MOAI: THE JOURNEY OF LIGHT

LOUIS VUITTON
In an unfrequented region in the middle of the Great Ocean, lies a mysterious, lonely island. No other land is to be found anywhere nearby and, at more than eight hundred leagues from the closest coastline, it's surrounded only by empty, fluid immensities. The island is planted with tall, monstrous statues, the works of an unknown, vanished race, and its past remains a mystery.

Pierre Loti
French writer (1850-1923)
EASTER ISLAND’S GOOD AND BAD FORTUNE

On 3 January 1872, the frigate La Flore dropped anchor off of Easter Island, with Julien Viaud, alias Pierre Loti, on board. Filled with wonder, the young midshipman noted in his little journal his day-to-day impressions, supplemented with vivid sketches. Nothing escaped his curiosity on this strange island dotted with reddish craters and dismal rocks. A hostile land far removed from the Edenic countries peopled with friendly, smiling creatures as commonly described by 18th-century travellers. Here, everything seemed desolate and sad.

So what had happened to the inhabitants of this “speck of an island”, discovered one Easter Sunday in 1722 by the Dutch admiral Jacob Roggeveen, who would immortalize it under this name? Fifty years later, two Spanish ships landed at the island and there spent six days, long enough to officially claim position and plant three crosses on the slopes of Mount Paketi! Following his fruitful expedition of 1769 in the South Seas, it was the turn of famous Captain Cook to land on Easter Island on 14 March 1774 in Hanga Roa Bay. His passionate descriptions would definitively lend the island the aura it has enjoyed ever since.

However, less than a century later, an unprecedented tragedy occurred. More than a thousand islanders, including their king, his son and the island’s main dignitaries (its priests and scholars known as “Maori”), were kidnapped and taken to Peru, where they were forced to work as slaves in the guano mines. Most eventually died from disease and maltreatment, while a handful of escaped slaves – no more than six – in turn contaminated the island’s remaining inhabitants, transforming Easter Island into a veritable mass grave. In 1877, Rapa Nui (the indigenous name for Easter Island) was home to only 115 inhabitants, the final guardians of their gods and culture.
I hope that this project, which has united so many souls from different countries, will become a “wish come true” for the Easter Island, and above all, for the Rapa Nui people, from their ancestors to the future generations.

Óscar Acuña Poblete
EXECUTIVE SECRETARY
NATIONAL MONUMENTS COUNCIL OF CHILE
RAPA NUI, THE ISLAND OF A THOUSAND STATUES

Masters of the Pacific Ocean, expert astronomers and sailors, the inhabitants of Easter Island – whose distant ancestors had undertaken an incredible voyage from far-off Indonesia – were no less firmly attached to their land. However, this tiny islet of only 165 square metres, located midway between Tahiti and the South American continent, disproved the popular Western fantasy of the bountiful South Seas, insofar as its natural resources were poor! At the most, a few meagre breadfruit plantations, a few scrawny banana trees... Nevertheless, according to recent research carried out by Catherine and Michel Orliac, such was not always the case. They believe that several decades of drought led to a deforestation of Easter Island around the period 1600 to 1640; prior to this catastrophe, the island would have resembled its more luxuriant Polynesian cousins.
Clever horticulturists (capable of creating “greenhouses” to shelter their plants from the sun and wind) and skillful fishermen (thanks to their nets made from hair), inventors of a not yet decoded writing (the famous Rongo Rongo tablets), the Rapa Nui people were, first and foremost, immense sculptors whose genius defies understanding.

What society was sufficiently wealthy and sophisticated to have created these strange colossuses carved from the tender rock of Rano Raraku volcano? With their backs turned to the sea and looking towards the houses of lineage, standing proudly upon the platform of their outdoor sanctuary (or “ahu”), these immense statues with their coral eyes and bizarre “hats” of red tuff (or “pukau”) have never ceased to intrigue specialists and the simply curious. Baptized “Moai”, they are thought to represent ancestors raised to the rank of divinities and protectors of their lineage.

But what visitors to the island are immediately struck with is the cosmic force emitted by these stone giants with their inscrutable gaze. The Polynesians have a word for this sacred dimension: “mana”, or divine energy.
Mana is the power. It is the spiritual power that expresses the infinite Universe and which allows us to change the world. With Mana, the truth will remain.

Pedro Edmunds Paoa
MAYOR OF EASTER ISLAND
The “Moai: the Journey of Light” is a project conceived by the Italian artists Marco Nereo Rotelli and Matteo Ferretti. Produced and supported by the Mare Nostrum Foundation, Louis Vuitton and the Chilean government, it is a long-term project that shows the utmost respect for the culture and people of the Easter Island.

Founded in 2003 by Orlando Pandolfi, the Mare Nostrum Foundation aims to protect the heritage of the islands, whilst strengthening their identity and perpetuating their tradition and culture throughout the world. Over the past couple of years, the Mare Nostrum Foundation, in association with the artists Marco Nereo Rotelli and Matteo Ferretti, has organised a number of artistic exchanges with the Easter Island, enabling them to establish a privileged relationship with the Rapa Nui people.

Through a number of actions planned for 2009-2010, Louis Vuitton - for whom the transmission of heritage and core values is an integral part of the brand - has associated itself with these initiatives in the aim of increasing public awareness on the culture and civilization of the Easter Island as well as on the challenges that the Rapa Nui people face today.
Our Moai possesses the “Mana”. Its spirituality reflects the respect for the being, and leaves footprints of Peace and Love that remain among us.

Carolina Hotu Hey
GOVERNOR OF EASTER ISLAND
In 2009, two artistic exhibitions, inspired by the Easter Island and its heritage, will be held in Paris at the Espace Louis Vuitton. Other exhibitions will be organized to celebrate the inauguration of the new Rapa Nui Foundation, which will be created in 2009 by the Chilean authorities in cooperation with the Mare Nostrum Foundation. The aim of this new Foundation is to protect the fascinating heritage and identity of the Rapa Nui people and to help them cope with the challenges that they face today, thus promoting sustainable development of the island. These actions will culminate in Paris, at the beginning of 2010, with the spiritual journey to Paris of a “Moai” statue: the soul of the Eastern Islanders. The “Moai”, which is seen as a messenger of peace transcending time and borders, will be carefully chosen and restored by a group of Chilean and Italian archaeologists and scientists. This project, which is an excellent opportunity for the public to understand the physical and emotional force of the “Moai”, will bring into light the importance of Easter Island’s cultural heritage and creativity, not only within the Polynesian triangle but also throughout the world.