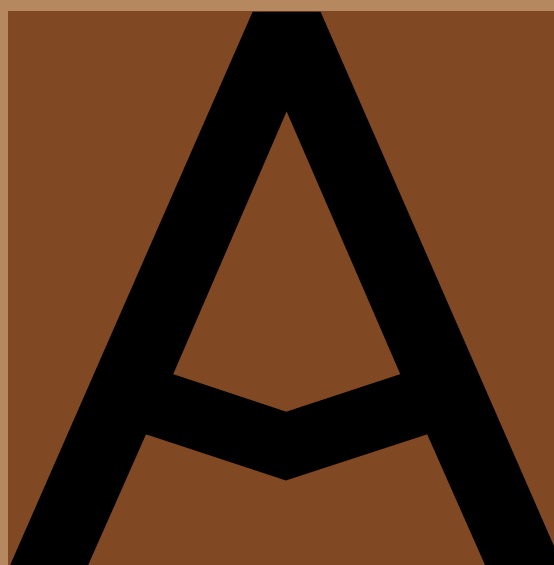
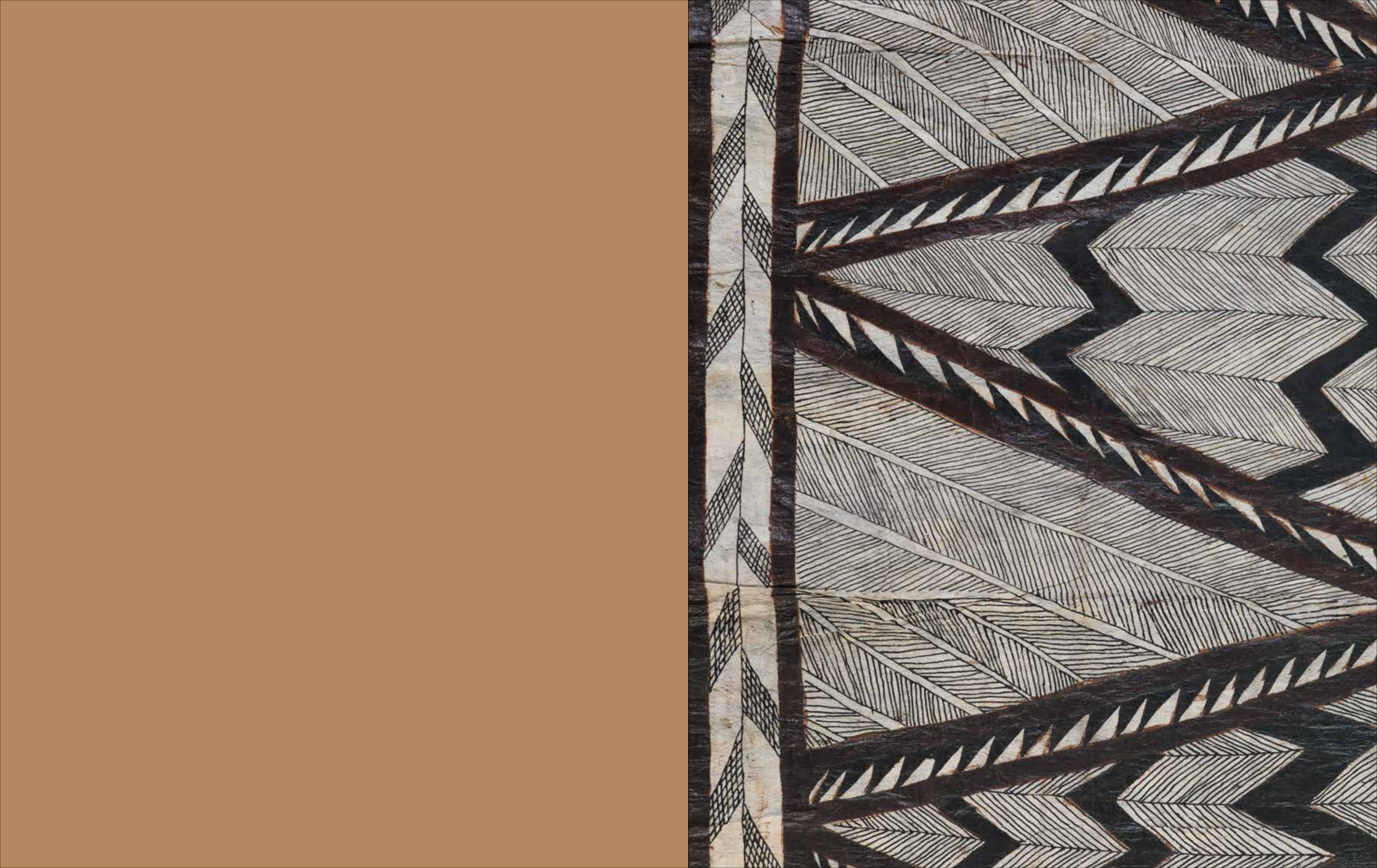


