Letter Man: representing graphic designer Joseph Churchward

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ABSTRACT: Since the 1960s, Samoan-born graphic designer Joseph Churchward has hand-created over 570 typefaces (fonts), the greatest number designed by any individual in the world. In 2008, the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa) acquired a large number of samples of Churchward's work and showcased a range of pieces in the exhibition *Letter Man: Joseph Churchward's world of type.* This new acquisition and exhibition deviated from the historical practice of collecting and exhibiting artefacts from the Pacific Islands, which previously had an ethnographic focus. This paper considers the rationale for acquiring an extensive archive of this nature for the Pacific Cultures collection.

KEYWORDS: typography, Pacific, collections, Samoa, New Zealand, history, Te Papa, design, exhibition.



Fig. 1 Display case and open drawer in the Letter Man exhibition, 2008 (photo: Sean Mallon).

Introduction

The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa) Pacific Cultures collection consists of about 13 000 objects. Following the establishment of the Colonial Museum in 1865, these artefacts were acquired from individual collectors and institutions as anthropological specimens, and housed within the Foreign Ethnology collection.¹ A similar philosophy was applied to the display of Pacific artefacts in the Dominion Museum, later the National Museum, at Buckle Street, Wellington. Over the last 16 years, however, the Pacific Cultures collection has been managed separately, and with the shift to Te Papa in 1997 came a corresponding shift in display practices of Pacific artefacts, as seen in Mana Pasifika: celebrating Pacific cultures (1998-2007), Te Papa's opening Pacific exhibition involving community participation. This exhibition focused on exploring the persistence of the cultural practices of Pacific Islanders in New Zealand and the historical and contemporary connections of these practices to those in the Pacific Islands. This was further extended with the refreshment of the exhibition space through the opening of Tangata o le Moana: the story of Pacific people in New Zealand in October 2007, an exhibition that emphasises the social history of Pacific people in New Zealand.

As with many museums around the world, Te Papa has had several reincarnations: as the Colonial Museum in 1865–1907; the Dominion Museum in 1907–72; and the National Museum in 1973–91. The identities and philosophies of museums reflect the changing social attitudes of the time, and Te Papa as 'Our Place', with its modern-day focus on visitors, is vastly different from its predecessors. There is now greater community engagement and dialogue, and increased opportunities for community partnerships (Gibson 2003; Fitzgerald 2009). This emphasis on community expresses the value placed on identities and representation, whereby material culture collected by museums is seen as a reflection of 'what we are' (Pearce 1994: 193).

The short-term exhibition *Letter Man: Joseph Churchward's world of type* (Fig. 1) was created in 2008 in the wake of the *Tangata o le Moana* exhibition, which is scheduled to be on display for 10 years. *Letter Man* was made possible because of the collecting opportunity that arose from *Tangata o le Moana*, with its focus on Pacific stories connected with New Zealand history. This article is thus a case study of how the shift from ethnography to biography has shaped the representation of the Samoan-born graphic designer Joseph Churchward and his work.



Fig. 2 Churchward Georgina and Churchward Maricia typefaces displayed in Courtenay Place, Wellington, 2009 (photo: Safua Akeli).

Churchward's collection is a distinctive example in Te Papa's recent collecting history illustrating the significant move from an anthropological approach to a biographical one, and a move from a typological system of classification to one that highlights an artist's influence on categorisation. For example, the curators' close association with Churchward while assembling the collection and their emphasis on the designer's biography contrasted sharply with the often poorly documented ethnographic objects acquired from nineteenth- and twentieth-century collectors.

