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Review article

Exploring Easter Island

Laurens, Q. (ed.). *60 objets de l'Île de Pâques dans la collection de la congrégation des Sacrés-Coeurs de Jésus et de Marie SS. CC.* 72 pp., illus., glossary, bibliogr. Paris: Galerie Louise Leiris, 2008. (cloth and boxed)

Orliac, C. & M. Orliac (ed. Q. Laurens). *Rapa Nui. L'Île de Pâques*. 126 pp., illus. Paris: Galerie Louise Leiris, 2008. €30.00 (cloth and boxed)

Orliac, M. & C. Orliac (transl. P. Bahn). *Trésors de l'Île de Pâques. Treasures of Easter Island. Collection de la congrégation des Sacrés-Coeurs de Jésus et de Marie SS. CC.* 288 pp., tables, figs, illus., bibliogr., index. Geneva: Éditions D – Frédéric Dawance; Paris: Éditions Louise Leiris, 2008. €65.00 (cloth unboxed; also comes boxed with Laurens)

Pelletier, M. *Regards sur l'Île de Pâques*. No page nos (64 pp.), illus. Paris: EDF Fondation Diversiterre, 2008. €10.00 (paper)

Please accept my generalization about those of us engaged in the sciences and humanities: there is a spectrum between those who carry out detailed recordings of the detail of their studies who never generalize and those who spend their time on the large scale, with scant regard for the facts that might get in the way of a good story, as the quip often attributed to Mark Twain has it. The former are seen as unimaginative drudges and the latter as superficial dilettantes. The husband and wife Orliacs combine in an elegant team careful work and considered interpretation in their research in Eastern Polynesia and, in the last couple of decades, on Rapanui (Easter Island).

So, it was with great anticipation that I stopped in Paris in February 2009 to visit their attractive exhibition, 'Rapa Nui. L'Île de Pâques', about the botanical and cultural development of that most remote of island places. I was not disappointed either with the three-floor display of artefacts from many sources or with the accompanying explanatory panels.

Here I review the exhibition, although it is now two years since it graced the culturally crowded Paris scene, and the substantial books associated with that event. (A further related book, *Inventing Easter Island* by Beverley Haun, is reviewed in this issue's Reviews section, p. 413.) As far as I know, the exhibition was a one-off and is not travelling, the pieces returned to their sources and the panels, I suppose, stored in some dark basement.

The exhibition ran from 20 November 2008 to 1 March 2009, supported by the EDF Fondation Diversiterre and staged in an old but very attractively refurbished power sub-station in the septième arrondissement. (EDF is an electricity supplier.) I attended on a weekday, but the place was crowded, mainly by people single or in pairs, with a few family groups. The dramatic poster for the exhibition was displayed prominently in the press and on the walls of several metro stations I passed through. The guard at the cloakroom/publications counter thought that it had been very popular, with hundreds attending daily since the opening.

On entering, one was faced with a rather kitsch replica of the megalithic busts, the *moai*, for which Rapanui is best known. In fact, people probably know the *moai* or 'tiki' more than they know it is associated with Rapanui. It is used prominently in advertising,

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for 'tiki-themed' restaurants and the like – a symbol of mystery with a slightly retro nostalgia for the 1950s, strong cocktails, and loud shirts.

But there the replica and kitsch ended and the rest of the exhibition featured some of the most attractive carvings that I ever have seen from Rapanui, accompanied by often striking photographs and informative panels. The panels sometimes were drawn from the Orliacs' previous publications, and form part of the texts here under review.

The first, small publication, by Micheline Pelletier, features photographs of varying quality and interest. Its content was a nine-minute slide show off to one side on the ground floor of the exhibition, using texts from French romantic author and traveller Pierre Loti, many of whose pieces and drawings appeared in the show and in the books here reviewed. Someone called Jean Piat read the text, in dramatic tones, whilst electro music by Jérôme Braque burbled in the background: not a pleasant combination, but a pretty book, with text, thankfully, kept to a minimum. There also was a CNRS (National Research Council of France) film about the 'toromiro' tree, with sequences from Thor Heyerdahl's visits and black-and-white footage shot by Henri Storck, who arrived as a newsreel photographer on the ship to collect Alfred Métraux and Henri Lavacherry, both of whom had just spent about five months doing their respective research projects on the ethnology and the rock art of Rapanui.

The book of the exhibition, edited by Quentin Laurens, illustrates forty-five of the precious pieces in wood, stone, and feathers. There is a catalogue of those other objects not in the book: seventy-five artefacts of diverse type, fifteen printed or drawn illustrations from the visit of Pierre Loti to the island in 1872, and seven maps and engravings. These were assembled from ten collections and, of course, un-named private collections, all in France, except for the stunning early items from the Congrégation des Sacré-Coeurs (SS. CC.) in Rome.