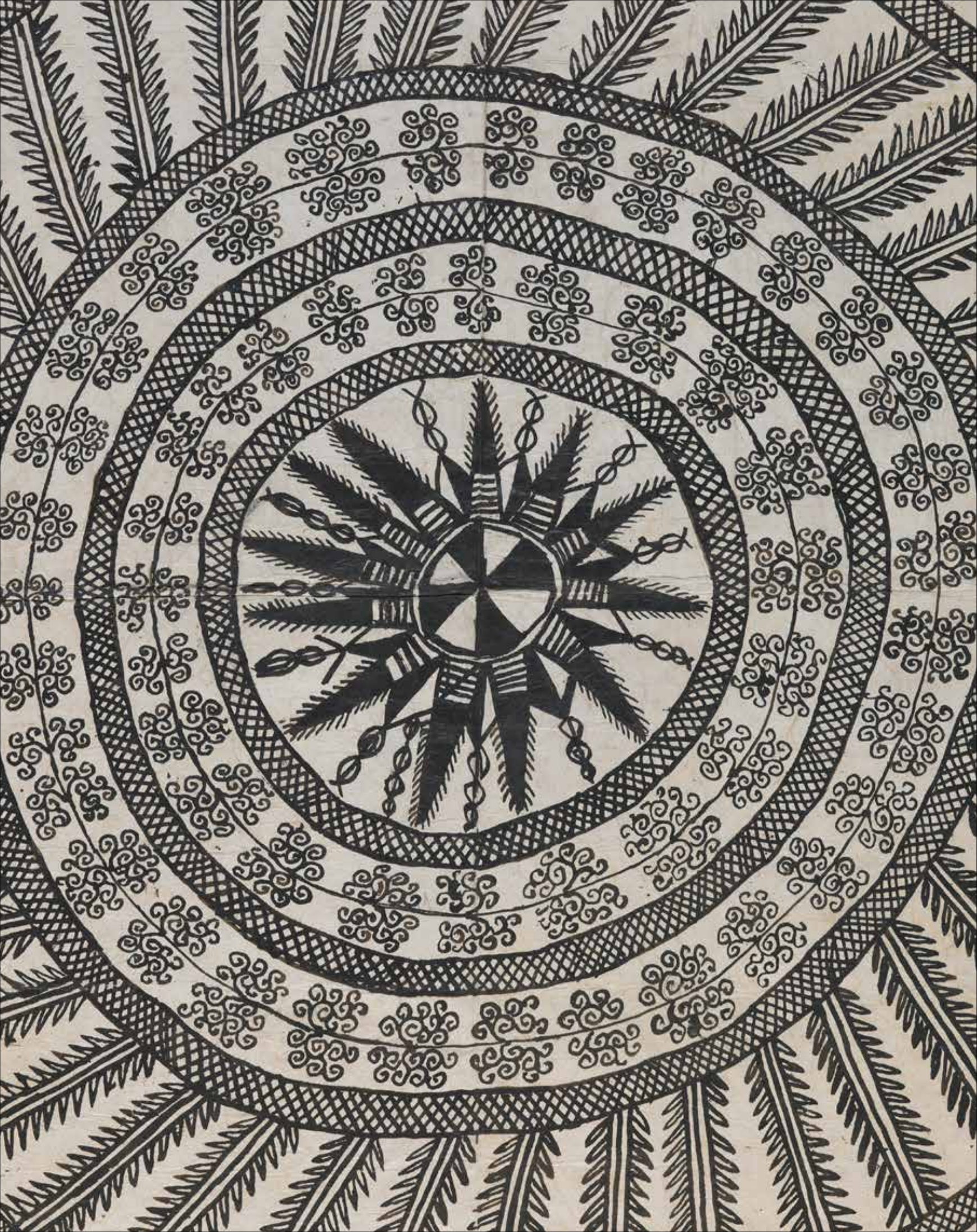
*Barkcloth paintings from the Pacific*



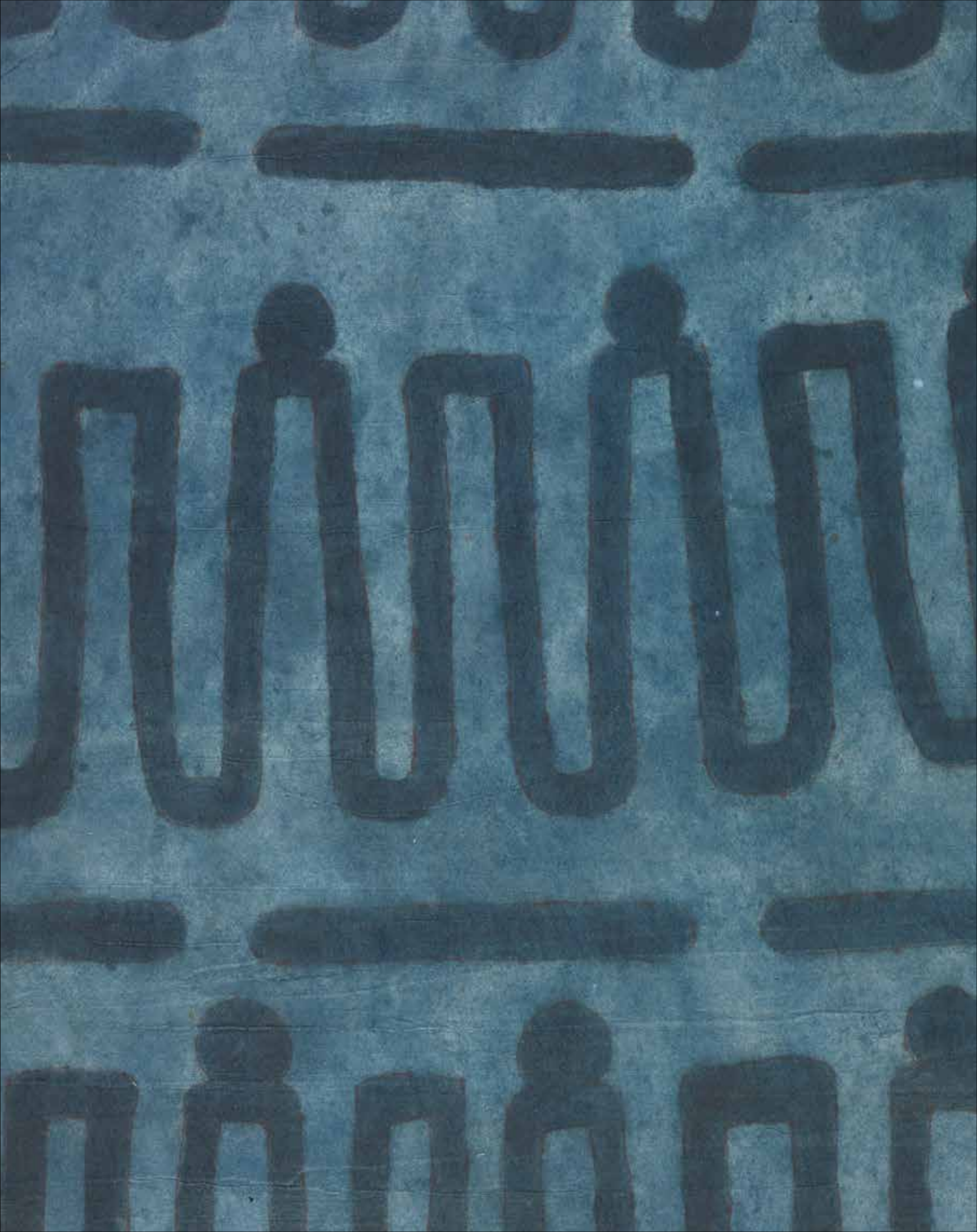




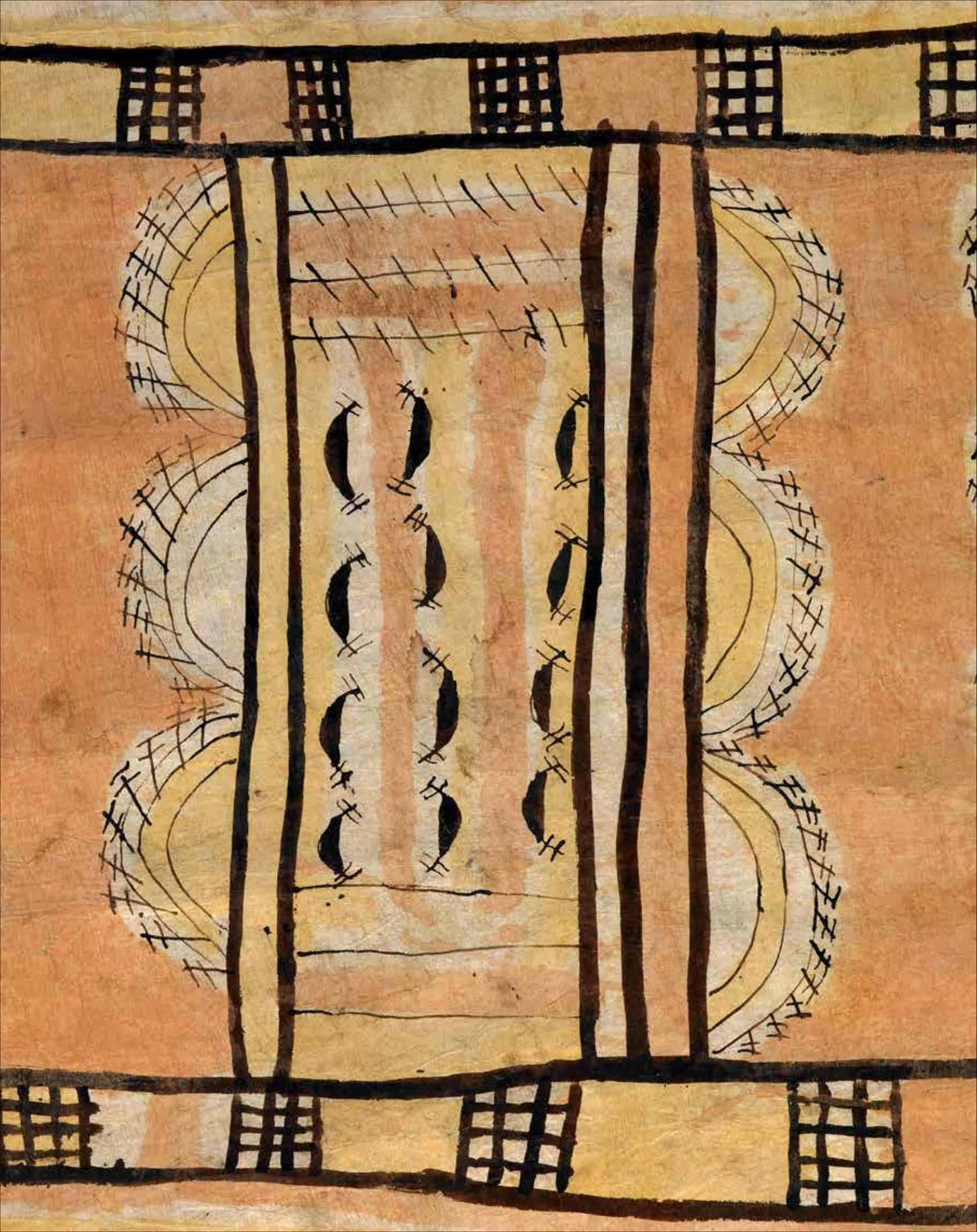








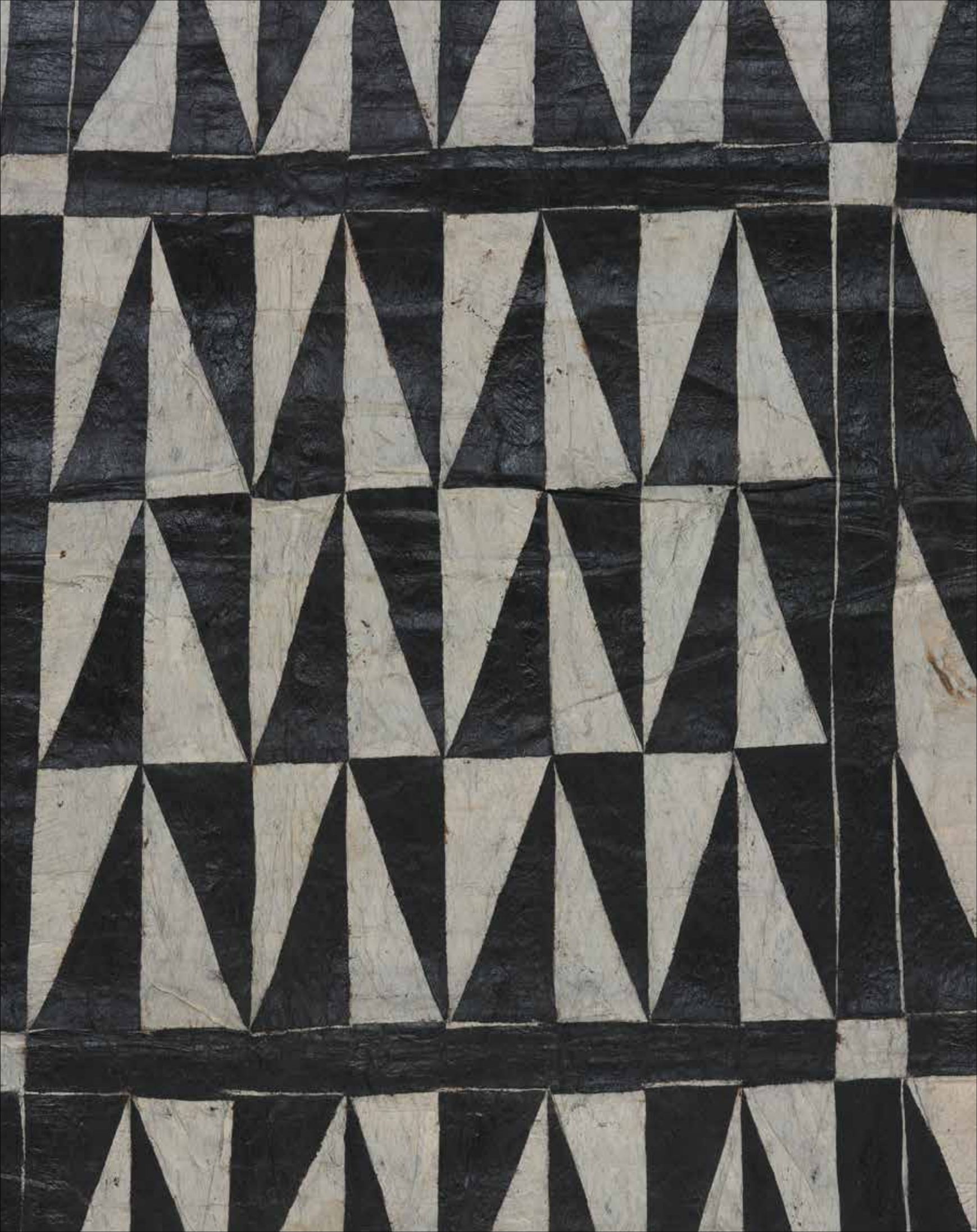
















## Foreword

This is the first exhibition to take place in any European art gallery of a great tradition – that of painted barkcloth, commonly known as tapa, from the islands of the Pacific. For millenia, Pacific Islanders have made cloth from the bark of trees. Often taking on ceremonial significance, its decoration is extraordinary, with patterns that were and are enjoyed for their formal quality as much as their symbolism. All the examples in this exhibition are drawn from the world-class collection of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge, which include examples collected as early as Captain Cook's voyages and those made today.

Barkcloth is made by soaking and beating the inner bark of trees, most commonly the Paper Mulberry (*Broussonetia papyrifera*). Across the region, from New Guinea to Hawai'i, barkcloth has been decorated, in some places in the form of huge sheets featuring optically dynamic abstract patterns, elsewhere on a smaller scale, depicting plant and animal life, sacred creatures and mythic narratives. Some barkcloths were wealth objects, others marked sacred spaces, or were incorporated into masks and other ritual assemblages. Cloth was often understood as a kind of skin, a powerful wrapping for the body which revealed its inner state and identity. Primarily created by women using inherited clan designs, the manufacture of barkcloth formed a major vehicle for creativity, kinship, exchange, and the expression of political prestige. Everywhere these fabrics maintained and communicated the artists' deep connections to ancestors and country.

This exhibition includes cloths spanning over 200 years, from Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, the Cook Islands and elsewhere in the Pacific. On display are several large Fijian barkcloths which feature complex geometric patterns, a kind of Oceanic Op art. These huge fabrics can be quite dazzling, their motifs seeming to dance; brilliant expressions of the