A small selection from the Churchward collection acquired in 2008, including around 1000 examples of typefaces (fonts) hand-crafted by the graphic designer, was displayed for six months, from 21 August 2008 to 16 February 2009, in the small llott Gallery on Level 4 at Te Papa. This gallery space is dedicated to displays of works on paper. Previous exhibitions here include *Theo Schoon: opening the archive* (2008), which featured a combination of artworks, sketches, letters, newspaper clippings and



Fig. 3 Churchward Design typeface used for the Tangata o le Moana exhibition title, 2007.

photographs; and the *Toss Woollaston: family and friends* exhibition (2004–05), which displayed paintings, letters and archives. Thus, *Letter Man* included Churchward's hand-drawn boards, print negatives, photographs, books featuring his typefaces, an international poster of typefaces that included the font Churchward Design, and examples of the application of Churchward's work.

Approximately 55 000 people visited the *Letter Man* exhibition over the course of the six months, an exceedingly high number of visitors for a gallery of this size.² This could partly be attributed to the subject matter: in the history of Te Papa, never before had there been an exhibition dedicated to the process of type design and its application in the real world. Along with local graphic designers, students, artists and the general public, *Letter Man* drew the attention of visiting type-design professionals who were attending the international TypeSHED11 Symposium held in Wellington in February 2009.³ Symposium participants included David Bennewith, a graphic designer and writer who has worked closely with Churchward since 2005, and who has recently (2009) authored Churchward's biography. During both

events, Courtenay Place – a shopping and entertainment precinct in the heart of Wellington city – became an additional exhibition space featuring three of Churchward's typefaces – Churchward Georgina, Churchward Lorina and Churchward Maricia – on long glass panels (Fig. 2).

Highlighting a Pacific artist

The rationale for acquiring Churchward's collection was to document the work of a 'forgotten' Pacific artist and graphic designer – forgotten in the sense that he was known to industry insiders, but remained an unknown face to the general public despite the high visibility of his work in popular print and media.

Tongan graphic designer Walter Moala first brought Churchward's work to the attention of Te Papa curators during the development of the exhibition *Tangata o le Moana* (S. Mallon, pers. comm. 2008). They immediately saw the relevance to the exhibition of Churchward's story, including his migration to New Zealand from Samoa as a young man, and his achievements in business and as an artist and designer. Churchward's story was consequently incorporated into the interactive 'Case Histories' section of the *Tangata o le Moana* exhibition, and his typeface Churchward Design was used to create the exhibition's title and signage (Fig. 3).

After the opening of the *Tangata o le Moana* exhibition, the opportunity arose to document Churchward's work further. The acquisition of the Churchward collection aligned well with Te Papa's 'Acquisitions strategy, 2007– 2008', suitably representing that document's stated aim for 'the ongoing collection of items for exhibitions, particularly those created and/or used in New Zealand by New Zealanders of Pacific Island descent, including items that show innovative use of materials or design'. In addition to providing a record of a Samoan graphic designer's contribution to the history of international type design and visual communication since the 1960s, the Churchward collection relates well to graphic artworks such as philately, product labels and posters already housed in Te Papa's History collections.⁴

Although visible to the Pacific community on paper, Churchward was at the same time invisible. As Labour MP Luamanuvao Winnie Laban stated at the opening of the *Letter Man* exhibition, 'One of the most visible of his designs, to Pacific peoples in particular, is the logo for the Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs, which has been in use on letterheads, promotional materials and the website for over ten years.'⁵ Not many Pacific Islanders would have been aware of this fact. Unknown to the general public, Churchward's work has long been used in public spaces both locally and internationally. The exhibition focus on Churchward thus allowed a local audience to connect the letters to the man.

Inspirations behind Churchward's artistic passion

Churchward's typefaces captured the attention of German type foundry Berthold Fototypes in the 1960s, and have since been used all over the world. In 2008, Churchward sold a large part of his collection for the first time, to Te Papa for its collections and for use in an exhibition. Works included sketches, print negatives, books, draft logo designs, hand-drawn boards and photographs. An acquisition of this scope and nature had never been proposed for the Pacific Cultures collection before, but the social significance of the objects, and the relationship between the museum curators and the artist, provided an important opportunity to document Churchward's life's work and explore new avenues for representing Pacific people in a museum context.