Inevitably, some pieces are more significant than others. Amongst the illustrated objects, not a few are clearly tourist art and derive from sources in nineteenth-century Tahiti, where ship-loads of artefacts were sent by islander carvers between 1868 and 1888, when Chile annexed the place, forbidding Polynesian contact and abandoning the remote territory for four years. The photography and printing of the pieces are extraordinary, revealing every fine mark and mistaken afterthought. For example, the *rapa*, usually thought to have been a dance paddle and so used by contemporary Rapanui, has a couple of crude, afterthought semi-figures scratched into its surface. Were they made by a carver interrupted in his work, a bored souvenir seller, or some anonymous miscreant subsequently? The stone carvings shown could be bettered by many carvers on Rapanui today, where there is excellent work done, available for sale.

For the collector interested in definitive examples, Laurens's book is a treasure. It even features a handy ribbon for marking one's favourite pages.

The boxed set is a masterwork of illustration and printing. Let's start with the smaller of the two volumes, the *60 objets de l'Île de Pâques* from the Rome collection of the Sacrés-Coeurs.

The small volume is not about the exhibition I saw in April, but one that took place at the Galerie Louise Leiris, Paris, between 3 June and 31 July 2008. As with the previous book, this one also is edited by Quentin Laurens. The exhibition (and this book) had a long gestation, about two decades, Laurens explains, and comprised thirty-one pieces from the SS. CC. Rome collection and twenty-nine from Galerie Leiris, collected over an even longer period. Many of the pieces were published in a 1995 Orliac duo book, *Bois sculpté de l'Île de Pâques*; there was also, Laurens writes, a 2005 school edition, the latter the kind of art book with stunning photographs faithfully printed that seems only to happen in France.

There is overlap between the 2009 and the 2008 exhibitions, of course. There is the iron cast of a human figure (*moai tangata*) made as an urban souvenir, perhaps, and obtained in Paris in 1881. Galerie Leiris believe that the wood figure they place beside the iron one was the model for the former. It appears so to my eye, except for a slight difference in the phallus and the stance of the piece. The *Tangata Moko* (gecko man) I found of very high quality in terms of its finish; some of the other pieces, however, were hurriedly completed. As the documentation for each object is so complete, it is possible to trace the well-known connections between Rapanui art and the Surrealists: item 21 appeared in a 1926 Man Ray exhibition, for example.

Apart from the wood pieces (and the one iron), there is a *mataa* (obsidian projectile point) and a *hau kurakura* (diadem), the latter being a headdress that often shows up on personal displays at the annual Tapati Rapanui, or Easter Island week, a community celebration of what it is to be of that island, taking place usually in February.

It is not the same one, but item 18, a *Tangata Moko*, reminded me of the exquisite piece I saw in Chile in 1973 that I tried to get the nascent National Gallery of Australia to purchase from a private (Chilean) collector. Through a complex chain of events typical, people tell me, of the collector's world, it wound up being traded for ten times the price it was offered to the public collection, staying for a while with the Hemmeter Corporation of Hawai'i before sliding away into other, private hands.

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After many years of poorly illustrated volumes on the suburb art of Rapanui, it is a pleasure to see what Galerie Louis Leiris wish to share with us.

But for those who want the full story, text and illustrations, the bi-lingual (French/English) *Trésors/Treasures* is the one to get. It is available also as a single volume: Amazon.fr sells it for €61.75 with the same high-quality graphics as the previous books I have in this review: a bargain!

This is a work not only of great beauty, but also immense scholarship with detailed aspects of everything to do with Rapanui, its history and art production. There are thoughtful and expert essays by the Orliacs, as well as Michel Orliac's delicate, artful botanical sketches.

The volume contains all the detail one could get about when and what objects were collected: to obtain more, one would have to do the painstaking archive work undertaken by the Orliacs. This *Trésors/Treasures* is truly the book of the exhibition and even more so. Citing the relevant material from the considerable bibliography about the place, the Orliacs piece together their story of Rapanui, including a bit on the oft-overlooked recent history.

The only book to which this could be compared is the 1935 amateur collection by Dr Stephan-Chauvet, who as a medical doctor collected art and wrote illustrated, large-format books about his interests. But his *Île de Pâques et ses mystères* (available on-line in an English translation by Ann M. Altman, *http://www.chauvet-translation.com/*) is plagued with errors and mis-interpretations and is very poorly produced. The only similarity between the Orliacs and Stephan-Chauvet is the pretension to completeness: there is no doubt that the Orliacs have assembled in one book a veritable reference library on most aspects of Rapanui.

The third part of *Trésors/Treasures* documents the illustrations in the volume of the Sacrés-Coeurs collection and is the longest section (pp. 91-261) of all. The entire SS. CC. collection is documented for the first time, along with the Orliacs' commentary on the woods used and how the carvings might have been achieved, as well as their possible significance.

In spite of the evident magisterial quality of this book and the avalanche of information it contains, the last phrase of the last paragraph reveals the wise modesty of the husband-and-wife team: '[T]he exploration of the intellectual universe of the Rapanui has only just begun' (p. 271, my translation).

In quality and completeness, balancing the minutiae of close investigation with the 'wild surmise' of the story-telling broad thinker (Keats cited in Howells 1973: 1), this volume will not be matched for many years.

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