to effectively regulate market consumption may relate to a misunderstanding of the people who are being regulated. Using more than 50 years of auction sales of Pacific cultural items as a case study, I present auction narrative analysis as a method to consider consumer desire and thereby inform heritage policy and market interventions.

Resumen

Este artículo utiliza la "commodity theory" y en particular "scarcity effect", para examinar cómo el deseo del consumidor se refleja en los catálogos de subastas de objetos culturales. Partiendo de la hipótesis inicial de Brodie y Manivet (2017:3) de que "[a]uction sales do not offer a clear window onto the broader antiquities trade," el artículo concluye que los catálogos de subastas representan material de marketing que puede ofrecer al menos una ventana borrosa hacia las necesidades y deseos de los consumidores en el mercado de objetos arqueológicos y de patrimonio. La motivación del consumidor en las subastas es difícil de acceder externamente y ha representado una laguna en el análisis de las ventas públicas de antigüedades. Las fallas en la regulación del consumo en el mercado pueden estar relacionadas con una comprensión limitada de los regulados. Utilizando más de 50 años de ventas en subastas de objetos culturales del Pacífico como caso de estudio, presento el análisis narrativo de las subastas como una manera de empezar a considerar el deseo del consumidor con el fin de informar la política de patrimonio y las intervenciones de mercado.

Keywords: antiquities market; auction catalogs; commodity theory; consumption; desire; Pacific cultures

Palabres clave: mercado de patrimonio cultural; catálogos de subastas; *commodity theory*; consumo; deseo; culturas del Pacífico

Prelude: The Flesh Fork

On May 15, 2017, Sotheby's New York offered Lot 49. The multipronged, dark-colored object on the block in this "Art of Africa, Oceania, and the America" sale was billed as a "Flesh Fork" from Fiji. The extended catalog note for this object offers clarification for interested buyers. It acknowledges that on the market these objects bear "the popular name of 'cannibal forks' due to the mistaken notion that human flesh was so special that none dared touch it with their fingers" while implying that, by avoiding

that term, Sotheby's was taking a self-aware step away from "Victorian sensationalism and the European fascination with anthropophagy" (Sotheby's New York 2017).

According to C. J. Thomas (2021:66), "The cannibal fork … is an ideal Western marker for Pacific authenticity"; unlike clubs and spears, which are "likewise symbols of savagery, in the minds of Europeans," the cannibal fork is easy to hold, transport, and thus to possess. Lot 49 was the twenty-third object of this kind that I had recorded across 50 years of auction sales of Pacific cultural objects at Sotheby's and Christie's auction houses. Most earlier sales used the term "Cannibal Fork" in either French or English, uncritically and without further detail or reflection. Narratives commonly shared within the predominantly white and European/American market for Pacific objects portrayed the cultures that created them as savage, salaciously sexual, and violent. It seemed that this terminological shift to "Flesh Fork" might indicate an art market response to the mounting decolonizing sentiment in popular culture and, specifically, a move away from equating Pacific culture with cannibalism. A closer look seems to indicate otherwise.

In this Sotheby auction catalog entry, which acknowledges that "few objects draw such macabre fascination as the flesh forks of Fiji," cannibalism in one form or another is mentioned eight times. Using a range of recent and less than recent sources constructed in the form of an "academic" assessment, the catalog note pushes a concept of cannibalism to a more shocking and grotesque level, still implying that it is at least likely that the fork in question was used in the consumption of human flesh. Differing views abound about the cultural significance of these objects, and their context and nuance are complicated; for example, see Jelinek (2012) for an exhibition in response to the cannibal fork imaginary; C. J. Thomas (2021) for the form of the fork as provoking European imagination and validation, or Banivanua Mar (2016) on the concept of Fijian cannibalism being "a drawcard for outsiders." Yet by moving from "Cannibal Forks" to "Flesh Forks," Sotheby's could attract buyers who shunned the social stigma of consuming objects of gross exoticism but to whom that exoticism still appealed. Prior sales of "Cannibal Forks" sold for prices in the hundreds to low thousands, within the range of the catalog price estimates. Indeed, the "Flesh Fork" sold for $16,250 USD, much more than its estimated value of $3,000–$6,000.