energy and vitality of a people. A rare and spectacular cloth from the tiny island of Niue combines abstract patterns with naturalistic motifs of animals and plant life, whilst a large cloth from Tonga is decorated with images of flying foxes, animals deemed to belong to the Tongan monarchy, suggesting this cloth may have belonged to a chief or individual of high rank.



Although the painted barkcloths collected by European museums have remained largely hidden from public view, the tradition remains alive in the Pacific. Our exhibition includes two works from the small Ömie community of the uplands of Oro Province, Papua New Guinea. There, a remarkable group of women are adapting the ancient tradition to create work for the contemporary world. They have emerged as brilliant painters, each with highly distinctive and personal styles.

**T**apa, shown within the context of a contemporary art programme, encourages us to reconsider what we think we know about art, especially the lines that are conventionally drawn between it and artefacts from non-western cultures. Although mostly not made by people identifying themselves as artists, the pieces we see here are as moving, as thought-provoking and as beautiful as any masterpiece of post-war abstraction. They lead us to the conclusion that the phenomenon of art arises out of all-too-human value systems and social imperatives, and this has radical implications for art worlds that trade on ideas of intrinsic quality and exclusivity. Thus, at once, art becomes more free and more problematic.

The partnership of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge and Ikon on this occasion exemplifies a process of enquiry that is vital for both our institutions, a commitment to discovering new things about art. Such an adventure more than doubles the satisfaction we derive from its outcome, and this is also due to the professionalism and goodwill of many others involved. In particular many thanks to Julie Adams who has contributed to and supported the project from start to finish. Likewise, we are grateful to Rosanna Raymond for her enthusiasm and the inspiration of her work, which exemplifies the ongoing lives of tapa in the present.