Churchward recalls drawing letters in the sand as a child growing up in Samoa, where he was born in 1933. He is from the 'aiga (family) Sā Anae and the villages of Faleasiu and Tufulele. In 1946, at the age of 13, Churchward left Samoa to attend secondary school in Wellington, New Zealand. Two years later he gained an Art Distinction Award in Lettering from Wellington Technical College and, shortly after, began work as a commercial artist for Charles Haines Advertising Agency.

In 1962, the designer founded Churchward International Typefaces (CIT), which became New Zealand's largest typesetting firm. Aforementioned leading German type company Berthold Fototypes, founded in Berlin in 1858, accepted some of Churchward's fonts for international distribution in the late 1960s, and they were soon in use throughout the world. CIT was the first company in New Zealand to produce a photo-lettering book.

The stock-market crash of 1987 saw the liquidation of CIT and, following his lawyer's advice, Churchward returned to Samoa in 1990, where he remained for the next five years. During that time he worked as a freelance graphic designer, mainly in advertising, for the Samoan government and local businesses. Churchward's focus on his advertising work in Samoa left him little time for his real passion of creating typefaces.

On his return to New Zealand in 1995, the designer continued once again to create new typefaces. Since 2001, Churchward's typefaces have been digitised and are now available through MyFonts[™], an online distributor of international typefaces. Despite this digitisation, Churchward argues for the superiority of hand-lettering over the electronic process, particularly pointing out the computer's failure to reproduce the fine, round detail of a curve, which can be drawn accurately only by hand.

Acquiring a sample of Churchward's archive

On a visit to Churchward's studio in May 2008, the author and Sean Mallon, Senior Curator Pacific Cultures at Te Papa, saw first-hand evidence of Churchward's prolific work ethic and artistic process. Located in the basement of

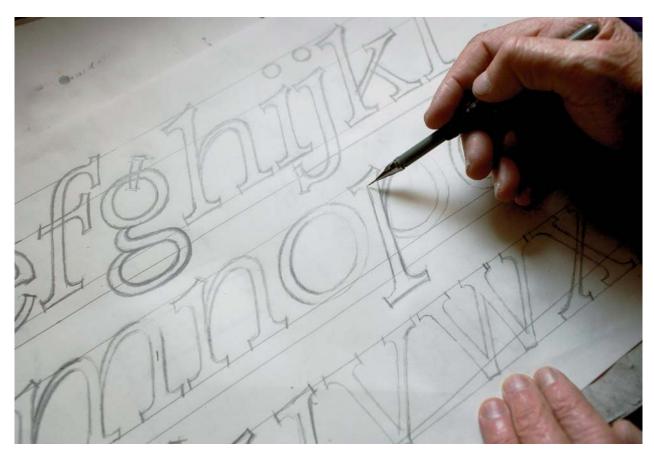


Fig. 4 Detail of Joseph Churchward sketching at his desk, 2008 (photo: Norman Heke).

Churchward's home, and having survived several floods, the studio was a place of solitude, allowing the designer the space to work creatively and progressively.

To create a new typeface, Churchward first makes a detailed pencil sketch to measure the size, shape and impact of each letter (Fig. 4). Next, he retraces an enlarged image of the letters onto a piece of A3 cardboard. Each letter is then inked in and perfected using a black marker. The whole process of creating an alphabet takes 150–300 hours.

From the 1960s up until the author's 2008 visit, Churchward had amassed an archive of his work in the form of scrapbooks, hand-drawn boards comprising typeface samples with visible alterations and corrections, print negatives of his fonts, and books covering subjects such as antique alphabets and Japanese typography. In the room next to the studio, mountains of inked boards surrounded a bed (Fig. 5), and a large photocopier churned out several hundred copies of altered fonts. It was clear from our first meeting that Churchward did not throw any of his work away, and that he had reservations about Te Papa acquiring his collection. Concerned that his extensive private collection would be split up, and finding it difficult to part physically with some of his works, Churchward was understandably reluctant to let it go.