Auction Catalogs as a Window into Consumer Desire

Archaeological scholarship related to the trade in cultural objects has its academic underpinnings in numerous influential evaluations of auction catalogs (including but not limited to Brodie 2006, 2008, 2011; Chippindale and Gill 2000; Elia 2001; Gilgan 2001; Gill and Chippindale 1993; Nørskov 2002; Yates 2006). Archaeologists interested in monitoring the licit and illicit trade in cultural objects have viewed these catalogs as an available, if imperfect, window into the functioning of this gray market (Bowman 2008; Mackenzie and Yates 2016a) and the objects within it. In many cases, they are positioned as a response to a perceived existential threat posed by the market to the discipline of archaeology: to quote a highly influential study by Gill and Chippindale (1993:601) published in the *American Journal of Archaeology*, "Archaeological contexts have been destroyed, the means of developing a reliable chronological sequence have been lost, regional variations in figure types have become blurred" because of the market for cultural objects. This research has profoundly influenced archaeology's disciplinary understanding of the demand for cultural objects and the trades that supply them to consumers.

These archaeologically situated studies—conducted by archaeologists, directed to fellow archaeologists, and published in archaeological journals—tend to focus on the availability or suppression of tangible truths related to object histories. These evaluations, including those I previously conducted, consider such features as the presence or absence of findspot/provenience information, ownership histories/provenance information, and, of course, analyses of the prices estimated and achieved—all for the purpose of drawing conclusions that are argued to have direct implications on the ground at archaeological and heritage sites. This has been important work of the highest standard and represents how the illicit trade in cultural objects, in particular, has been defined in the public, policy, and academic spheres.

However, as Neil Brodie (2019:265) has argued, "While auction catalogs do provide an invaluable source of information for investigating the antiquities market, it can be misleading." Based on his own auction catalog work, Brodie challenges the common assumption that the effects of so-called market

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control measures (or a lack of those measures) meant to counter the looting and trafficking of archaeological material can be seen in data gleaned from catalog sales: "Auction sales do not offer a clear window onto the broader antiquities trade" (Brodie and Manivet 2017), and "the effects of business decisions aimed at increasing profitability cannot be ignored" (Brodie 2019). Using these assertions as a starting point, I explore the unclear window provided by auction catalogs onto business decisions that auction houses make to increase profitability through provoking consumer desire. Previous archaeological studies of catalogs did not focus on desire specifically but took it as a given. It is this desire that many archaeologists have argued translates directly to holes in the ground at archaeological sites (e.g., famously, Elia (1993) and Renfrew's (1993) article titled "Collectors Are the Real Looters"). Thus, understanding this desire is of great importance to archaeologists.

Direct support for Brodie's assertion is evident in the court transcripts of *Accent Delight International Ltd. et al. v. Sotheby's et al.*, a lawsuit heard in the US District Court, Southern District of New York. The suit was brought to determine whether Sotheby's auction house was responsible for an alleged fraud committed by an art dealer against a Russian oligarch. Over the course of several days, Samuel Valette, a Sotheby's senior vice president, testified about the purpose of the auction catalog. The picture he painted of the catalog was that it was not concerned either with presenting or concealing information about the pieces for sale but rather selling those pieces: catalogs were designed to make the objects for sale desirable to consumers. Reconceptualizing auction catalogs as purely marketing material can and should cause scholars to rethink the conclusions about the trade in cultural objects that can be drawn from them.

With this reconceptualization comes new opportunities. If auction catalogs are marketing material, they will inevitably contain clues about the needs and desires of the people that they are marketing to: the buyers, the collectors, the consumers of cultural objects. These people are largely beyond the reach of academic interview and evaluation because of a market culture characterized by anonymity, perceived risk, and understandably poor relations with scholars who ultimately seek to critique the commodification of the objects these people buy (see Mackenzie and Yates 2016b). We have long sought to regulate the trade in cultural objects with little to no insight into the motivations of market participants and with mixed success. Better regulation can only be developed by understanding the people we seek to regulate (for a comparative model, see Kersel 2023).

In this article I argue that, even though auction catalogs may not provide a window into all quantitative truths about the trade in cultural objects, they do provide qualitative insight into consumer desire. I present a method through which consumer desire can be glimpsed: the collection, classification, and analysis of unsubstantiated narratives that are assigned to many cultural objects by the catalog text.

As a demonstration of this method, I analyze sales of Pacific cultural objects at Sotheby's and Christies over the span of 50 years (1970–2020). The collection and classification of what amounted to just over 600 narratives present within these sales reveals a consumer desire for objects that are linked to concepts of exploitation, domination, and control. The attraction to violence inherent in these case study findings frames the purpose of such a method. By documenting the persuasive narratives that cause buyers to consume such objects, we can develop ways to prevent, in this case, dominating cultures from continuing to enjoy the literal spoils of violence. Or, put more neutrally, we can develop regulatory interventions that stem directly from an understanding of the desires of the people whose behavior we seek to regulate. We can work to make illicit, illegal, (post)colonial cultural objects less desirable.

