

Barkcloth of the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG)

Developing the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery's barkcloth collection

When Mr Walch of Davey Street Congregational Church travelled to visit Rev Newall in Malau, Samoa in 1897, he took with him a request from Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery (TMAG) Curator, Alexander Morton. Morton wrote:

Having heard you are about to pay Samoa a visit. I bring under your notice a proposal that you might be favourably inclined to support. As you are aware the trustees of this museum are endeavouring to get together a thorough representation of Southern Island ethnological collection. ... If during your visit you could [gather] a collection of native weapons, dress etc it would form a great addition. I am aware the Congregational Sunday Schools of Hobart have contributed very largely to the Samoan Mission friends & such a collection I mention would prove of great interest to the many hundreds of scholars who visit the museum. Trusting you will be able to bring back a good collection...ⁱ

Mr Walch returned with a series of ethnographic material including three barkcloths, donated by Rev Newall. These Samoan cloths added to a steadily growing collection of Pacific barkcloth at TMAG.

Barkcloth has been considered an important symbol of Pacific identity since early European explorers visited the region. Its material nature enables it to be easily cut for collectors, visitors, traders and missionaries to take as distinctive souvenirs, verifying their travels and visits to remote places in the Pacific. Missionaries also came into possession of barkcloth and other artefacts in parts of the Pacific through locals surrendering objects that were associated with "false religions" in a step towards becoming Christian.ⁱⁱ The later display or presentation of these artefacts testified that people were being converted and that missionaries were being successful.ⁱⁱⁱ Such was the case at sermons and meetings held in aid of the United Methodist Missions at Hobart's Murray Street Chapel in 1861, where 'several curiosities from the South Sea Missions were on the table and excited a good deal of attention'.^{iv} Artefacts were also used by missionaries as a form of currency, being received as gifts from their congregation and at times sold to raise money for mission work.^v

The Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery's collection of barkcloth was acquired between 1850 and 2009 and includes material from Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, Vanuatu, Tahiti in French Polynesia, Papua New Guinea, Futuna Islands and Solomon Islands (including Santa Cruz and Tikopia). Containing material from a vast region of Melanesia and Polynesia, acquired over a period of a hundred and sixty years, this collection of barkcloth contains a diverse range of techniques and styles.

The Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery has its origins in the collections of Australia's oldest scientific society, the Royal Society of Tasmania (est. 1843), and was therefore in a good position to acquire relatively early Pacific material. In the mid to late 19th and early 20th century, Hobart was a major deep water port of call, connecting Hobart to the Pacific as well as serving as a base for missionaries. Many of the donations of barkcloth to TMAG in this period were from missionaries or people associated with missions. For example, five barkcloths were donated by Rev Dr Nicholson in 1866 and four by Rev FW Walker in the early 20th century. However, material also arrived from the

many naval vessels, whalers and traders passing through Hobart. TMAG, located opposite the port on Hobart's waterfront at Sullivans Cove, was in close proximity to these ships. Some Museum records document the name of the ship on which material arrived. This was the case with a donation in 1897 of a cloth collected from Rubiana Island in the Solomon Islands by Captain Adams and brought to Hobart aboard the HMS Pylates. Similar donations were reported with interest. In January 1899 *The Mercury* reported that 'The Tasmanian Museum has received a quantity of valuable contributions this month from officers of the war vessels who collect curios from the natives of the islands in the Pacific'.^{vi}

As a small state Museum with limited resources, TMAG's collection has developed in a somewhat unplanned fashion, predominantly dependent on the generosity of donors. However, Alexander Morton (Curator and then Director of TMAG 1884-1907) actively influenced the collection of barkcloth through requesting material from people in relevant regions. In 1896 he wrote to 'Geo. Bellamy Esq. District Officer, Kualla, Selangor, Malay Peninsula' requesting that:

Should you at anytime be able to let us have any specimens my trustees would be deeply obliged. As our museum is a general museum anything in the way of natural history specimens, or native weapons would be most acceptable. I am most desirous of obtaining some samples of native cloth. The different coloured loin cloths used by the natives. Anything I can send in exchange I will gladly do so.^{vii}

Later, in 1906 he approached the Lieutenant Governor of British New Guinea for further ethnographic material. He received a letter from the Private Secretary, Government House, stating that His Excellency the Governor of New Guinea would be pleased to make up a collection for the Tasmanian Museum^{viii}. Approximately fifty items were received from his administrative area later that year including a barkcloth which was attributed to Collingwood Bay, N.E. New Guinea.

