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“Compelled to record my impressions”: an artist's view of the Pacific shipping world

Max Quanchi and Jean-Louis Boglio

At a watercolour art exhibition at Anthony Horden's Art Gallery in Sydney in August 1950, Captain Brett Hilder, (1911 - 1981) a master in the Burns Philp shipping line,¹ offered studies of the “native inhabitants of the Pacific basin” mounted in teak frames with woven pandanus matt surrounds.² The importance of these watercolour portraits as a record of the people in Australia's Pacific neighbourhood was acknowledged by the presence of the Professor of Anthropology at Sydney University, AP Elkin, who gave the opening oration.³ Hilder also exhibited his art work at ASOPA (the Australian School of Pacific Administration), and held exhibitions in Melbourne, Port Moresby, Noumea, Honiara and the American Museum of Natural History in Washington. In an exhibition in Honiara in March 1954, titled “Watercolour paintings of landscapes and natives in the Solomon Islands”, sixteen landscapes and sixteen portraits of the Solomon Islands were offered for sale for between eight and fifteen Guineas. Hilder's work still attracts interest and at an auction in Sydney in 2002, his watercolours “Simi of Malekula”, “Rachel Nesuaua” of Tanna and “Soaika of Rennell” (Solomon Islands) were listed for \$AUD200-\$300. To gauge his total output, which remains unknown, in 2005 at a retrospective exhibition of Hilder's water colours, 202 portraits and landscapes were offered, a fraction remaining after sales and gifts to friends, of the many hundreds he produced between 1945 and 1970. Hilder had been a systematic painter and photographer, and he noted while serving as Mate and later Master on Burns Philp's (BPs) Pacific routes, he was “compelled to record my impressions”.⁴

In his biography in 1961, *Navigator in the South Seas* and elsewhere, although in the middle of an active artist's career, Hilder rarely promoted himself as an artist, perhaps in acknowledgment of his more famous artist father JJ Hilder, regarded as Australia's leading watercolourist up to his early death in 1916.⁵ In November 1950, not long after the Anthony Horden exhibition, Hilder did talk on ABC Radio's “Armchair Chat” program about his life as a “painter of Pacific portraits” and four years later he admitted he had taken up painting to ease the boredom of wartime service, initially in the navy, but later as a wartime navigation instructor in the Royal Australian Air Force. He remembered sketching at Drimmie Head (at Gove Pensinsula) on the day the war ended.⁶ After the war, resuming his rank as Ship's Master for Burns Philp, he recalled finding a new interest in “the different types of natives who inhabit the Pacific” and set out to record them as subjects, “both as individual characters and as representatives of their race and tribe”.⁷ In 1961, he told the magazine *Pacific Islands Monthly* (PIM) that he did not remember being taught to draw. By this time, 54 of Hilder's portraits of noted expatriates in Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea, Kiribati, Norfolk Island and the Solomon Islands had appeared in PIM.⁸

Hilder used photography sparingly,⁹ but after snapping away at remote ports of call across the Pacific, he would later paint during the hours ploughing through ocean swells on BP's long Pacific routes. For example, a photograph taken by Hilder in September 1958 of Kiribati migrants leaving Sydney Island in the Phoenix Islands¹⁰ for resettlement to the Solomon Islands, appeared in *Walkabout* magazine in Australia in October 1959.¹¹

Pic 1 Black and white Photograph, Sydney Island, Phoenix Islands, published in *Walkabout*, October 1959, page 14.

Pic 2 Watercolour; *MV Tulagi at Sydney Island*. (dated "1959")

Pic 3 Watercolour; *Matthew Sanda of Tikopia 1956* (No 128 from sale catalogue)

Pic 4 Watercolour; Tekeaki Mwea, December 1961, from Abemama atoll, Kiribati.



After photographing i-Kiribati settlers in 1958 sitting on canoes under palms waiting for the loading of his ship anchored offshore in the background - the *MV Tulagi* - in the following year Hilder used the photograph to paint "MV Tulagi at Sydney Island", which he dated "1959". A copy of this watercolour is held by the Australian National Maritime Museum.¹² Hilder had no trouble finding subjects at these small ports of call. He recalled for ABC Radio's Social History Unit in 1989, that when ships hove to, "steamer day" was terribly important for "every man and woman, black, white or Chinese" and the ship became "the focus for lots of social activity".¹³ For Hilder this meant a quick sketch or photograph of a young indigenous woman, an expatriate or crewman to be worked up with water colours later at sea. Hilder also used his own art work in many journal, magazine and newspaper articles, and in his books *Navigator in the South Seas* (1961) and *The voyage of Torres* (1980).