During our visit, we were shown framed portraits of Churchward's mother and grandparents, as he recalled his family history and fond memories of Samoa (Fig. 6). Ancestral influences on Churchward's artistic process became increasingly clear as we sought ways to represent the designer in the exhibition and justify the acquisition of his archive. Churchward's career spans more than 40 years, and his typefaces have been used in various media, including billboards, record sleeves, books and newspapers, to name but a few. This kind of material culture is difficult to trace because of its disposable and ephemeral nature, and examples were, at times, hard to find. This meant that the exhibition content relied heavily on Churchward's private collection and his recollections to provide context for the pieces.

Over the course of five months, regular contact with Churchward and his family became a normal part of the



Fig. 5 Inked-in fonts created by Joseph Churchward, 2008 (photo: Norman Heke).

acquisition process in order to allay their fears regarding future storage and access to the collection. Our dialogue with his daughters Maricia and Marianna provided assurance for both Churchward and his family that Te Papa was housing the collection for posterity. Churchward and members of his family was shown the exhibition space and the Pacific collections store (where the collection would be housed), and copyright and access issues were discussed in detail. The designer's rationale for parting with some of his collection was his concern to make his work available to future generations, and the prestige of having his collection housed in a public institution like Te Papa.

In August 2008, Te Papa purchased approximately 1000 pieces of work, comprising a very small sample of Churchward's more extensive collection. The Pacific Cultures collection now houses 42 samples of Churchward's 570 typefaces. The largest part of the collection comprises examples of his typeface Churchward Design, of which there are 72 examples. This vast but representative collection complements the growing compilation of material about Churchward held at the National Library of New Zealand Te Puna Mātauranga o Aotearoa.

The preparation and packing of the Churchward collection for long-term storage is critical to its future use.⁶ Although the negative transparencies are largely in a stable condition, they are stored in Mylar (polyester) sleeves for protection. Hand-rendered typefaces on paper and boards are grouped according to size and placed into folders in boxes. A Linotype poster, which required treatment, is stored flat between rigid archival board in a plan drawer, while bound material is stored in phase boxes and smaller pamphlet bindings in an archival folder. Each individual item has been photographed for Te Papa's Collections Online initiative, allowing public access through the museum's website.⁷

The Pacific Cultures collection reflects the history of the museum, its curatorial practices, and New Zealand's relationship with the Pacific and its peoples. As mentioned above, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Pacific artefacts acquired by the museum reflected an ethnographic and an ethnological focus, whereby artefacts were collected as specimens for comparative scientific study. In 2008, the move to collect a sample of Churchward's work indicated a changing curatorial focus on acquiring items reflecting the varied cultural and social histories of Pacific peoples. Moreover, it signalled the changing concerns of museum professionals engaged with Pacific cultures, and of curators who are actively integrating social history with ethnology in their collection development.

Conceptualising Churchward's design practice

Visitors to *Letter Man* may have expected a focus on the subject of typography. However, the curators chose to deviate from that approach and instead highlight aspects of Churchward's biography *through* his practice of typography. In contrast to typological exhibits at Te Papa such as *Culture Moves! Dance costumes of the Pacific* (2005) and *Tapa: Pacific style* (2009), Churchward's exhibition featured objects that would not normally be designated as 'Pacific'. The biographical concept of the show integrated Churchward's typographical talents, and further pushed the boundary of a typically 'Pacific' exhibition. The exhibition concept for *Letter Man* was developed in 2008 around conversations with



Fig. 6 Joseph Churchward standing before portraits of his family, 2008 (photo: Norman Heke).

Churchward and the available literature about his work. The curators' specific aim was to give insight into the designer's artistic practice. The overarching theme of showcasing the work of a Pacific artist is connected to the *Tangata o le Moana* exhibition, in which the focus is on the oral, visual and written stories of Pacific people in New Zealand.