Donations of barkcloth to the Museum were usually made alongside other ethnographic or natural history material from Pacific islands. In the nineteenth century ethnographic artefacts, like zoological and botanical specimens, were interpreted by collectors through their morphology and geographical location resulting in little ethnographic information being recorded.^{ix} Such was the case with E.T. Walker's ethnographic donations in 1871 which were recorded on the acquisition list in the same way as the natural history specimens with which they were received, viz: 'A bow, 6 arrows and a branch of coral used as a club, from Tanna, New Hebrides. Two clubs, 2 pieces of Tapa cloth, 3 mats, a pillow, 3 pieces of sponge, sample of sugar cane, a piece of the root of a plant from which the drink called "kava" is made and 2 beetles from Fiji.'^x While this limited information was prevalent, there is evidence of further information being actively sought on ethnographic material. Regarding Fijian material on loan from Mrs Waterhouse (and which was later donated to the Museum in 1920), TMAG Curator Alexander Morton writes in 1896, "I would be much obliged if you could give me some particulars as to how they were obtained and the date they were collected".^{xi}

It is often difficult to know where particular barkcloth in TMAG collections originated, as early records associated with them are usually vague. Even when the locality where cloth was collected from was recorded, it may not have been made there. As a portable object it could have been traded and exchanged between islands by either the islanders or European settlers. Furthermore, some Pacific Islander communities resettled on other islands and continued to create barkcloth in

their original style.^{xii} Given these issues, some of TMAG's barkcloths have been attributed to their places of origin by the creation methods and stylistic indicators. The dates of manufacture of cloth are likewise difficult to determine, with often the only clue to a date suggested by its entry into the museum collection (if that date was recorded).

TMAG's barkcloth collection exhibits a diverse range of decoration and motifs, evidence of many early collectors' interest in the aesthetically pleasing nature of patterned barkcloth. This interest in the aesthetics of the cloth, rather than its significance to the society that created it, is highlighted by a report in *The Mercury* in 1853 of the donation of an early barkcloth to TMAG; 'Dr Milligan presented a mat of figured Tapa cloth, remarkable for the distinctness of the colours employed and the neatness and fidelity of the pattern.'^{xiii}

Many barkcloths were actually traditionally used in their plain form, however such cloth tends not to be as prevalent in museum collections as collectors have predominantly collected the more eye-catching patterned cloth.^{xiv} Regarding Fiji, Rod Ewins has pointed out that while the plain white barkcloth was not often collected, 'white signified the spiritual domain and white cloth was reserved for the principal rites of passage and for special uses in the temples... it was of at least as deep cultural significance as the richly-figured cloth normally collected'.^{xv} Some of these more commonly used undecorated cloths were donated to TMAG, and actually comprise about a tenth of the barkcloth collection.

Given the wide range of uses and importance of barkcloth, focusing on aesthetic appreciation of these objects forms only one dimension of the stories, people and places they can be connected with. Several collectors have collected a range of cloth (decorated and undecorated) of significance to societies being visited. For example, of the seven barkcloths collected by John Beattie (a professional photographer, collector and amateur anthropologist), presumably during his journey to the Pacific in 1906, two were undecorated, one from the Solomon Islands was simply dyed blue with *pau* (wild indigo) and four were patterned. A range of cloths were likewise donated by Mrs Barclay in 1897, and reported in *The Mercury* as 'Mrs David Barclay yesterday deposited in the museum an excellent sample of "Tappa" or native cloth, from Fiji'^{xvi}, in various stages of manufacture^{xvii} indicating an interest in the process of manufacture of the cloth.

The TMAG collection of barkcloth is significant due to the diversity of cloth that it contains. It comprises cloth created by a range of methods from regions throughout the Pacific. It is perhaps surprising, that such a collection of barkcloth has ended up at TMAG, given that as a small state Museum it has been unable to resource collecting expeditions common in larger museums. Much of this variety is a result of Hobart being well connected with the Pacific as an active port and base for missionaries, in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. As such the generosity of random donors passing through or returning to Hobart has developed a diverse collection. Additionally, it has benefited from the early curator and director Alexander Morton approaching relevant people in the Pacific to broaden the collection. While the majority of cloths are decorated in line with the aesthetic preferences of collectors of the time, the presence of a significant amount of undecorated cloths at TMAG is to be noted, as they were traditionally more common in the societies who created them.

Background on barkcloth

As an important part of Pacific life, barkcloth conveys the vitality of these cultures. A craft that has been practiced for thousands of years in many parts of Melanesia and Polynesia, it is predominantly a means of creative expression for women, although in some parts of New Guinea, the Marquesas Islands and Easter Island men also made barkcloth. With the arrival of Europeans in Melanesia and Polynesia, Pacific cultures adapted their techniques of producing barkcloth, incorporating new tools, dyes and motifs and creating products which were of interest to European travellers and tourists.^{xviii}

Barkcloth is made from the inner bark of certain trees, in particular the paper mulberry (*Broussonetia papyrifera*) tree, with other sources including breadfruit (*Artocarpus*) and various species of wild fig (*Ficus*) which creates a heavier kind of cloth^{xix}. It is prepared by stripping the bark from the tree, separating the inner bark and then beating it on an anvil with wooden beaters to spread the fibres. Water, soaking or even fermenting may be used in this process. Larger pieces are produced by gradually adding thin pieces together during beating by layering and felting, or alternatively pasting the edges depending on the region where they were made.^{xx}