Nicholas Thomas  
Director, Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology  
University of Cambridge

Jonathan Watkins  
Director, Ikon

## Tattooed Textiles

Paintings on barkcloth from the Pacific

**I**f you were alive in the early nineteenth century and you walked through almost any inhabited tropical Polynesian landscape, or through certain villages or valleys today, the pervading sound might not have the wind through the breadfruit trees and palms, or the surf on a distant reef, but the beating of barkcloth. The sound of mallet against anvil is a clear and resonant ringing that carries over considerable distances. According to James Morrison, one of the *Bounty* mutineers, Tahitian women, who usually made cloth in groups, as women do in many parts of the Pacific and probably have for millenia, sustained their beat to 'a Song given by one and Chorous'd by the rest'; they kept 'regular time.... Shifting the pieces backwards and forwards till it is all beat out to a regular Breadth and thickness'. The musical tone would have been enhanced by the fact that the anvil, generally two to three metres long, was invariably of very dense and resilient wood. In eastern Polynesia it was not a solid block of wood but a low, hollowed-out trestle, a sounding board supported on squat legs, and in rare cases, in the Marquesas for example, carved along the sides, bearing the extraordinary interlocked forms for which Marquesan art is famous.

In tropical climates, cloth did not last long, clothes were always needed, and greater fabrics were often needed to, in large quantities for gifts, and otherwise for ceremonial and ritual purposes. Hence cloth-making was continuously, aurally-present in indigenous lives, not just as noise but as expressive activity, as part of the art of life.

Barkcloth is now known generically as tapa. This word is similar to the Hawaiian term *kapa* and to some words for unpainted cloth or undecorated areas of barkcloth on larger pieces but there were needless to say proper local terms and names everywhere such as *masi*, *ngatu*, *siapo* and *hiapo* in Fiji, Tonga, Samoa and Niue respectively. Tapa, as a generic term, seems to have emerged and spread with the lingua franca of travel and trade in the early nineteenth century: this was a period in which the voyaging and interaction that was always characteristic of Oceanic histories, before Europeans, accelerated dramatically. Islanders began working and travelling on European ships; they encountered Christian missionaries, adopted Christianity, and became missionaries themselves; the values and uses of fabrics changed in many ways, and local styles spread and responded as they were brought into contact.



The cloth was and is made mainly from paper mulberry bark and sometime from breadfruit and other trees. The process of production always involved various phases of soaking, scraping and beating the bark; in some areas a few days' fermentation at an early stage was allowed to make the material more sticky and easier to beat into a cohesive sheet; supple and strong varieties were produced by beating out very fine sheets that were then pounded or felted together; old tapa could similarly be repaired and joined to new pieces, but since the cloth was adversely affected by exposure it was more usually simply discarded. In a few areas such as the Austral Islands, the fabric was glazed, varnished with a vegetable gum, to become resistant to rain. Beaters were square in cross-section and usually grooved; in Hawaii and a few other places they were sometimes carved with more complex patterns and would leave watermark-type impressions in the cloth, behind other designs.

**A**cross the Pacific the fabrics that were created varied considerably in scale and intended use. In island Melanesia strips of cloth were worn as clothing, typically on ritual occasions rather than ordinarily, though larger sheets of cloth were in some places hung around graves. In western Polynesia tapa was produced on a large scale and long strips of decorated cloth were presented on major occasions such as weddings, and most particularly on events in the lives of high chiefs and their funerals. Cloth was a form of wealth, it was presented along with other valuables when people came together, and it was stored in great bales in the rafters of chiefs' houses. But it was also used in a host of quotidian ways, in clothing, to wrap infants, and as room-dividers within large open houses, and so forth.

Tapa was also used as a medium of assembled art, for example in the Papuan Gulf, among the Baining of New Ireland, and also on Rapanui, where figures and masks were made out of wicker and then wrapped with cloth that would be painted and paraded in a ritual context. The scale of some of these figures is extraordinary – a male and female pair now in Hamburg are about seven metres high.

Europeans began to encounter the arts of Oceania in the eighteenth century. Those who participated in Captain Cook's voyages were struck by a whole range of objects and art forms, from canoes to tattoos, and collected and described many things, without being quite sure how to evaluate or interpret them. Broadly speaking, as a canon of Oceanic art later came to be defined and celebrated by collectors and connoisseurs, women's genres were marginalized. Tapa could be seen as the exception that proves the rule, in the sense that participants in the early voyages were delighted and impressed by it, they considered it finely-made, and beautifully decorated, and Hawaiian kapa, in particular, was collected in very large quantities during Cook's third voyage, and subsequently trafficked in extensively, by dealers in curiosities, back in Europe. Yet large pieces were commonly cut up into samples, and treated as European fabrics themselves might have been, as bearers of pattern. This was to appreciate the cloth as an expression of craft and ornament but of course to fail to see the whole – the extraordinary power of a large decorated cloth, which might be five metres or more wide and as long, in some cases much longer. For decades, in

ethnographic museums in Europe and elsewhere, all that was done with cloth was to use it as a backdrop in display cases. It appeared as a bearer of pattern but not as a whole fabric with structure and total effect.

Some tapa were in fact designed to be divisible, and their joining and separation in fact modelled the sociality of affiliation, of coming together, that defined the sort of ceremony, on a massive scale, that marked the marriage or death of a great chief in Tonga. Various local groups would work on their own sections of a great cloth that would then be joined together; subsequent to ceremonies it would be cut up into sections and distributed among those who contributed. But other barkcloths were conceived and created as whole and integrated entities and bear structured designs that demand to be seen as such.

**W**estern audiences tend to bring to non-western art traditions the expectation that forms will be symbolic, and will bear traditional meanings. This is sometimes true but often also misleading. In the societies of the Pacific art was more commonly concerned with social effect. It did communicate, but not in the sense that it was a coded or graphic form of language-like information. Some barkcloth patterns did suggest narrative and motifs had names and might refer to living creatures or aspects of the environment that were important in various senses. But those barkcloths that were presented in the contexts of major ceremonies were also instruments in those ceremonies, in which the prestige of groups was very much at stake. When people offered gifts, they always sought to meet and exceed expectations, they ideally overwhelmed the recipients with the magnificence of things that were offered. In various senses, painted designs exemplified the vigour and strength of the group that produced them, the aim was to create vibrant and shimmering social appearances, an effect of power, that stood out, relative to the humdrum of everyday life, like figure upon ground.

**Y**et the art and the necessary operation was also in the process, and what people did with barkcloth was very often to wrap. In eastern Polynesia wrapping was the ritual operation par excellence. Managing life in the world meant managing flows of *tapu* (taboo or contagious sacredness). The newborn who came direct from the other world were intensely *tapu* as were the dead, and were people at various times and in various states, when bleeding or when being tattooed. The skin contained the body and tapa was an additional skin, a wrapping that reinforced and contained the self, and ordered and bounded the flow of sacred energy in the world. The skin could be armoured and wrapped through tattoo, and tattoo protected the body and the self. Tattoo designs, tapa designs, and the geometric patterns engraved into weapons such as the great clubs carried by Tongan and Fijian warriors – both ceremonial and lethal – are related, they were all arts of reinforcement and empowerment.

Tapa was often elsewhere plain, but never exactly 'undecorated' – sometimes stained with turmeric, sometimes plain white, these were aesthetic effects apt to particular uses that were sought after in themselves.

Those who sight a few examples of Fijian or Tongan cloth may assume that designs were standardized and relatively homogeneous. It is correct that instruments enabling the



reproduction of pattern over extensive areas, stencils and templates over which fabric was beaten, were used but it is really the heterogeneity of design and painting that is arresting, as are an extraordinary range of devices and techniques that create visual dynamism. The European viewer cannot but help see some barkcloths as op-art works, which, notwithstanding the entirely different interests and motivations of the Vasarelys and Bridget Rileys and the makers of these much older fabrics, they essentially are, in that motifs are certainly organised such that they play with the eye and create impressions of movement and animation, a sense of motion that was of course further charged, when barkcloths were presented not statically but in movement, as they were carried, presented, unwrapped, and laid out.