Commodity Theory, Marketing, and Auction Catalog Narratives

Auction catalogs are physical or digital booklets through which auction houses present objects for sale to potential bidders. They contain photographs and physical descriptions of the objects for sale; some limited information about the objects' provenance, provenience, or both; details of any past publications or display of the objects; an estimated price range that buyers should expect the object to sell for; and a "note" section that can contain whatever additional information the auction house decides to include. Auction catalogs are compiled by the auction house and have no single author: various auction house employees assemble the information in the information in each catalog entry. In years past, a physical version of the auction catalog would be mailed to subscribers and other potential customers. Physical

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auction catalogs are held in various library and archive collections, notably those with a focus on art and art historical research. Since the early 2000s, digital versions of the catalogs have been made available for free on the websites of the auction houses and exist there as an accessible archive to researchers.

"The catalog presents the auction house not as a selling center, but as an institution of scholarship and expertise" (Thompson 2012:116), yet the catalog "is not a scholarly essay, but rather a subtle advertisement for the artwork" (117). Despite a concerted effort to mimic the imagery, content, and tone of scholarly works, auction catalogs are marketing material. They serve two complementary purposes: to attract (1) potential buyers, make them feel connected to objects for sale, and to convince them to bid; and (2) consigners of similar objects who are drawn by the prospect of the auction house attaching a positive price estimate to the lots (Thompson 2012:148; see Ekelund et al. 2013; Louargand and McDaniel 1991). "The catalogue is the first instance whereby the retail/commercial aspect of the auction combines with fine-arts aesthetic in order to set price" (Geismar 2001:34), and the content of the catalog entries, including their provenance and other notes, is not meant to inform but to provoke desire. The auction catalog "copy recounts stories and myths to market the art and reinforce the auction house mystique" (Thompson 2012:116). The content, then, reflects what consumers want because the auction houses seek to profit from those desires. "The catalog is the place in which value seems to congeal on the sites of objects" (Geismar 2001:37), and value and consumer desire are intimately related (Yates and Mackenzie 2021).

Commodity theory (Brock 1968) holds that perceptions of scarcity influence consumer desire for a commodity, essentially arguing that "scarcity enhances the value (or desirability) of anything that can be possessed, is useful to its possessor, and is transferable from one person to another" (Lynn 1991:43). It is tied closely to what has been termed the "scarcity effect" or "scarcity bias," a psychological bias that holds that perceived scarcity makes consumers see a commodity as more desirable (Mittone and Savadori 2009). This effect may be enhanced by a lack of clear, reliable information about a commodity; indeed, "the effect of scarcity is hypothesized to be strongest when no other information about the good is available" (Verhallen 1982). The scarcity effect has been further identified with ideas of rarity value (e.g., Hughes 2022), and the so-called snob effect (Leibenstein 1950), which considers the desire of some people "to be exclusive" in their patterns of consumption. Importantly, Lynn (1991:53–54) postulated that the consumer desire for uniqueness and thus the greater scarcity effect would be strongest for commodities that are "valued for their symbolic and self-defining properties" rather than their utility. Those are exactly the type of commodities that are present in the catalog for an auction of cultural objects.

Combining the assertion that catalogs are marketing material meant to attract consumers with the work from commodity theory suggesting that consumers of cultural objects likely desire objects that are scarce, unique, or otherwise exclusive, I return to the previously mentioned court testimony of a Sotheby's senior vice president Samuel Valette. He was asked, essentially, why Sotheby's chose not to put clear and accurate information about ownership history in their catalogs. He responded, "It wouldn't help sell the work" (see transcript of *Accent Delight International Ltd. V. Sotheby's and Sotheby's, Inc.*, January 22, 2024, p. 1481, lines 5–10; also reported on in Cassady 2024). His answer implies that what is included in the catalog is what helps sell the work. Valette went on to discuss catalog marketing strategies that increased the perceived prestige and thus the implied rarity, scarcity, and uniqueness of the object for sale. Because increasing an object's prestige is the catalog's primary purpose, extraneous details that did not enhance the value of the objects for sale are not included. Only those details that are directly related to consumer desire are in the catalog.

It is within this context that I present the concept of the "narrative" within an auction catalog entry. Although prior research on cultural object auction catalogs has deeply considered truth and believability issues related to provenance (the ownership history) and provenience (the origin or findspot), little attention has been paid to the linguistic flourishes, the unsubstantiated back stories, and the undocumented tales that add narrative depth to the cultural objects being sold. The archetypical auction narrative, as defined here, is expressed either in the "note" or the "provenance" section of a catalog entry, although it may be present in the title given to the object. Many entries start with some version of these phrases—"reported to have been," "believed to have come into his possession from," "there has been

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some speculation that it may have been collected by," "with an old label marked," "the family claims," et cetera—which are all quotes from auction catalogs included in the cases described later. Others are one or two descriptive words that add narrative depth to an object; for example, "Chief's Club," rather than simply a club, or the "Flesh Fork" discussed in the prelude.