The Pacific Islands, already known visually through early 16th to 19th century voyaging art, illustrated travelogues, and black and white etchings in books, travelogues and journals, became more widely known across the public domain after the 1890s because of the massive output of published photography in illustrated newspapers, magazines and serial encyclopaedia.¹⁴ The 'islands' had been created as a place in the geographical imagination, and in a romantic, idyllic literary world, and then again in the early twentieth century through published photography and motion picture film.¹⁵ The conventional 'Pacific' or 'islands' composition and subject matter that evolved was partially replicated by Hilder in his own art ashore and at sea, as he painted the men and women who populated his experience as a ship's officer tracking back and forth across the Pacific. His portraits in particular reflected a keen grasp of the individual, and avoided the stereotyping of Oceanic cultures and the personalities being promoted in other mediums and genres. Hilder's hobby therefore created an important artistic output, which because we can now position this thirty years work in the context of cross-cultural encounters, the shipping world and the post-war resumption of colonial hegemony and imposed normality that unfolded as he travelled the region.

Brett Hilder sketched vignettes of island life, and Pacific Islander portraits, in the major ports as well as little known bays and anchorages. After a year trying to get to sea, Hilder eventually joined the *Marella* of the Burns Philp line in 1928. Except for

the war years and two short postings required to pass his examinations, as captain of the steam trawler *Millimumul* and as chief officer on the *Mulubinba*, he stayed with Burns Philp until 1968. His early years of sailing apprenticeship were on the *Marella* and the *Malabar* sailing between ports along the eastern Australian coast, the Dutch East Indies and Singapore. Hilder recalled the crewmen of these ships were typically from different backgrounds: Malay sailors, Bengali Indians in the engine room, Chinese cooks and stewards from the island of Hainan. Just as Hilder was coming to the end of his four year apprenticeship, the Great Depression began to take effect, so he abandoned his apprenticeship and sat for his Second Mate's Certificate in order to obtain an immediate posting in the coastal trade. He also joined the Naval Reserve as a midshipman. The years in the coastal trade were formative, and to escape boredom he gradually took up painting. He complained that "the worst part of going to sea was the deadly monotony. The clock never moves more slowly than in the long dark stretches of the night. The first 10 or 15 years are the worst ... Sydney, Townsville, Thursday Island and Darwin, each of these places seeming worse than the last". In the Navy he found that midshipmen had to keep a personal journal "to include at least one full-page sketch a week, either of artistic or of technical interest".¹⁶ This was a habit Hilder carried over into his merchant service, drawing portraits, coastal landscapes and topographical instructions on reefs and passages into ports. After the coastal trade, Hilder became a cadet officer on the New Guinea 'run', with Australian crews working under union regulations, and then after the war on ships in and out of Asian ports. Hilder by then was painting members of the crew regularly. In 1946, he recalled "I tried to occupy my spare time in ... sketching the more interesting ones and then in writing articles for publication".¹⁷ Hilder was busy on three fronts; ship's officer, portrait and landscape painter and aspiring intellectual. He later spoke at conferences and published articles on navigation, cyclones, hydrography, oceanography and conchology.¹⁸

Hilder referred only in passing to his art and photography in his biography, *Navigator in the South Seas*. Even though he had begun sketching in the late 1930s, he did not make any reference to art until the post-war period, and rather than the Pacific, it was Asia that first captured his attention. In Penang and Kuala Lumpur he "found Malaya teeming with interest as ever and felt compelled to record my impressions by sketches of interesting items and scenes".¹⁹ On the long return voyage to Sydney with a Malay crew, he noted he "tried to occupy my spare time ... sketching the more interesting ones".²⁰ Finally in 1946, he resumed as Master with a posting to the small urns Philp island's trader, *MV Muliama*. To refresh his memory of reefs, bearings and passage in the many small island ports, initially in Vanuatu, he took up the practice of sketching in notebooks the bearings of dangerous reefs and safe anchorages.

Figure 5: *Gilbert Islands: Anchorage off Nikunau (Byron Island) 1 March 1957*

Figure 6: *Rupert son of Adaleur, Basilaki Island, 17 yrs old, RC student to Rabaul 25 March 1955*

Figure 6: *Kefega Rakevake, High Chief of Tikopia (nd, probably 1956)*

evident in the portrait, but the art - the physical evidence of the moment when Tekeaki posed for Hilder - opens up a life story of interest to i-Kiribati and Pacific researchers and historians, art historians. It also opens up the exciting possibility of repatriation so the descendents of Tekeaki might finally see his 1961 portrait.²⁵