These compositional systems were various but often feature structure and repetition that is carefully supplemented or disrupted, regularity that is deliberately produced and as deliberately subverted, often subtly, in some small fashion that nevertheless moves the work as a whole from stasis to dynamism. Yet it is important to emphasize that the styles in which these operations are conspicuous, the primarily geometric styles of Fiji, for example, are just one of many modes in which these fabrics were decorated. Cloth was stained by immersion in dyes or mud, it was painted freehand, stencilled, stamped and rubbed, it was directly exposed to smoke, varnished and occasionally perfumed.

In Samoa, one of a number of styles entailed freehand drawing and painting, also a hallmark of Niuean *hiapo* and of the remarkable and unusual Cook Islands example in this exhibition. An arresting feature of some of these works is a combination of dynamic geometric fields with occasional often tiny and almost hidden figurative details – on the edge of a grid or squeezed within a line of diamonds one may suddenly discover a beetle, a canoe, or a person. In western Oceania freehand painting was also not uncommon and in Simbo fish and birds feature in what are narrative images, recently interpreted by Islanders to depict fishing expeditions.

Oceanic art is full of surprises, and one of the greatest of the last decade has been the emergence of a spectacular painting movement. From the perspective of the Ömie, of Oro Province, Papua New Guinea, there is nothing new about *nioge*, about painted barkcloths. To the contrary, these fabrics are intimately associated with the beginning of time and the first female ancestor who ventured into the mountain Papuan territory that the Ömie now inhabit. She had her first menstrual period, cut bark from a tree, and decorated it by soaking it in red river mud that symbolised her blood and her capacity to produce children. Ever since, Ömie women have beaten cloth and painted it.

The Ömie had long suffered from sustained conflict with their neighbours, the much larger Orokaiva. And like many Melanesian peoples they dealt with the intrusion of Christian missionaries and the local impacts of the Second World War. The 1951 eruption of Mount Lamington was also devastating. By the early 2000s, some among this remote and acutely marginalised population were concerned to take action, to create some positive relationship with the wider world. Consideration was given to encouraging tourism, but the nearest

airstrip had closed, and access was just too difficult. David Baker, Director of Sydney's New Guinea Gallery, visited in 2002 and 2004 and encouraged Ömie to make *nioge* for sale. Chiefs and elders weighed up the issues and decided to embrace the opportunity. An art that until this time had been produced in and for its own environment would travel to Australia and beyond.

The rapid success of Ömie painting is striking. Shows in Sydney were quickly followed by the inclusion of the work in a major survey of historic and more recent barkcloth, *Paperskin*, at the Queensland Art Gallery and Te Papa, Wellington, over 2009–10; the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne simultaneously mounted a dedicated exhibition, *Wisdom of the Mountain*; at the time of writing exhibitions in the United States and England are being developed. One could speculate that the famous desert painting movements from Papunya, Balgo and elsewhere prepared curators and audiences in Australia and elsewhere for this aesthetic and this work – which is not to say that its growing renown is in any sense undeserved.

Historically, Ömie barkcloths were open in structure, their imagery sparse. The prospect of production for sale appears to have empowered the artists. They adapted designs derived from the tattoos that, before the missionaries, they had borne on their bodies. They experimented and created an extraordinarily varied and animated visual language. If all of these works mobilise motifs associated with mountains, vines, pigs' tusks, and other natural forms and creatures, they seem not only different from tapa painted elsewhere in the Pacific, but all arrestingly different too from each other.

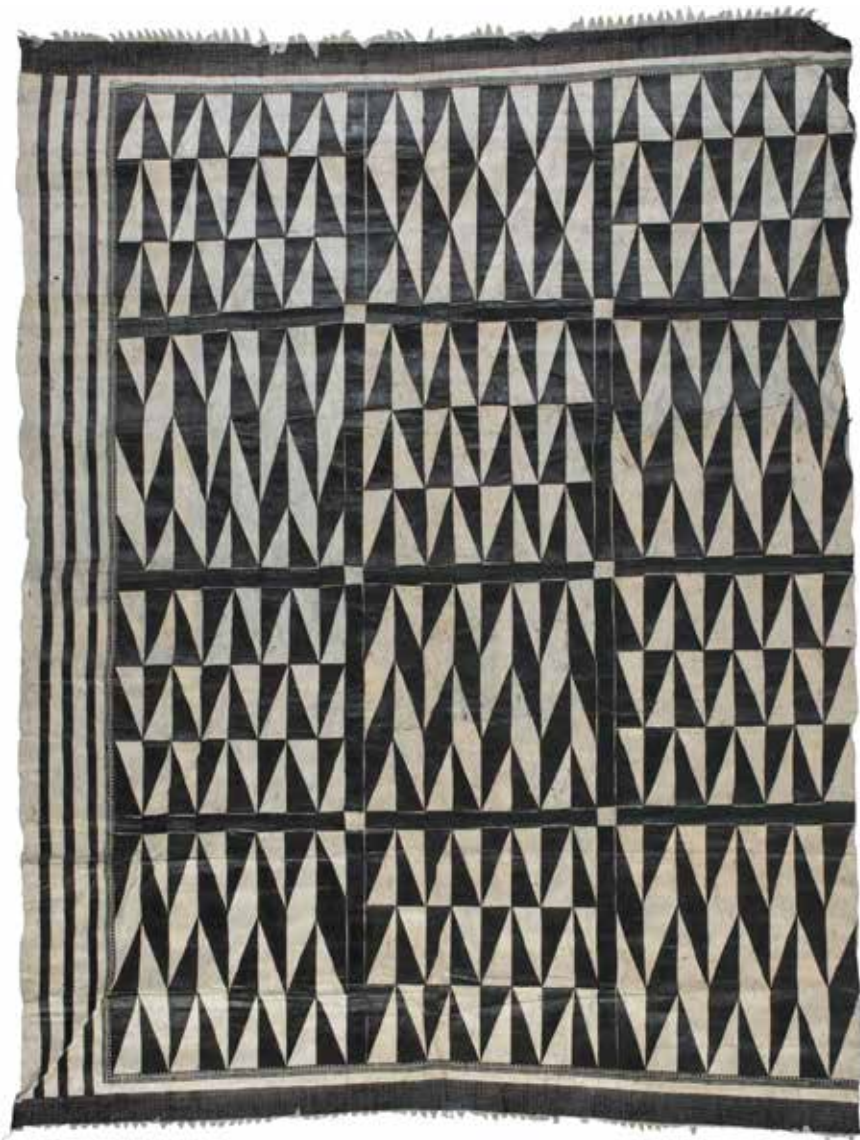
The designs of Dapeni Jonevari's works are dominated by single circular or concentric forms; their titles refer to spiderwebs. Lila Warrimou's are structured by a grid, incorporating zigzags with elements of symmetry, that are refracted, the pattern straining outwards at the edges, refusing containment. There is an aesthetic that is exemplified in both their works and those of all of Ömie artists: every one of their compositions is animated and dynamic. Despite their diversity, none aspires to balance or stillness, instead all seem full of the life of a place, a community, a people.

Nicholas Thomas





Fiji  
Late 19th Century    MAA No. Z30621    69 × 423 cm



Fiji  
1870s    MAA No. Z4169    274 × 199 cm



Fiji  
1870s    MAA No. Z4167    83 × 365 cm



Fiji  
Early 20th Century    MAA No. Z28336    88 × 308 cm



Fijian barkcloth is remarkable for its variety of decorating techniques and styles: bold black designs painted freehand; stencilled motifs of tremendous intricacy in black and red; patterns obtained by rubbing the cloth on a board of wood or fibre. All are employed, in different parts of Fiji, to produce vibrant and contrasting pieces. Symmetry plays an important part in the decoration of the cloth, and becomes particularly effective when it is intentionally broken, producing a pattern that is at once regular and flickers with life under your gaze.