Many auction catalog narratives lack supporting documentary evidence, and many have a "tall tale" quality that does not appear to aspire to objective truth. Rather, they try to enhance consumer perceptions of the item's uniqueness and desirability: they make the objects special. As marketing material, these narratives aim to reflect what consumers wish to see, what they find desirable, and what enhances the consumability of the cultural objects. Existing beyond documentable truth, the narratives then reflect consumer demand. To study them is to study what consumers of cultural objects want and to begin to understand what and why they buy. Prior work has argued that "western values and desires are well expressed" in auction catalogs of Pacific cultural objects from the period before 1940 (Torrence and Clarke 2011:39). Working under the assumption that auction catalogs reflect consumer desire, I sought to see what those desires are for relatively more recent cultural objects from the Pacific.

The rest of the article outlines my attempt to collect and classify these narratives across 50 years of auction sales of Pacific cultural objects at Sotheby's and Christie's auction houses. The results, I argue, reveal important aspects of consumer desire in this market that are difficult to square with attempts to reduce market demand via appeals to decolonization and emphasizing the horrors of colonial domination and control. If my argument that auction narratives are a direct reflection of consumer desire holds true, the horrors of colonial domination appear to be appealing to the market. Market reduction strategies that focus on engendering guilt through stories of colonial loss may simply not work because consumers are actively consuming that loss.

Collecting Patterns of Market Narratives

This work has strong subjective qualities, in which the tone and focus of the recorded narratives are necessarily mediated via the positionality and interpretive lens of the researcher. This was partially mitigated by having multiple researchers collect the data, classify the narratives, and review all the classifications, but the inherent bias in such classification cannot be eliminated. These narratives are themselves affective and subjective: they are designed to play on the preexisting desires of auction catalog viewers, among whom are the researchers who attempt this work. We did not aspire to objectivity in this type of research. At the same time the emergent patterns we document are strong.

At the outset, I placed artificial boundaries on the cultural objects that would be included in this research. These boundaries, however, are more or less aligned with how the objects are sold on the market and consumed. Objects from Polynesia and Melanesia (including New Guinea) were included, and Polynesian and Melanesian cultural affiliation was the primary determinant of inclusion. Objects from Australia, the Philippines, and non-New Guinea Indonesia were excluded, as were books, maps, and overtly European objects offered within these sales. No temporal bounds were placed on the sample, but contemporary Pacific art was not present in these sales and thus was not included; most objects in the sample were produced before the 1950s, with some having been made long before.

Before data collection began, I also placed some boundaries on what I considered to be a narrative. However, my definition is open to allow thematic patterns to emerge organically from the data collected. For the purposes of this study, a narrative is any piece of additional information, particularly unverifiable information, that adds an evocative desire-enhancing "story" to the object in question. This additional information ranged from the addition of one evocative word to the title of an object, to the linking of the object to particular ships and voyages, and to longer and unsupported stories attributed to family lore or other scenarios.

With these boundaries in place and in collaboration with three research assistants, we collected the narratives present in 50 years (1970–2020) of Christie's and Sotheby's sales catalogs for cultural objects from the Pacific; we consulted both physical catalogs and digital ones from the Sotheby's and Christie's websites. Because many of these catalogs have not yet been digitized, narrative collection was done by

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Table 1. Number of Auction Catalog Entries in the Sample That Displayed Each Subtheme.

Theme	Subtheme	Lots
Colonial Domination		
	Tales of Daring Do	4
	"Isn't Colonialism Dandy"	6
	Violence	11
	Missionaries	94
South Seas Savagism		
	Human Sacrifice	5
	Murder of Whites by Natives	6
	Cannibalism	22
	Head Hunting	29
	Human Remains for Sale	47
	Human Hair or Teeth	90
	Other "Violent Natives"	10
Chiefs		
	Named Chief	20
	Royal Family	26
	"Chief Stuff"	69
"Collected by White Men in Boats"		
	Thor Heyerdahl Connection	1
	Darwin Connection	2
	The Bounty Connection	3
	Whalers	5
	Only the Name of a Ship	14
	Collected by Named Person on Named Ship	28
	Collected by Other Military Person	34
	Collected by Captain/Admiral X	48
	Captain Cook Connections	54
"Buy the culture that Colonialism destroyed"		11

Note: Some catalog entries displayed multiple subthemes.

hand, page by page, with each narrative typed into a spreadsheet. Narratives from digital catalogs, of which some were website based and some were PDFs, were copied and pasted into the spreadsheet.