These core themes helped to guide the curatorial selection process, whereby a representative example of Churchward's work from the 1970s to the present could be shown, and at the same time the designer's personal biography could be highlighted. Four key concepts were identified as important to Churchward. The first of these is that his inspiration comes from the Roman alphabet. The Romans are acknowledged as having been the creators of the modern 26-letter alphabet, which as Churchward explains was an amazing feat, since 'without letters we don't have words, and we wouldn't be able to communicate' (J. Churchward, pers. comm. 2008). Second, throughout Churchward's career his family has played a pivotal role in his practice – typefaces such as Churchward Tua, Churchward Marianna and Churchward Isabella, named after his wife, daughter and granddaughter, respectively, are telling examples of this. Churchward created Churchward Marianna in 1969 when his daughter Marianna, then aged six, was what he described as 'plumpy' (Fig. 7). According to David Bennewith, Churchward's biographer (2009: 214), 'through Joseph's process of designing, a narrative was occurring that would result in a biographical disposition being instilled in the Marianna alphabet'.

The third concept is the influence of Churchward's heritage on his works. Examples are the font Churchward Samoa, created in honour of his homeland, and Alefapeta Samoa, a Samoan alphabet (Fig. 9) designed by Churchward and mass produced for use in schools. Significantly, Churchward also has English ancestry dating back to his great-grandfather William Brown Churchward, who was British Consul in Samoa during the late nineteenth century. Along with his Samoan and English heritage, Churchward acknowledges Chinese, Tongan and Scottish genealogical connections, all of which have influenced his creative process, as illustrated by his fonts Churchward Chinatype and Churchward Asia.



Fig. 7 Churchward Marianna, Joseph Churchward, [date unknown], print negative, 380×305 mm, purchased 2008 (Te Papa FE012186/1).



Fig. 8 Churchward Maori, Joseph Churchward, 1983, card, ink, 586×445 mm, purchased 2008 (Te Papa FE012255/1).

Finally, although he is originally from Samoa, Churchward has spent much of his life in New Zealand, and typefaces such as Churchward Maori (Fig. 8) and Churchward Ta Tiki reflect the designer's relationship to his adopted homeland. The Churchward Maori typefaces were created in the early part of the 1980s, a time of land marches in New Zealand by tangata whenua (people of the land, or native people) and protests against breaches of the Treaty of Waitangi of 1840.

As mentioned above, *Letter Man* received a very favourable response from the public. However, after the exhibition opened the curators received one complaint from a visitor who was surprised to find on display a poster of Linotype fonts, created by machinery as opposed to freehand production. In reply, we emphasised the poster's importance in highlighting Churchward's international status, particularly the fact that his typeface Churchward Design appeared among fonts created by such eminent typographers such as Claude Garamond (Garamond), Herbert Bayer (Bauhaus) and Max Miedinger (Helvetica).

Since meeting Churchward in 2005 during his studies at Werkplaats Typografie in the Netherlands, David Bennewith has worked closely with the designer to produce his biography, published in 2009 and entitled *Churchward international typefaces*. Bennewith details Churchward's creative life and the impact his work has had locally, nationally and internationally since the 1960s. The richly illustrated life story contains photographs, letters and examples of the commercial application of Churchward's work. Advocating for Churchward, the biography has played a vital part in resurrecting the designer's artistic achievements and his contributions to typography. As a courtesy, Bennewith was contacted in advance of the *Letter Man* exhibition, and as part of the public programme around the exhibition he read the introduction to the biography at a public talk at Te Papa (Fig. 10). Highlighting the global coverage of Churchward's typefaces in his talk, Bennewith noted that the title font used in the Lonely Planet series of travel guides (which have a total circulation of around 55 million) was Churchward's creation.