Hilder took roughly the same number of male and female portraits, and roughly the same number of landscapes compared to portraits. His daughters recalled their father suspiciously had an ‘eye for good looking girls’ and it might be added, also for attractive expatriate wives. But he also did portraits of Catholic Nuns in Kiribati, members of the royal family in Tonga²⁶, school children, expatriate husbands and wives and the famous Aggie Gray in Apia. Portraiture was not popular with artists or photographers in the Pacific. South Sea Islander labourers in Queensland in the 19th century, known as *kanakas*, were photographed often, but rarely as portraits²⁷, and Silas Ellis, a watercolourist whose art was widely reproduced in the 1930s, rarely did portraits. Max Dupain and Rupert Emmerson, two war time Australian photographers and artists in Papua during the Pacific War did some portraits but preferred village scenes, work sites and tableaux rather than portraits.²⁸ This places Hilder’s several hundred portraits from across the western Pacific as an important contribution. The study of his artistic output also reveals the importance of photography to art and artists, an aspect of Pacific imaging mostly ignored so far by researchers. His portraits and landscapes also form a significant gallery of cross-cultural encounters, in islands that in some parts had been ravaged by four years of war, and in other remote ports of call, where modernisation was only just taking effect. Hilder’s art is therefore an archive of a ‘Pacific’ somewhere in a transition zone between the old turn of the century South Seas and the new decolonised, independent, colour camera carrying tourist-prone Oceania of the 1970s. Hilder’s portraits are also human, of living cultures and not of scientific ‘types’ or specimens, or of salvage art of declining populations and victims of alleged ‘fatal impact’. Hilder’s Pacific Islanders are proud, happy, lively men and women. Hilder’s art therefore offers access to an indigenous world, not a constructed place derived from western hegemonic perceptions, and this is quite an achievement for an untrained artist relying on conventional western art techniques, and who was primarily a ship’s captain and academic.

¹ A version of this paper was presented at the Pacific History Association conference, Suva, Fiji in December 2008. The artworks cited in the paper are in the private collection of Jean Louis Boglio.

² The teak frames were made by Hilder’s wife out of wood salvaged from the teak decking of the Burns Philp vessel, *MV Macdui*, sunk by Japanese bombing in Port Moresby in 1942.

³ *Pacific Islands Monthly*, August 1950, p.11

⁴ B Hilder, *Navigator in the South Seas*, Rigby: Sydney, 1961, 129.

⁵ JJ Hilder died aged 35 years and produced at least 400 watercolours. Brett Hilder wrote an account of his father’s art, *The heritage of JJ Hilder*, Rigby: Sydney, 1966.

⁶ Anon, “Author, artist, sailor, pilot”, *Projector*, (published by Namalco), No 8, November 1970.

⁷ “Watercolour paintings of landscapes and natives in the Solomon Islands”, Catalogue, Honiara, March 1954.

⁸ Our thanks go to Jim Burton of Brisbane for compiling this record of Hilder’s material in *Pacific Islands Monthly*.

⁹ Hilder’s many articles in *PIM* and *Walkabout* were illustrated with his own photographs. There were eight photographs in his first Phoenix Island story in *Walkabout*.

¹⁰ This saga was narrated by Harry Maude in his *Of Islands and Men* in 1968. (Chp 8 “The colonization of the Phoenix islands”.)

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- ¹¹ B Hilder, "Exodus from Sydney Island", *Walkabout*, October 1959, 14-18. Hilder also wrote an account of the Solomon Island's settlement in "Gilbertese migrants become new Solomon Islanders", *Walkabout*, November 1958, 69-73.
- ¹² Hilder pasted a version of this sketch in his scrapbook. Also see, "MV Tulagi at Sydney Island", Australian National Maritime Museum, Sydney, 00031348.
- ¹³ Brett Hilder, 1989. Oceans of time. Archive 97/7/1555. ABC Social History Unit.
- ¹⁴ See, Quanchi (2007).
- ¹⁵ For constructions of the 'islands' see; Sutton (1995); Sturma (2002); Geiger (2005), and O'Brien (2006).
- ¹⁶ Hilder, *Navigator in the South Seas*, 12.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 130.
- ¹⁸ Hilder was President of the Australian Institute of Navigation, gained his Master degree from Macquarie University in 1977 and later published *The voyage of Torres* in 1980.
- ¹⁹ He wrote that he found in Asia, "The natives of the east are very colourful but it was their racial types of features which caught my interest and started me drawing and painting them in watercolours". Hilder, *Navigator in the South Seas*, 166.
- ²⁰ Hilder, *Navigator*, 29 and 30.
- ²¹ Hilder, *Navigator*, 147.
- ²² Hilder, *Navigator*, 166 and 167.
- ²³ Hilder, *Navigator*, 167, and a unpublished compilation by Jim Burton, "*Sketches and profiles of identities of the South Pacific islands ... extracted from PIM*", Brisbane, 2008.
- ²⁴ A partial analysis of Hilder's art will now be possible as the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau (PMB) microfilmed several hundred works held in a private collection in 2009, possibly half of Hilder's total output, along with a few documents that survived after his death.
- ²⁵ Sr Alaima Talu, who knew Tekeaki, provided the biographical details of Tekeaki's life after she saw the portrait in 2008. Tracking the life histories of the subjects of the several hundred portraits by Hilder is an important, intriguing, future project.
- ²⁶ A Hilder portrait of Topou IV of Tonga was used on the cover of *Pacific Islands Monthly* in July 1968 and again in June 1970, and subsequently used for a stamp design by Hilder. This was based on a painting dated 5.11.1967. Hilder also designed stamps for the Solomon Islands and Vanuatu.
- ²⁷ Max Quanchi, 2008, 68-87.
- ²⁸ Max Quanchi, 2007, The New Guinea portfolio of Robert Emerson Curtis, War Artist: display, art, ethnography and popular anthropology, unpublished paper, Pacific Arts Association conference, Paris.

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