The dataset that resulted is not an exhaustive collection of all sales of Pacific cultural objects at the auction houses during this period: The undigitized sales from before 2000 were less well represented within the sample. Yet, thousands of objects from the Pacific were described in the catalogs, and we analyzed just over 600 of them that contained some indication of a narrative in the sense previously described. We believe these narratives to be representative of the stories that exist within this market during the period in question, at least as presented at Sotheby's and Christie's, the two largest and most influential global auction houses in terms of sales.

After these 600 narrative-bearing catalog entries were collected, I inductively coded each with one or more broad-stroke characterization of the focus of the narrative. Some catalog entries contained multiple thematic narratives, and many contained none. I then organized them into subthemes of what I saw as five major narrative themes present within the catalogs (Table 1). These characterizations were in many ways subjective and related to my own reading of the narratives. My flippancy conveys the often-startling tone of some of the original narratives.

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Marketing Pacific Cultural Objects: Emerging Narrative Themes

Although I discuss the themes and subthemes in the individual narratives, I believe they all contribute to (and stem from) a centralizing core narrative about how the Pacific has been and continues to be imagined by the people who consume it on the art market and, in turn, what is rare and unique within that core narrative. To paint in broad strokes, this centralizing narrative is a shared fantasy space in which the European ships that "explored" the Pacific were "heroic"; in which white people conducted "voyages of discovery" and had adventures among primitive, violent, and sexually charged "natives"; and in which the intense "collecting" of cultural objects by whites represented the laudable "preservation" of "dying races." These are grotesque "racial stereotypes and notions of the primitive" (Torrence and Clarke 2011:40), and within this overarching narrative, there is no space for the real experiences of Indigenous peoples of the Pacific. Authentic Indigenous voices are entirely absent from the auction narratives: there is no room for Indigenous reality within European fantasy at auctions.

In the following sections I briefly describe some of the narrative themes and offer examples of narratives that fit each one. I then conclude with a discussion about how coming to understand the desire-provoking qualities of these narratives may facilitate the development of effective deterrents to the undesirable consumption of cultural objects.

Colonial Domination

The theme of colonial domination relates to stories attached to objects associated with the suppression, elimination, or forced transformation of Indigenous Pacific culture. Four subthemes were identified in this broader theme. First are "tales of derring-do," narratives of heroics in which an American or European person acts bravely in some scenario. A related subtheme, which is titled with purposeful flippancy "Isn't colonialism dandy," evokes the colonial period in the Pacific as the "good old days"; these narratives also sometimes involve a story of native deference. Another subtheme detected is direct violence targeting Indigenous people of the Pacific at the hands of Europeans or Americans. Finally, within this theme are the 94 narratives that mention missionaries in some way, usually as an unsubstantiated aspect of the collection of the object in question. Geismar (2001:36) notes that in auction catalog descriptions, "the context of missionary colonialism [is] mentioned just enough to give the piece historical credibility," and the missionary presence in these narratives seems to be used to assert the authenticity of the piece. These narratives reflect a buyer interest in redefining cultural loss and are tinged with a sense of adventure, with cultural loss enhancing the perceived rarity and value of the object for sale, as seen in two examples:

> One of a group of about 60 figures that were revealed by Dr. Jacques Viot from their secret burying place in Lake Sentani where they had been hidden by the local inhabitants to escape the missionaries [Christie's London 1979a:Lot 234].

> The plaque accompanying . . . reads: When the Admiral asked him, "But what will your successors say when they are told that you gave away that which had been handed down by your ancestors for you and your tribe to preserve?" The chief replied at once: "When they are told it was given by Paora Tuhnere to a big Sea Chief sent out to us by our 'Great Mother' the Queen they will say Paora Tuhnere did well" [Christie's London 1995:Lot 7].

"South Seas Savagism"

Nicholas Thomas (1989:44) wrote that "the spectre of anthropophagy was formerly so overdrawn in depictions of South Seas savagism that it is now hard to appreciate the extent to which this was more than a racist stereotype." This theme includes narratives that imagine the Indigenous people of the Pacific as backward, savage, sexual, and violent. These take the form of stories of nameless "natives" wreaking violence in some way that involves the object in question. Also included are decontextualizations of Pacific cultural practices into the brutal or grotesque, such as assertions of cannibalism, "head hunting," and human sacrifice. Narratives reflecting this theme also describe the sale of what are purported to be Indigenous human body parts as objectified curios, with the implication being that savage natives

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objectified that what was once human before the market and consumers did. This seems to reflect buyers' desire for the taboo, itself a word taken from Polynesian culture by Captain Cook in 1777 (see the later discussion). These cultural objects and their narratives, then, are the epitome of titillating; they are literally the original taboo in consumer's eyes, as seen in these examples:

> Bearing a label: "This Tortoise-Shell-neck ornament was taken from the person of a Female Savage—one of the Admirals of Murray Island in Torres-Straits- who murdr'd and devour'd . . . passengers and crew of the British" [Christie's London 1979b:Lot 39].