Some of the barkcloth exhibited may look large to a European audience. But they are only a fraction of the size of the original piece they belonged to. Immense lengths of decorated barkcloth were, and still are, produced and presented on special occasions such as weddings, deaths or the installation of a new chief. They are meant to be cut up and distributed to the participants.



Fiji

Early 20th Century    MAA No. Z5064    440 × 331 cm

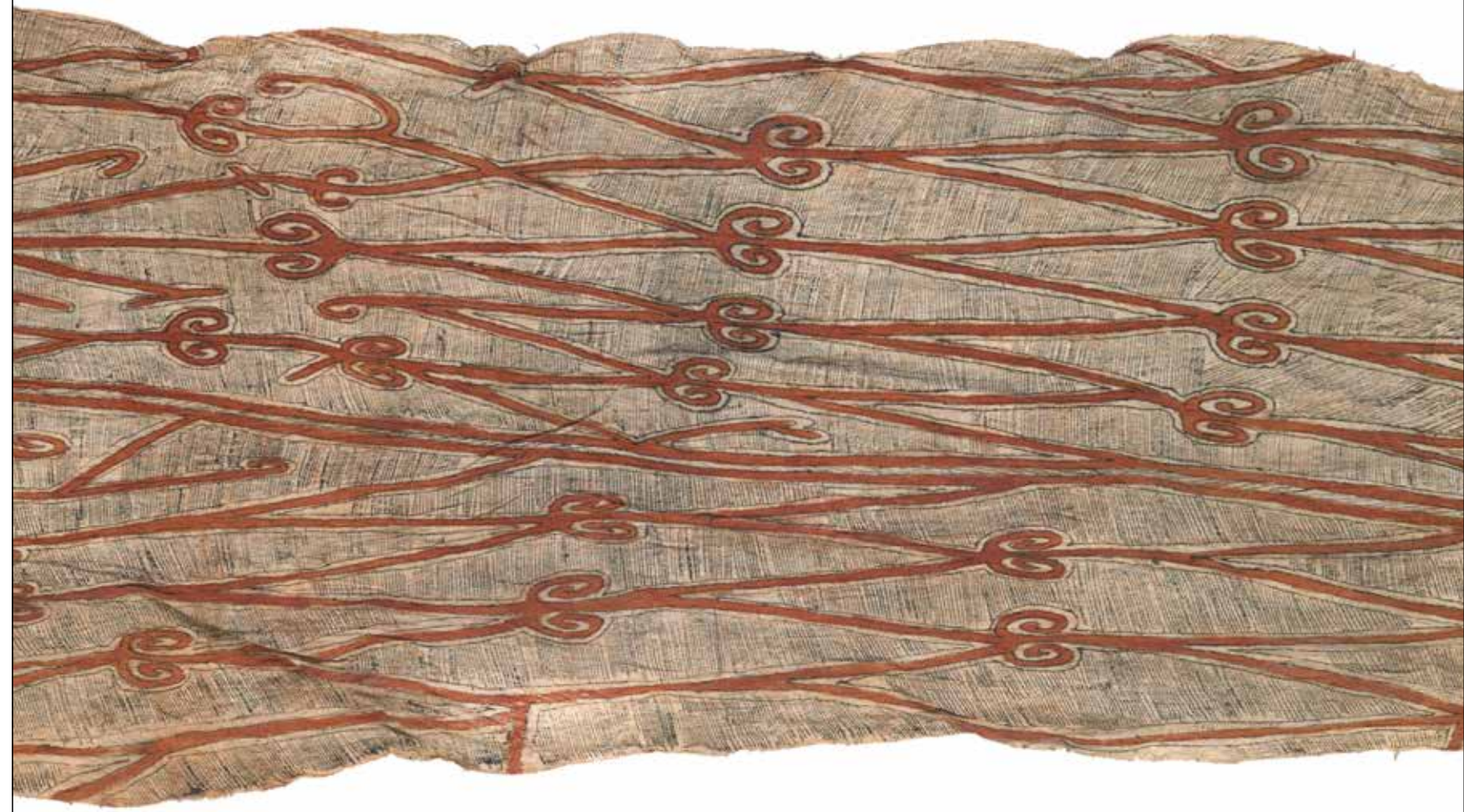




Papua New Guinea, New Britain  
1920s MAA No. 1930.476a 595 × 11.5 cm



Papua New Guinea, New Britain  
Early 20th Century MAA No. 1927.1897 73 × 429 cm







Papua New Guinea, Collingwood Bay  
Early 20th Century MAA No. 1903.111 221 × 47 cm



Papua New Guinea  
Early 20th Century MAA No. 1915.26.102 287 × 37 cm







Cook Islands, Aitutaki

Late 19th Century MAA No. 1901.123 388 × 116 cm

Working in a museum means that I spend my days surrounded by amazing artefacts. They all have stories to tell, however some are easier to research than others. At MAA, our barkcloths are stored out of sight, rolled up on long cardboard tubes and covered in white fabric to protect them from dust. Finding the space to unroll the largest pieces is a challenge, so the selection and photographing of barkcloths for this exhibition was a major undertaking. Days spent on hand and knee, rolling and unrolling cloths, were rewarded when a piece like this one appeared from under sheets of tissue paper.

Made on the island of Aitutaki, in the Cook Islands, this cloth's beautiful pastel colours and striking designs, which probably represent canoes, remain fresh and vibrant despite the fact that it came into the Museum over a hundred years ago. It was collected by Bishop John Richardson Selwyn of the Melanesian Mission and purchased from his family after his death in 1901. Selwyn was forced to return to the UK due to ill-health and was said to be heartbroken to leave his island diocese. Perhaps he kept this barkcloth as a reminder of his work and of happier times.

Julie Adams



According to Tongan and Samoan legends, Tongatapu’s flying foxes descend from a pair presented in ancient times to the Tongan monarch by Sina, a princess of Samoa. The pair comprised one white flying fox and one black flying fox with a golden mantle. Since their arrival in Tongatapu, the flying foxes have belonged to the Tongan monarch and have received their royal protection. This important barkcloth, and those made since with similar motifs, celebrates these sacred flying foxes and, by association, the nobles of the villages in which they roost, the royal family of Tonga to whom they belong, and the chiefly families of Samoa from whom they were first received. Though most of the flying foxes seen today are of the black and gold variety, the white flying fox is said to appear among them on occasions such as royal weddings, coronations, and funerals.

