

Portrait of Tu, Pomare I of Tahiti, by John Webber

ANTHONY MURRAY-OLIVER

Captain Cook visited Matavai Bay, his favourite anchorage at Tahiti, for the fourth and last time in August 1778, on the Third Voyage. It has long been known that at that time John Webber, RA (1752-93), the official artist on that voyage, painted a portrait in oils of Tu, the young chief who was later to found the Pomare dynasty that ruled Tahiti for nearly a century. Tu, as Pomare I, came to power in 1791: in 1880 Pomare V abdicated and handed his kingdom to France.

The portrait of Tu was lost sight of until it came on the market at Christie's auction in London in October 1977. Recently it has been acquired by the Library, the Endowment Trust contributing \$5,000 toward the purchase price of \$9,000. Webber was a skilled portraitist and this painting is a fine work, of particular interest because the only other pictorial record of Tu is a red chalk drawing made by William Hodges on the Second Voyage, now in the Rex Nan Kivell Collection of the National Library of Australia, Canberra.

Webber's portrait has an excellent provenance. It was in the possession of Captain James King, RN, who took command of H.M.S. *Discovery* after the death of both Cook and Captain Clerke in 1779 and who wrote the official account of the Third Voyage subsequent to Cook's death at Hawaii. The painting remained with King's descendants until it was sold last year. It was one of the very few Cook associated paintings still in private hands, the great bulk being already held in institutions around the world, so that the Library was fortunate to be able to acquire this important example of such work.

When Webber painted the portrait of Tu at Tahiti in August 1777 the young chief was about 25 years old. He lived until 1803. Although Cook did not meet Tu on his first visit in 1769, he heard of him as a high-ranking but minor chief who was not popular with the other chiefs. When Cook did meet Otou, as he called him, in August 1773 he was not disposed to be favourably impressed, writing that (perhaps from hearsay) 'he seems to be a timorous Prince.' But on his return in May 1774 Cook admitted to having changed his opinion. 'When I was last here I conceived but an indifferant Opinion of Otou's Talents as a King, but the