> Collected by a relative of the present owner, family tradition has it that the present mace was used by the natives to kill a missionary and was thus seized from them [Sotheby's London 1980:Lot 64].

Chiefs

This type of narrative ascribes importance to the object via unsubstantiated assertions that it was associated with a "chief" or "headman." Most narratives offer no proof for such claims, although some individuals are named, particularly regarding those objects that the narratives associate with the monarchy of Hawai'i. Many of the names are so mangled that it is difficult to figure out which individual is meant; the entries do not attempt to correct the name renderings for clarity. The deployment of this narrative appears to reflect consumers' imagination of structures of power in the Pacific and the role objects might play in those structures, rather than Indigenous Pacific cultural reality. This speaks to a buyer interest in power symbols that themselves imply eliteness and rarity, as seen in these examples:

> The "Rosenthal club" was probably not intended for active service, but for the ceremonial use of a chief [Sotheby's New York 2008:Lot 99].

> A paddle club with notches indicating victims. . . . Believed to have been King Thackombau's personal weapons [Sotheby's London 1984:Lot 60].

White Men in Boats

Consumer imagination of the Pacific has been fundamentally shaped by the image of voyages of conquest and discovery that evoke whaling misadventures, mutinies, "untouched" island paradises, natural science, and the idea of sailing beyond the edge of "civilization." Many consumers who desire the physical manifestations of Pacific culture likely developed this desire via fictional and nonfictional writings about white men in boats. This narrative seeks to connect individual objects for sale to boat voyages, particularly the famous boats and the famous men in them with whom potential consumers are already familiar. Indeed, 54 narratives include references to the ultimate white man in a boat in the Pacific, James Cook. In those catalog entries the narrative contortions needed to connect a particular object to Cook are, at times, formidable. Although it is true that Cook's travels resulted in a large number of Pacific cultural objects being brought back to Europe (McAleer 2017; Shawcross 1970; Thomas 1989; Thomas et al. 2016), many are in museum collections, and their supply, it is implied, is limited, as seen in these narrative examples:

> Believed to have come into his possession from some member of Captain Cook's expedition—Oct. 29, 1887 [Christie's London 1973:Lot 244].

> A large number of the pieces of bark cloth included are from Hawaii, and because of the date, it is unlikely that the pieces could have come from any other voyage than Cook's [Sotheby's London 1983:Lot 88].

> Given to Elizabeth Allen (Born 1808) who married the Pope Family of Liverpool, one of whose ships Captain Cook sailed in, and by family descent to the present owner [Sotheby's London 1993:Lot 30].

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Conclusion: Controlling Consumers

It is clear from the entry examples that auction catalogs contain narratives and that those narratives can be categorized into themes. Those themes are meaningful to our attempts to understand and regulate the market for cultural objects because they are marketing strategies employed by the auction house and thus are reflections of consumer desire. The narratives would only be included in the auction catalog if they helped objects sell.

The narratives used to sell Pacific cultural objects, are dark, upsetting, and postcolonial. In them, market rarity, uniqueness, and desirability appear to be intimately tied to extremes of loss. My research assistants and I struggled with our own aversion to the narrative patterns we detected. The disgust we felt directed our attention to the assumptions we make about policy and practical interventions in the market aimed at reducing harm to archaeological sites and heritage objects. The narratives that elicited strong repulsion in us were intended to strongly attract consumers; any intervention that does not recognize this tension is unlikely to be effective. This glimpse into the desires of the consumer can help us reconfigure existing market reduction strategies to increase their effectiveness.

Much of the public critique about the presence of Pacific cultural objects in museums and within the European and American market, alongside the African and Native American cultural objects that they are usually sold with, involves calling out the horrors of conquest and domination. Collection and display of these objects are equated with continued control. It is theorized that airing their true histories, including those of violence, destruction, and cultural loss, may reduce the market for them and support calls for their return. Yet, this research into the auction narratives and consumer desire seems to indicate that stories of colonialism and violence instead may serve to enhance the desirability of these objects to certain consumers.

When policymakers believe consumer desire has negative consequences—for example, the desire to buy looted, stolen, or otherwise illicit cultural objects—the nuances of that desire must form a key element of approaches to market control. Market interventions that assume mutual disgust for colonial truths, then, might backfire. Indigenous people protesting outside an auction house and carrying signs that call attention to the sacredness of the objects and to the cultural genocide that occurred to bring them to sale—as was seen during protests related to the sale of Native American objects in Paris in 2014 (Adamson 2014)—might actually serve to increase consumer desire. In that 2014 case, the sales of the objects garnered nearly 1 million euros. Perhaps, the auction narratives begin to tell us why the protests did not reduce sales. All told, awareness-raising campaigns or protest actions that intend to reduce demand for antiquities and cultural objects by emphasizing cultural theft and postcolonial struggles may be ineffectual among target groups: some consumers appear to find those qualities attractive.

