

Project

The George Brown Collection

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National Museum of Ethnology

Both authors are professors at Minpaku. Hayashi is a specialist of cultural anthropology in Papua New Guinea and led the George Brown Collection project described here. Project member Matthews is an ethnobotanist who has conducted fieldwork in Papua New Guinea, and has a special interest in the use of plants in material culture.

The project “Building a Comprehensive Database for *The George Brown Collection*” is a subproject of the “Museum Info-Forum Project” and was carried out from June 2014 to March 2017 with four main areas of activity: (i) updating the database system used to record information about the George Brown Collection, (ii) designing and building a public website to provide greater access to the Collection database and history, (iii) adding new information about the history of the Collection to our archives, through visits to museums where the Collection was previously located, in the United Kingdom, and (iv) adding new information by asking visiting experts to review objects of interest to them, and adding their observations to our records.

The George Brown Collection is a historically and culturally significant assemblage of Pacific Island artifacts collected over a period of almost fifty years by the Rev. Dr. George Brown, a Methodist Christian missionary who was active in the Pacific Islands from 1860 to 1907. The Collection and other materials related to the Collection enable understanding of how missionaries and local residents lived during the period of early contact with Europeans, and can be used by source communities wishing to learn more about the lives of their ancestors.

In collaboration with scholars, museums, and other research institutions in Japan and the Pacific region, we have been working to improve the quality of basic data associated with each collected object and to establish links to other materials collected by Brown, and held now in institutions in the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand, and elsewhere. These materials include ethnological objects, photographs, and the personal letters, diaries, and other related items.

Data sources and website

The George Brown Collection is comprised of some 3,000 ethnographic items. According to the current object descriptions, 1,532 are from Papua

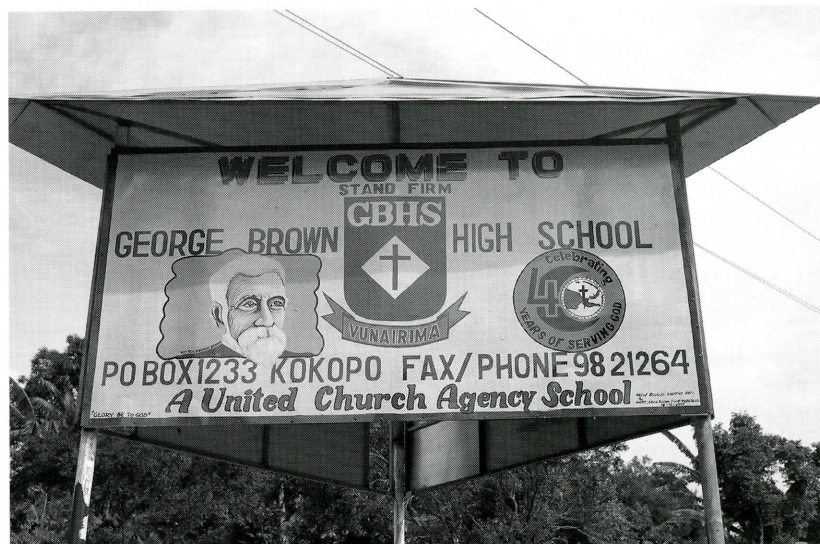
New Guinea (287 from the Trobriand Islands and 615 from the Bismarck Archipelago); 652 from the Solomon Islands; 138 from Fiji; and 240 from Samoa. The items from these four countries alone total 2,562. The Collection was purchased by the National Museum of Ethnology in 1985, after it was offered for international sale by the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, United Kingdom. Two books and numerous scientific articles authored by Brown (comprising twenty-two rolls of microfiche) are available in the Minpaku library. Most of his journals and letters are preserved at the Mitchell Library (a specialized historical library within the State Library of New South Wales, Australia) but have been published in a digital format, and these too can be studied at Minpaku. The Australian Museum, houses a large collection of photographs taken by Brown (about 900 plates). In 1999, a special exhibition of the Collection was held at our Museum, providing the first comprehensive introduction to the Collection for the public and scholars in Japan. Today, the George Brown Collection website (www.r.minpaku.ac.jp/GBC/) offers a freely accessible introduction to the life of George Brown, the history of his Collection, and through the objects themselves, an introduction to the life and history of Pacific peoples.

Visiting researchers

With support from the Info-Forum Museum project, researchers were invited to Minpaku to study the collection first-hand and to discuss possible approaches for future exchange with source communities. The social and historical background of George Brown’s collecting activities and the collection have been studied through his writings (books, letters, journals, and other documents), and with input from our visitors. The reconstructed database now allows more effective cross-referencing of collected data, and the photographic records of the Collection have been expanded and improved. The public

and in house databases will be useful for research purposes, and will also serve people in the regions from which these materials originated, and future providers of information related to the Collection. A large effort has been made to improve the translation of information between English and Japanese, so that the Collection can be more easily studied inside Japan and abroad.

Christian mission activities and the lives of missionaries in the Pacific Islands at the end of the 19th and early 20th centuries, when Brown was active in the region, were previously described in the works of collaborating researchers, Helen Gardner (Deakin University) and Margaret Reeson (Canberra). In 2012, Christopher McHugh (then University of Sunderland) came to Minpaku as visiting faculty under the International Placement Scheme Program of the Arts and Humanities Research Council, UK, to work on his project, "Recontextualizing the George Brown Collection through Creative Ceramic Practice." Since returning to the UK, McHugh has continued his studies on Brown and the Collection, and Brown's family history in Northeast England. Other visitors who have worked with us during the project, and their special interest areas, are: Rod Ewins (art and material culture of Fiji), Robin Hide (ethnobotany of Papua New Guinea), Rhys Richards (material culture of Solomon Islands), Jim Specht (archaeology of Papua New Guinea), Pamela Stewart (ethnography of PNG), Andrew Strathern (ethnography of PNG), Tim Timothy (archaeology and ethnography of PNG), and Craig Volker (language and art of PNG).



Entrance sign at the George Brown High School, East New Britain, Papua New Guinea. In this area, the missionary has had a large and continuing influence on the life of the people (Matthews, 2010)

Future possibilities

We have been much encouraged by all the interest shown in the George Brown Collection by our visitors to Osaka, and our by hosts in the United Kingdom, at the Bowes Museum (Barnard Castle), British Museum (London), Hancock Museum and University of Newcastle upon Tyne (Newcastle), Pitt Rivers Museum (Oxford), and Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts (Norwich), and descendants of Brown (Pat and Michael Brown, Newcastle upon Tyne). Although our current project has ended, there is of course much still to be done. We must continue to look for ways to build contact with source communities, engage with students of Pacific history and culture, and support related research activities by scholars based in Japan and elsewhere. We welcome all enquiries and suggestions in this regard.