TAPA

Barkcloth paintings from the Pacific
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 millennia, 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.

Tapa, 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

If 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 prevailing 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 millennia, 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.

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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 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.

Western 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 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.
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 Riley, 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, and 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 form; 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 – an aesthetic that 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.
Fiji
Late 19th Century    MAA No. Z30621    69 x 453 cm

Fiji
1870s    MAA No. Z4169    274 x 199 cm

Fiji
1870s    MAA No. Z4167    83 x 365 cm

Fiji
Early 20th Century    MAA No. Z28336    88 x 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.

Lucie Carreau
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    71 × 429 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

Cook Islands, Aitutaki
Late 19th Century    MAA No. 1901.123    388 x 116 cm
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
Solomon Islands, Simbo
Early 20th Century    MAA No. Z264D    236 x 56 cm

Solomon Islands, Santa Cruz
Early 20th Century    MAA No. Z5440    227 x 45 cm

Solomon Islands, Isabel
Early 20th Century    MAA No. Z5196    169 x 100 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 hiapo 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 hiapo 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
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
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.

Drunilla Modjeska