Revisiting our auction catalog analysis through the lens of marketing as reflecting consumer desire could lead to creative approaches to reduce the undesirable consumption of archaeological objects. The next step is to develop such approaches. I suspect that each segment of the market for cultural objects will have its own separate set of narratives that speak to differing consumer desires. These should be mapped, classified, considered, and applied to our existing knowledge of the auction market for cultural objects, so that we can better address the root causes of consumer behavior as part of our social and regulatory interventions and our archaeological interactions with the market. These narratives may represent one of the very few pathways to truly understanding the needs and desires of the people who consume archaeology through collection that we seek to regulate. In rare interviews, consumers of cultural objects portray themselves as who they want to be, using strategies that allow them to escape uncomfortable labels (Mackenzie 2006, 2014; Mackenzie and Green 2008; Mackenzie and Yates 2016b). This research, however, indicates that marketing within auction catalogs may show who they really are.

Epilogue: to the Fork and Back

In 2021, outside the temporal span of this research and after the sale of the "Flesh Fork" that was no longer a "Cannibal Fork," Sotheby's Paris held a sale that it named "La Polynésie Découverte" (Polynesia Discovered). It was clear from the content, focus, and wording of the sale that the "discoveries" indicated by the title were not those made by the Polynesians and Melanesians, who set out on stunning and

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commendable voyages of true discovery as the first humans to encounter the islands that became their homes. Instead, the sale represented a fantasy of discovery in which Europeans encountered the Pacific and its peoples (who, of course, were already there) and then harvested their cultural objects. The written overview of this auction reaffirmed this fantasy Pacific, stating that the collection of these cultural objects "reflects an imagination nourished by dreams, daring and achievements." It is a clear manifestation of the narratives discussed earlier that were in about 600 auction lots offered in the years before this sale. This imagination, these dreams, are steeped in a history of violence that has not been cleansed from auction narratives. In contrast, it appears as if that violence remains part of the appeal.

In the "La Polynésie Découverte" sale, lot 14 is titled a "Bulutoko fork"—even though it is clearly the same type of object that was called a "Cannibal Fork" in most previous sales and a "Flesh Fork" in the 2017 sale discussed in the prelude. And yet cannibalism is not mentioned in the catalog entry. A key narrative of imagined Indigenous violence, a narrative that it seems consumers of these objects want, is absent. As such, it is interesting to observe that the "Bulutoko fork" sold for only €3,780, far less than the $16,250 that a buyer spent on the "Flesh Fork" whose entry emphasized extreme ideas of "native savagery." Although it is possible that other factors influenced the price difference between the objects at auction, given the prevalence and, indeed, the seeming power of these narratives, one wonders whether, without a description of violence, the objects lose much of their market appeal.

There is some indication in the data contained in these catalogs that the marketing strategy around Pacific cultural objects at the major auction houses is shifting. In recent years, fewer Pacific objects have been offered at the auction houses (Schild 2019), and these auctions have been held in fewer locations. Outside the scope of the sample discussed, sales of high-end offerings of Pacific cultural objects have moved online, something that was almost unthinkable in the market previously. For example, Christie's online sale "Living with African and Oceanic Arts," which was held from February 23 to March 8, 2023, included eight Pacific cultural objects, seven of which sold for over their price estimate; some went at prices far above the estimate. Notably, none of these eight objects contained any narrative of violence as outlined earlier. Indeed, no narrative was included with any of these objects. What might this mean?

First, isolating sea changes in buyer preference within the auction market for Pacific cultural objects is likely impossible. The "auction salesroom is a paradoxical space in which multiple perspectives may coexist and influence one another, continually reconfiguring prices and understandings of ownership" (Geismar 2008:299–300). The who and why of changes in these narratives require extended observation to untangle. That said, Schild (2019) has documented a shift in auction narratives related to both African and Pacific cultural objects: an increase in the use of narratives that relate these objects to twentieth-century European art movements, rather than either the pseudo-ethnographic or colonial violence narratives that were found in prior decades. She sees this as an attempt by the auction houses to lure younger buyers of modern art to these pieces, with modern art being the highest-earning sector of the art market with the widest appeal today. The desires of younger buyers may differ from those of older generations of consumers: colonial violence may turn them off.