Various local names are used for barkcloth such as *siapo* in Samoa, *masi* in Fiji, *lepau* in Santa Cruz Islands and *ngatu* in Tonga. While they are now commonly referred to as 'tapas', this term was only originally used in Hawaii (*kapa*) and Mangareva, as well as in Samoa in reference to the undecorated border of the cloth. The term 'tapa' became a common term in the early nineteenth century as Europeans started arriving in the area, and taking the cloth home with them.^{xxi}

Barkcloth has served various uses, from the everyday to ceremonial, in each society that creates them. This may include use for various items of clothing; loin cloths, breechcloths, shawls, neck scarves, sashes, belts, wraps, skirts, ponchos, headdresses and as special clothing for particular festivals. Additionally, barkcloth may be used for mats, bed covers, blankets, mosquito nets, room dividers, decorations, burial shrouds, ceremonies and rituals. They may be presented in ceremonies and at events such as weddings, births and deaths as well as gifts for visitors.^{xxii}

Different techniques have been used to produce patterned barkcloth throughout the Pacific, resulting in distinctive styles that can be attributed to different islands. Natural dyes collected from various trees or plants are applied a variety of ways such as free hand painting, repeating patterns rubbed over design tablets, stencilling and relief printing.^{xxiii} The context and meaning of motifs used in these designs is largely incomprehensible to people outside of the societies who make them.^{xxiv} For example, in Papua New Guinea patterns may carry significant cultural information such as signals about clan allegiance and as such have information which may not be meant to be shared with outsiders.^{xxv}

While barkcloth continues to have significance to many Pacific cultures, in some societies such as Santa Cruz Islands and the broader Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and Tahiti there have been periods from the late 19th century when the art of making barkcloths was lost or nearly lost.^{xxvi} As the creation of barkcloth continues to be revived in these cultures, the cloth preserved in museum collections could play a role in reconnecting societies with this practice. Such a process could

potentially see barkcloth from various societies triggering memories and connections between people and place, as such adding to the stories that can be associated with them.^{xxvii}

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ENDNOTES

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- ⁱ A Morton, *TMAG letter book, R2000.10.58*, 18/1/1897, P. 252.
- ⁱⁱ N Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific*, Harvard University Press, London England, 1991.
H B Gardner, *Gathering for God: George Brown in Oceania*, Otago University Press, Dunedin, 2006.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Thomas.
- ^{iv} *The Mercury* 22nd May 1861, p.3, retrieved 28 April 2011, Trove online database: trove.nla.gov.au
- ^v R Ewins, *Fijian Artefacts: Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery Collection*, Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, 1982. ; Gardner.
- ^{vi} *The Mercury* 7th January 1899, p.2, retrieved 25 April 2011, Trove online database: trove.nla.gov.au
- ^{vii} Morton, (1896) P.181.
- ^{viii} TMAG Correspondence Files, 30th May 1906, ADItems18756, TRST207.
- ^{ix} Gardner.
- ^x Royal Society Acquisition List, C1848 – 1880.
- ^{xi} Morton, (14/10/1896), p.238.
- ^{xii} R Neich & M Pendergrast, *Pacific Tapa*, University of Hawai Press, Honolulu, 1997, p. 9.
- ^{xiii} *The Mercury* 14th May 1853, p.2, retrieved 15 May 2011, Trove online database: trove.nla.gov.au
- ^{xiv} Ewins, *Fijian Artefacts*, p. 6.
- ^{xv} R Ewins, 'All things bright and beautiful, or all things wise and wonderful? Objects from Island Oceania in the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery,' *Pacific Arts: The Journal of the Pacific Arts Association* 15 &16, 2000, p71-72.
- ^{xvi} While initial museum records (the TM register), record these barkcloths as being from Fiji, they were later attributed to Tonga (in the M register).
- ^{xvii} *The Mercury* 23rd February 1897, p.2, retrieved 15 May 2011, Trove online database: trove.nla.gov.au
- ^{xviii} Neich & Pendergrast.
- ^{xix} Neich & Pendergrast, p. 9-10.
- ^{xx} Neich & Pendergrast, p. 13.
- ^{xxi} S Kooijman, *Tapa in Polynesia*, B.P. Bishop Museum Bulletin 234, 1972, p. 3-4.
- ^{xxii} Neich & Pendergrast ; S.Kooijman.
- ^{xxiii} Neich & Pendergrast ; S.Kooijman.
- ^{xxiv} M Page, 'Paperskin: An introduction', in *Paperskin: Bark cloth across the Pacific*, Queensland Art Gallery, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa and Queensland Museum, South Brisbane & Wellington, 2009, pp 10 – 21.
- ^{xxv} Neich & Pendergrast, p. 11. ; M Page, p. 11-12.
- ^{xxvi} Neich & Pendergrast.
- ^{xxvii} I. Miller, 'The Pacific Perspective on the Queensland Museum', in *Paperskin: Bark cloth across the Pacific*. Queensland Art Gallery, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa and Queensland Museum, South Brisbane & Wellington, 2009, pp. 33-36, p. 35.