Billie Lythberg



Tonga  
Late 19th Century   MAA No. 1902.335   372 × 156 cm





Solomon Islands, Simbo

Early 20th Century MAA No. Z264D 236 × 56 cm



Solomon Islands, Santa Cruz

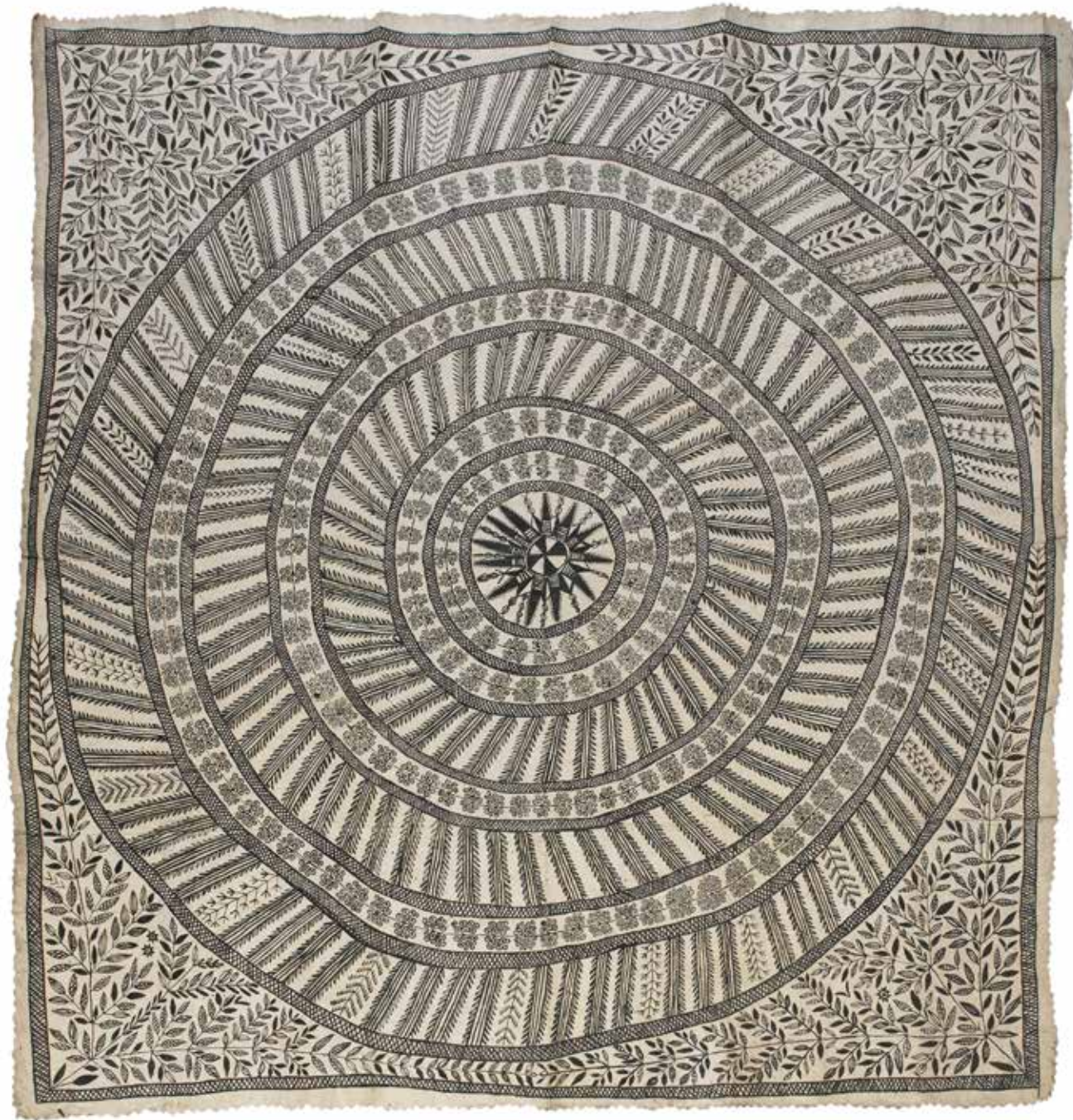
Early 20th Century MAA No. Z5440 227 × 45 cm



Solomon Islands, Isabel

Early 20th Century MAA No. Z5196 169 × 100 cm





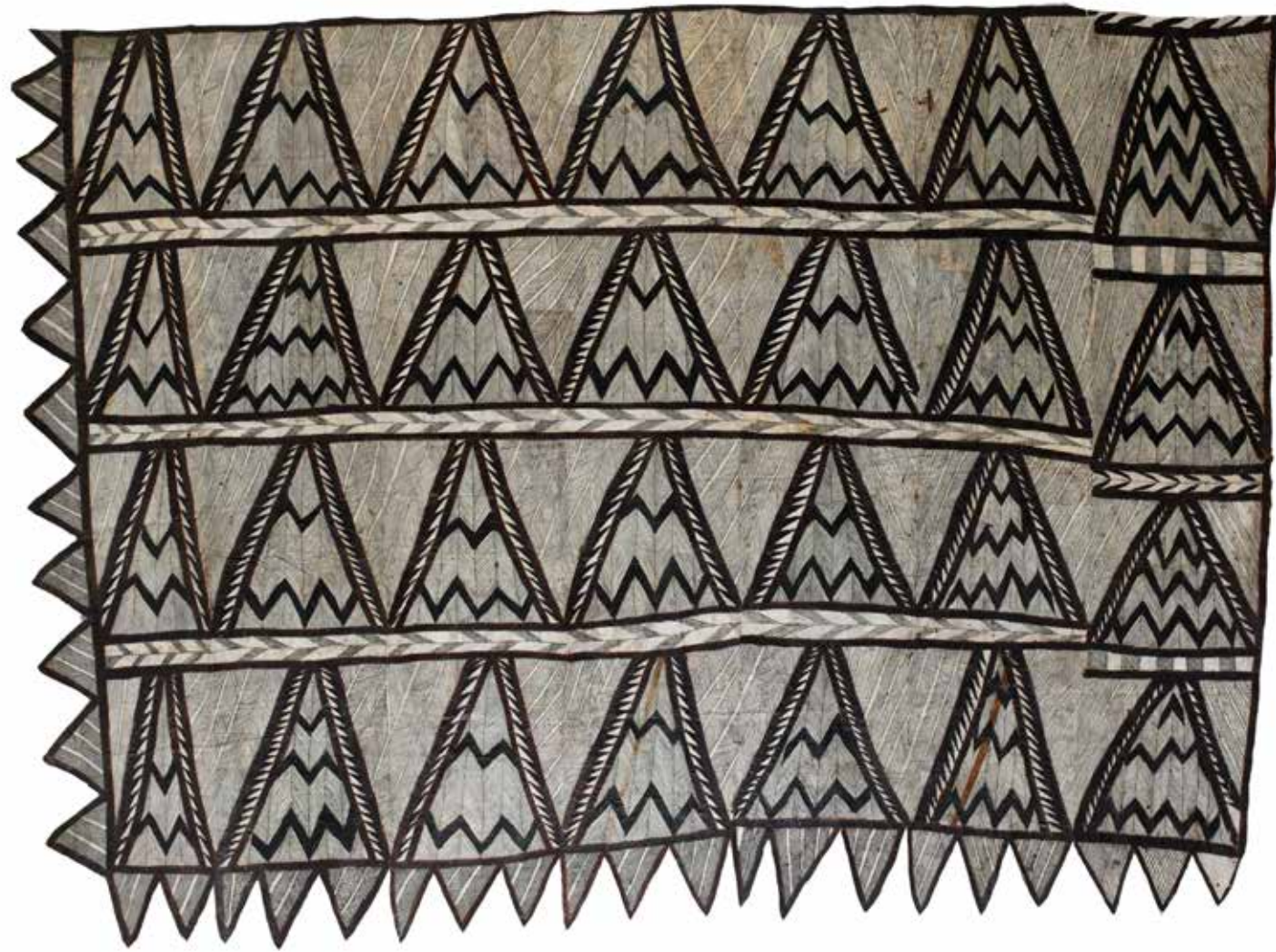
## Niue

1880s MAA No. Z30323 253 × 234 cm

Niuean artists used barkcloth as a canvas to paint the strange and new things that entered their world. Rectangles were introduced in early paintings. These were experimental, spontaneous, and juxtaposed with indigenous plants. Before long, religious proverbs had their own space on the periphery of the painting. Colonial figures, furniture, and ships would sit next to sharks in the same field of architecture. Artists also had time for memory when names of people and names of lands were written into the fibre. The natural black ochre used has an ambitious persona and illuminates the cloth with its energy. There are a handful of *biapo* that have small and large concentric forms as in this circular piece, filled tenderly with the richness of seeds, branches and bulbs. From the centre the dynamism of circles bursts upwards, spreading a joyous occasion by showing off its lamina of leaves, scattering petals along with the patterned spaces, one can almost breathe in the fragrance. At its peak *biapo* brilliantly depicted the religious and colonial life of Niue. By the end of the nineteenth century the artists of Niue had ceased making and painting these extraordinary works.