Geismar (2001:32) also notes that "the museum collection [is] the ultimate reference point by which [Pacific] objects are judged," and those very museum collections have been the subject of pointed public criticism in recent years. One prominent example was the protest action taken by Mwazulu Diyabanza who in June 2020 "stole" an African cultural object from the Quai Branly Museum in Paris during a livestream on social media (Nayeri 2020). He engaged in similar actions during the same year at the Museum of African, Oceanic and Native American Arts in Marseille and the Afrika Museum in the Netherlands. Diyabanza's actions were prompted both by the injustice of having to "pay [his] own money to see what had been taken by force" and by the idea that in a "museum that contains stolen objects . . . there is no ban on an owner taking back his property the moment he comes across it" (quoted in Nayeri 2020). Although Diyabanza's actions focused on African objects, two of the three museums he targeted also display significant collections of objects from the Pacific. Given that Pacific and African objects are sold at the same auction sales, the critique inherent in Diyabanza's actions extends to Pacific objects as well. On that note, it is worth considering whether the overt racism, exoticism, and violence that were once not only acceptable but also desired in the catalogs have fallen out of fashion, particularly

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among the younger potential collectors that dealers wish to attract. Within the greater movements that Diyabanza's actions fall within, perhaps buyers are uncomfortable with being seen to consume colonial violence. And yet, it may be that the persuasiveness of these violent narratives among buyers persists beyond the startling overt nature of these themes in past auctions.

This leads to one final narrative that I detected in the catalogs sampled, one that I call "buy the culture that colonialism destroyed." In this formulation colonial violence is portrayed as a bad thing because it destroyed the "Edenic wonderland" (Tamaira 2010) that the consumer longs for. Yet, this is still marketing, and it still appeals to the same violent fantasies of the Pacific. Assertions of cultural tragedy in this narrative are followed by an implication that the object for sale is now rarer and more valuable because colonial violence decimated the culture in question. This narrative, as a marketing tool, may be designed to allow buyers to express the political correctness of critiquing colonial violence, while still allowing them to consume the products of that violence and the fantasies that come with it, as seen in these examples:

> This sculpture offers us a glimpse into the spiritual life of a primordial, autochthonous island culture, as it existed before the cataclysmic influence of Western contact [Sotheby's New York 2016: Lot 8].

> Dances related to the harvesting of yams were abandoned from the late nineteenth or early twentieth century as a consequence of the people's conversion to Christianity. Devoid of the purpose for which they were made, the masks were sold to European settlers and travelers. The rapidity which with the traditional were abandoned en masse means that the small number of known masks are unquestionably old [Sotheby's New York 2019:Lot 33].

> The corpus of pre-colonial Tolai art from New Britain is extremely small. Already by 1904, when the Tolai secret society, iniet, was officially banned by German colonial officials, there was a sense that the pre-colonial culture on the island was irrevocably changing, and the artifacts of those cultures becoming scarce [Sotheby's New York 2019:Lot 25].

During a visit to the exclusive preview day of the TEFAF art fair in Maastricht in 2023, a colleague of mine and I found ourselves looking at a Pacific cultural object for sale that was said to be from somewhere on the island of New Guinea. We two bespectacled and appropriately dressed (Yates and Bērziņa 2025) white females, in our thirties/forties, were approached unprompted by a younger white female gallery assistant. Speaking in general terms that, to us, indicated that she probably knew little about Pacific cultures, the assistant said that the figure represented an anthropomorphized female mantis, an insect known for eating its mate. She said this was because the object was made by, in her words, "cannibal head-hunters." The titillating narrative, offered without us asking for it, was presented to us as the reason why the object was appealing to buy. Certainly, one does not have to work very hard to find narratives of violence within the contemporary sale and consumption of Pacific cultural objects. Narrative shifts in auction catalogs do not necessarily mean shifts in the underlying desires of consumers, perhaps just that they are satisfied in less overt ways. Future research in this area can no doubt provide further insight into the intricacies of consumer desire.

Note

The art market terms normally applied to the modern cultures of the Pacific range from geographically and culturally meaningless to dehumanizing. All terms that lump these cultures and the objects that they created together as one unit are inherently incorrect. In this article I use the term "Pacific cultural objects," with reservations, to speak about this market sector. However, I believe this term represents the "market" and the people within it, not the cultures that created the objects in question nor the objects themselves. I in no way wish to deny agency, personhood, meaning, or life by using this term.

Additionally, to position myself, I am a white European/American whose experience in the Pacific is limited to familial connection and the resulting time I spent in Aotearoa New Zealand. However, because

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the subject of study is the white European market for Pacific cultural objects, I argue that this article, to quote (Satov 1997:216), considers "the commercial treatment of these [objects] in [my] own lands"; it studies and critiques my own culture.

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