Representing Joseph Churchward

It seems ironic that, despite the international visibility of Churchward's typefaces (Kegler et al. 2002; Headley 2005), the artist's story and achievements are not well recognised in New Zealand. Unlike iconic people featured in previous exhibitions in the llott Gallery and nearby Eyelights Gallery, such as New Zealand opera singer Kiri Te Kanawa and artist Theo Schoon, who are easily identified by the majority of New Zealanders, Churchward needed a reintroduction. Following the liquidation of CIT in 1988, Churchward was absent from the New Zealand advertising and typography

Opposite: Fig. 9 Alefapeta Samoa, Joseph Churchward, [date unknown], paper, ink, 420×295 mm, purchased 2008 (Te Papa FE012154/4).

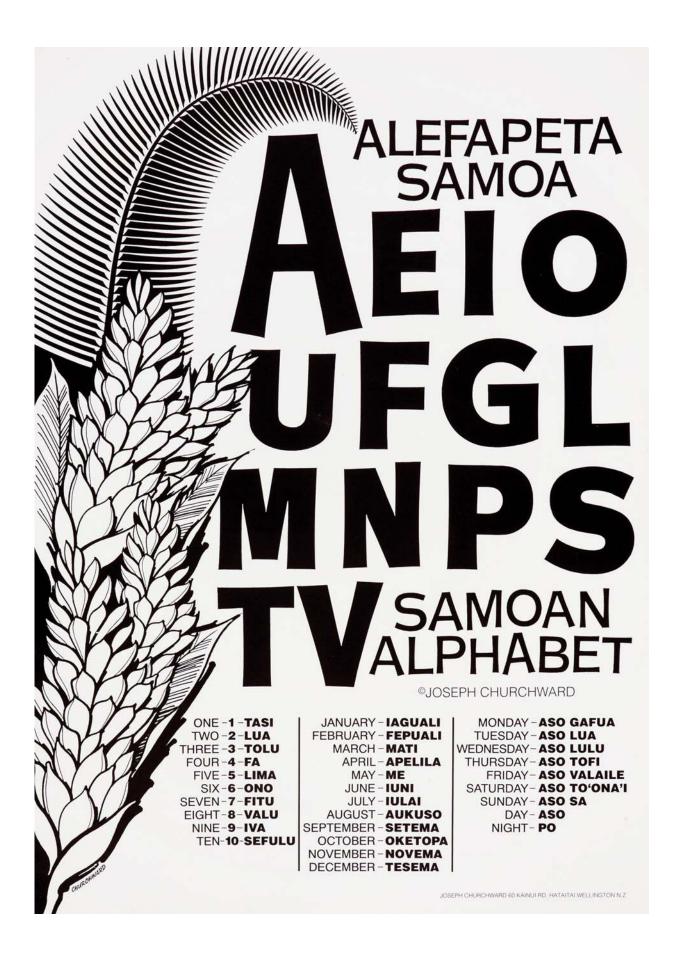




Fig. 10 David Bennewith (standing) and Joseph Churchward in the Ilott Gallery, Level 4, Te Papa, 2009 (photo: Safua Akeli).

scene for at least 10 years. However, since 2001 the digitisation of his fonts online has assisted in maintaining his national and international status for industry insiders. For example, the Klingspor Museum in Germany (a museum that specialises in the art of modern book production and typography) has included Churchward among its prominent typographers.

In the course of the Letter Man season and in events related to the February 2009 typography symposium, Churchward had several public opportunities to recall interesting stories from his life and career; these will be an important legacy in the coming years. The designer had an extended interview on Radio New Zealand with broadcaster Kim Hill, and he appeared on the television programme Tagata Pasifika during filming of the opening of the exhibition on 21 August 2008. In line with the exhibition, a Joseph Churchward Graffiti workshop with high-profile graphic designer Gavin Mouldey was organised by the Te Papa events team, while media interest was generated through newspaper articles in the Dominion Post and The Wellingtonian in August 2008. These appearances of Churchward in a range of news media reintroduced him to New Zealand households. His profile was raised further in October 2009, when Churchward was presented the John Britten Award from the Designers Institute of New Zealand. This award represents the highest recognition given to an outstanding individual for leadership, vision and achievement in his or her field (in this case type design), both locally and internationally. Even at the age of 76, Churchward continues to handcreate typefaces, and at the time of writing he had completed 600 – an amazing achievement and testament to the designer's passion and creativity.