John Pule





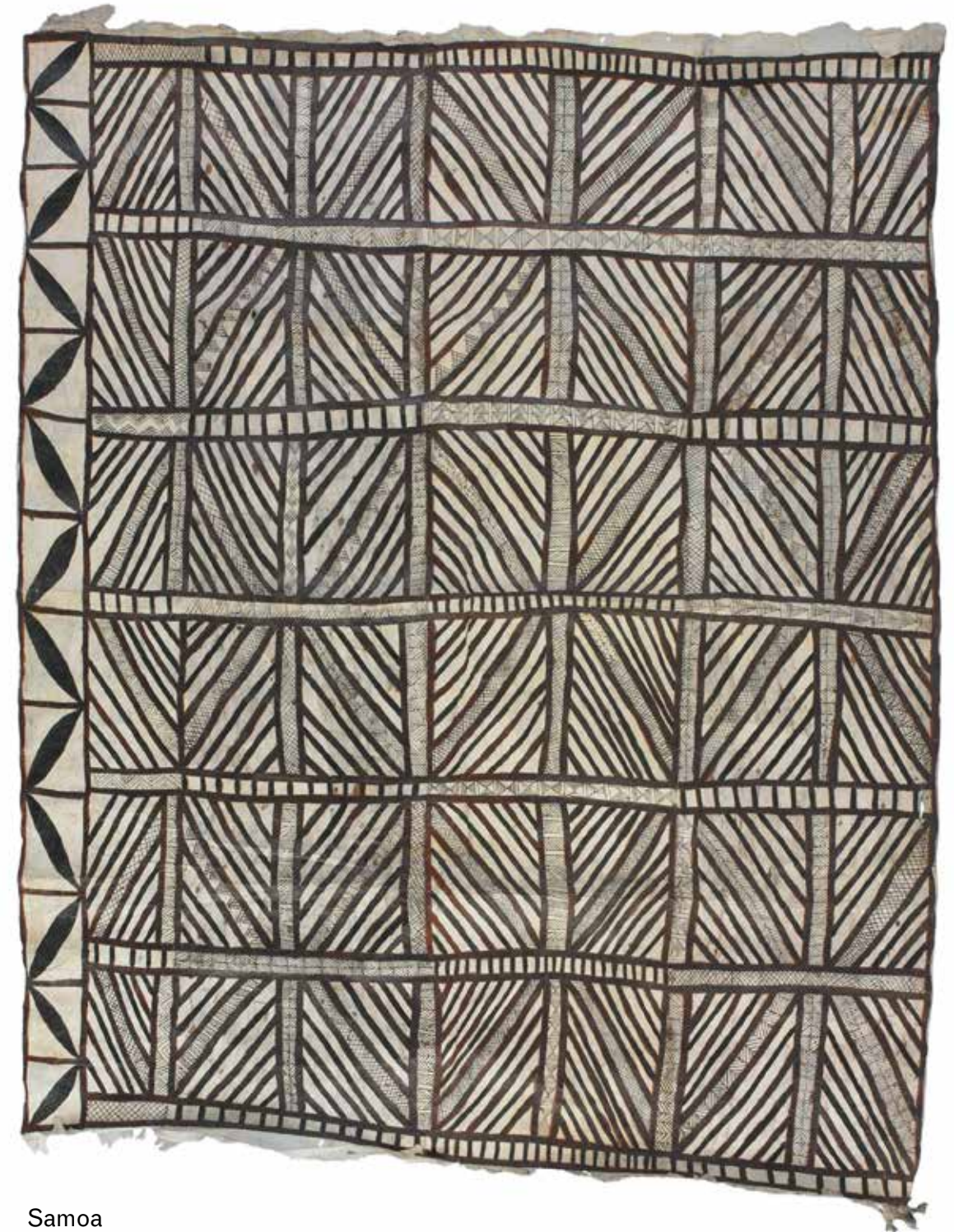
## Samoa

Early 20th Century MAA No. Z5040 226 × 279 cm

My Samoan grandmother didn't feel the need to pass on to her children or her grandchildren her native language, which she felt would not be of any use to us in New Zealand, yet she insisted I was always to be in the possession of *siapo*, for you were not a real Samoan unless you had some. To this day, even living in the UK, I am never without this cloth.

*Siapo* or tapa cloth floats through my memories: the smell, folded, stacked in piles, under beds, wrapped around our bodies, rubbed with coconut oil, adorned with feathers we danced in them, gifted them, received them. Later in life I hung them on my walls, rescued them from organic rubbish days to make art works and thought of the goddess Sina who now lives on the moon, beating her cloths and laying them in the sky to dry.

Rosanna Raymond



## Samoa

Early 20th Century MAA No. Z30709 236 × 180 cm





Futuna  
Early 20th Century    MAA No. Z5045    74 × 151 cm



Futuna  
Early 20th Century    MAA No. Z5047    97 × 171 cm



Papua New Guinea, Ömie (by Lila Warrimou)  
2011    MAA No. 2012.89    110.5 × 70.5 cm



Papua New Guinea, Ömie (by Dapeni Jonevari)  
2011    MAA No. 2012.90    189 × 81 cm

From the end of the road, it is a two-hour walk past gardens and hamlets to the last of the Orokaivan villages before the Siriwa River, a tributary of the Kumusi, that now marks the western boundary of Ömie. To us ‘new’ people it is an impenetrable landscape, but to the Ömie every ridge, every stream, every step of this vast tract of forest and mountain is known and regulated, marked by clan boundaries, by the territories of ancestral beings, by their cosmology and history. This is Huvaemo, their mountain, their land, their home.

Drusilla Modjeska



Contributors

Julie Adams is a Senior Research Fellow at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge. She has worked on projects, exhibitions and books devoted to the arts of Polynesia, Melanesia and Micronesia. She is co-editor of *Melanesia: Art and Encounter* (British Museum Press, 2013).

Lucie Carreau is a Research Associate on the AHRC-funded ‘Fijian Art Research Project’ (2011–2014), during which she has researched the 3,000 Fijian objects at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge. She is co-curator, with Anita Herle, of the exhibition ‘Chiefs & Governors: Art and Power in Fiji’ (MAA, Cambridge, 2013–2014).

Billie Lythberg wrote her PhD thesis about Tongan barkcloths. She is a postdoctoral fellow at the University of Auckland and Research Associate on the ‘Artefacts of Encounter’ project based at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge.

Drusilla Modjeska is a prize-winning writer who lives in Sydney. Her most recent book, *The Mountain*, tracks engagements between Papua New Guineans and expatriates around the time of decolonization and since. Her text here is drawn from *Wisdom of the Mountain: the Art of Omie* (National Gallery of Victoria, 2009).

John Pule is one of the Pacific’s most distinguished contemporary artists. His books include *Hiapo: Past and Present in Niuean barkcloth*, co-authored with Nicholas Thomas (Otago University Press, 2005). His paintings have been widely exhibited internationally, and he received a Laureate award from the New Zealand Arts Foundation in 2004.

Rosanna Raymond was born in Auckland, New Zealand, a ‘Salagi’ proud of her mixed Samoan/Anglo descent. She currently lives and works with her family in London. A ‘Tusitala’ (a teller of tales) at heart her art practice takes a variety of forms ranging from installation works, spoken words and body adornment, fusing traditional Pacific practices with contemporary innovations and techniques.

Nicholas Thomas is Director of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Cambridge. He is author, co-author or editor of many books on history and art in the Pacific including most recently *Art in Oceania: a new history* (Thames and Hudson, 2012).

Published on the occasion of the exhibition

*Tapa*  
*Barkcloth paintings from the Pacific*

Ikon Gallery, Birmingham  
1 May – 14 July 2013

Curated by Nicholas Thomas

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