

Oceanic art sings with mystery

By HELEN ZUCKER

A very strong show, "Oceanic Art from the Collection of Dr. Harry Bober," opened at Meadow Brook Art Gallery on March 16.

Bober, Avalon professor of humanities at New York University, modestly called himself a "self-confessed accumulator" during the course of his lecture on the differences between the arts of New Guinea, Australia, the New Hebrides, New Zealand, the Fiji and Easter Islands.

"Oceanic" is an area twice the size of the Atlantic Ocean. It is fascinating to see the diversity of shields, fighting staves, ceremonial paddles, and amuletic figures, fish hooks, feast bowls, fan handles, animals and figures produced in Melanesia and Polynesia.

Bober, a highly knowledgeable fellow, and a well-known medieval art scholar, is hardly a "pack-rat." He is what writer Richard Shepard, in an article in "Antiques World," accurately described him as, "a discriminating accumulator." The current show is ample proof of Bober's wide-ranging, exquisite taste.

A SCHOLAR whose major work has been in the field of manuscript illumination, he is particularly qualified to appreciate the differences in patterning on eucalyptus bark in Australia, palmwood in Papua New Guinea, sago palm spathe (two stitched pieces of palm fronds, dried, then attached to bamboo rods, and painted), in Melanesia and of course, the differences in carvings on wood from the Solomon Islands and New Zealand.

There are stone figures from New Hebrides here as well. And pestles, bowls, and beautifully carved house-

hold objects. Luckily, they are behind glass. Like Bober, I had a sudden urge to become "an accumulator." In short, I immediately wanted to fill a Polynesian feast bowl with Michigan apples and take it home.

This is art that sings with mystery. Bober began his lecture with slides of the Lescaux cave paintings. He called them "realistic," despite the fact that these paintings and the little stone "Venus of Willendorf" go back 30,000 years.

He went on to say that Greek and Roman tradition completely covered the art of the Western world, but Oceanic art goes back to Paleolithic times — uninterrupted until very recently.

"OLD PEOPLE IN AUSTRALIA, natives (aborigines)," Bober said, "are totally unimpressed by electricity, running water, western civilization. They are producing the last artifacts of this kind. The new generation in Australia is westernized. Message sticks, boomerangs, which were lethal weapons for killing animals, or men, not playthings, ceremonial shields used on walkabouts (the ceremony where in a young man went out into the bush to commune with himself and come to grips with his emerging manhood), face masks, bull-ropers, a religious, decorated slightly horn-shaped piece of wood, probably mean little to the young Australian native now."

The show has beautiful shields, spear throwers and boomerangs. Anyone who has seen the movie, "Walkabout," will immediately recognize the items used in this ceremony and will understand the meaning of Bober's comments.

Despite the careful craft, the sophisticated work evident in this show, I was

especially taken with a friendly wooden pig from New Guinea. Somehow its shark-like little teeth seem to grin. Its eyes pop out at you through the incised decorations filled with lime to keep it solid. Someone loved this pig.

Bober said, "It is not enough to love. To know is the key. I'm not interested in anthropology, but in broader questions, in ways of seeing."

THIS SHOW is the collection of an erudite man whose love for art is obvious, and whose desire to know is a veritable passion. The variety of works does what Bober intended. It raises questions about the very nature of cultural differences, about the mystery inherent in change, about our fellow creatures — whether they be in the Oceanic world or the Asiatic, or in

North America.

Bober has returned to New York, but he has left his collection here until April 25. It's an extraordinary show. Look for the wooden guardian figure from the Solomon Islands. He leaves a bit drunkenly, smiles toothily, has a cap that looks like a replica of the tin man's hat in "The Wizard of Oz." His hands fold across his broad stomach.

Bober's long association with the Meadow Brook Art Gallery is a fortunate one; it brings us pieces like this.

The museum is located on the ground floor of Wilson Hall at Oakland University near Rochester. For information, call 377-3065. Hours are Tuesday-Friday: 1-5 p.m. Saturday and Sunday, 2-3:30 p.m. The gallery is open during Meadow Brook Theatre performances.

review

Cancer Society brings session of 'Straight Talk'

Farmington Community Center in cooperation with American Cancer Society has scheduled two one-hour programs called "Straight Talk." One will be given at 10 a.m., the other at 8 p.m. Tuesday, April 1.

The sessions are without charge, but reservations are requested by calling the center, 477-8404.

Lynn Attard, health educator for the American Cancer Society, says, "Our Straight Talk message is sensitive but very straightforward. It is designed to dispel fears many women have about the possibility of uterine or breast cancer."

The program will zero in on good health habits and a woman's responsibility for taking her own health actions.

Women will be advised about the kind of attention and care to seek from their doctors, and locations where free pap tests and breast examinations are available.

The program includes discussion, visual presentations and a question and answer segment.

Farmington Community Center is located at 24705 Farmington Road.

Thursday, March 20, 1980

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