Conclusions

The acquisition of a collection of hand-drawn typefaces would not typically be associated with the development of Pacific Cultures collections in most museums. However, at Te Papa this acquisition represents a significant development in the curatorial practice and focus relating to the Pacific collections. It is an approach that reflects the curators' concern to document the breadth of work undertaken by Pacific people, and a recognition that significant Pacific stories may be attached to items that may not appear culturally distinctive or unique, including typefaces, which circulate and have relevance beyond their point of origin. Although housed in the Pacific Cultures collections of Te Papa, Churchward's work traverses geographical, ethnic and cultural boundaries. This path of enquiry has resulted in a broader approach to the curators' collecting practice. Museums are places to display artistry, innovation, history and culture, and the exhibition of Churchward's work in *Letter Man* incorporated these concepts in the form of letters and alphabets. However, even exhibitions are ephemeral, although a catalogue, photographs and reviews may offer some record or reflection on the curators' work. Fortunately, the museum's collections are permanent resources that exist for future generations to rediscover and reinterpret. Te Papa's catalogue, available on the museum's website, also continues to re-present Churchward's work to a virtual audience well beyond the life of the exhibition.⁸ But just as important is the lasting legacy of both *Letter Man* and the collection of Churchward's work, whereby they have extended and challenged our notions of what constitutes a 'Pacific' subject and object.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank and acknowledge Sean Mallon and Kirstie Ross (Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington, New Zealand), and Selafina Akeli (Brisbane, Australia), for providing insight and comments on this paper. My thanks also go to Grace Hutton, James Brown, and Vicki-Anne Heikell, Norman Heke, Andrea Hearfield and Suzanne Knight (Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, Wellington, New Zealand), and to Joseph Churchward (Churchward Type, Wellington, New Zealand) and his family for their support during the exhibition process. I also acknowledge a great debt to the referees.

Notes

- 1 See http://collections.tepapa.govt.nz/theme.aspx?irn=1330 (accessed 27 October 2009).
- 2 Visitor numbers based on Te Papa Visitor and Market Research figures. A talk was given by David Bennewith, author of Joseph Churchward's biography, and the Joseph Churchward Graffiti workshop was held with graphic designer Gavin Mouldey in *Our Space*. Media interest included newspaper articles following the opening, a Kim Hill interview with Joseph Churchward on Radio New Zealand, and an interview with Joseph Churchward and the author on *Tagata Pasifika* and Radio New Zealand.
- 3 See www.typeshed11.co.nz/wellington/whats-on (accessed 24 September 2009).
- 4 Acquisition proposal (2008). Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa internal document.
- 5 Laban was Minister of Pacific Island Affairs at the time the exhibition opened on 21 August 2008. For a full transcript

of her speech at the blessing ceremony for the exhibition, see www.beehive.govt.nz/speech/letterman+joseph+churchward039s+world+type+exhibition+blessing (accessed 11 May 2009).

- 6 The exhibition display and long-term storage was organised by Vicki-Anne Heikell (Conservator Paper, Te Papa) and Grace Hutton (Collection Manager Pacific Cultures, Te Papa).
- 7 The documentation work was carried out by contractor Andrea Hearfield. Te Papa Collections Online database can be accessed at http://collections.tepapa.govt.nz/search.aspx? term=joseph%20churchward&imagesonly=on (accessed 24 September 2009).
- 8 See http://collections.tepapa.govt.nz/theme.aspx?irn=972 (accessed 30 October 2009).

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