



OCEANIA:

Art & Culture Intertwined



Introduction

The art of Oceania flows seamlessly through every aspect of Pacific Island life. In the rich cultures of this region, there is often no word for “art” as we know it in the western sense: no separation between the functional and the aesthetic. A fishing hook is not merely a tool, but a sculpted extension of its maker’s connection to the sea. A ceremonial mask is not displayed as decoration, but breathes with spiritual power and communal meaning.

This glossary explores a world where the act of creating is inseparable from daily life, where every carved paddle, woven mat, or tattooed skin tells a story of tradition, spirituality, and collective identity. To understand Oceanic art is to shed our pigeonhole view and embrace a reality where beauty and function are one, where the sacred and mundane dance together in every object, in a region with diversity in artistic expression filled to the brim.



Aboriginal

The Aboriginal people are the original inhabitants of the Australian continent. Archaeologists believe they have inhabited this area for 40,000 to 60,000 years. There are about 500 different Aboriginal peoples in Australia, each with their own language and territory and usually made up of a large number of separate clans.



Stone Adze,
Museum of New Zealand

Adze

An adze is a tool with an arched blade at a right angle to the handle, used for shaping, cutting, or carving away large pieces of wood. Wood carving is a common art form throughout the Oceanic region, making adzes an incredibly common tool. Carving tools from this region are typically made from bone, teeth, shell, or stone.



Aboriginal People, Steve Evans (2011)

Bai

Large men's houses, found on the Micronesian island of Belau, are known as *bai*. They are constructed using traditional materials like wood, thatch, and bamboo, and often required the entire community to contribute to the construction. Numerous intricate carvings of different animals that represent the beliefs and culture of the people are seen throughout the structure. *Bais* served various functions, from being a venue for traditional ceremonies to being a meeting place for the community's chiefs and elders.

Biomimicry

The tribes of Oceania have always used the natural world around them to draw inspiration for their artistic style, be it spirit totems in the form of animals like crocodiles, or utilizing animal parts such as turtle shell to create ceremonial items. Creating complex imagery of insects, birds, and animals that hold totemic value is common throughout the region. In a majority of tribes, Ancestors are believed to take the form of different animals, combinations of animals, or anthropomorphic shapes.

Bark Cloth

Made using the inner bark of trees such as wild fig or breadfruit, bark cloth or *tapa* was a common textile in the Pacific Islands. Dyes from primarily vegetable sources would be applied in elaborate patterns by stamping, stenciling, or freehand painting. Different islands had different patterns and designs that reflected the culture and creative style of the people. Bark cloth was frequently used to make clothing, ceremonial masks, room dividers, sheets, and in many Polynesian tribes, even kites. The quality of the *tapa* determined its use; thin *tapa* was used for mosquito netting and bandages, while the coarser kind was saved for ropes or wicks.



Samoan Bark Cloth, the Metropolitan Museum of Art



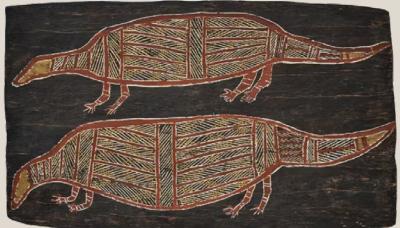
Ceremonial Board depicting
bird, mammal, and insect forms,
The Metropolitan Museum of Art



Whale Tail spirit totem, Mountain Jade, NZ



Turtle Shell Mask,
Torres Strait Islander
The Metropolitan Museum of Art



Two Goannas (Lizards), Groote Eylandte

Biomimicry

Caroline Islands

The Caroline Islands consist of the majority of central islands in the Micronesian Region. There is a distinct art style seen in the Caroline Islands that emphasizes simplicity, functionality, and hard angles and form over heavy ornamentation. This is not to say that ornamentation does not exist in this region, it is simply less compared to other Oceanic counterparts.

Ceremonial Grounds

Ceremonial Grounds are a significant part of Polynesian culture, a place for rituals to take place and community to gather. These grounds hold spiritual value and are used as places of worship; often decorated by large stone sculptures that represent the tribe's ancestors. These stone sculptures are a distinct feature of Polynesian islands, and have evolved over time from smaller sculptures to ones of huge stature.



Colonialism

Beginning in the early 16th century, and continuing on until the mid 19th century, Oceania was being colonized by various European powers. This led to huge shifts in art and culture; many traditional art forms became devalued or developed into works that suited European tastes. With conversion to Christianity, many objects created with religious and spiritual meaning were discarded. However, the culture of the Natives still persists as many stay true to their traditions, uncovering what was lost in the centuries before.



Queen Elizabeth greeted by local children, Queensland, 1970

D

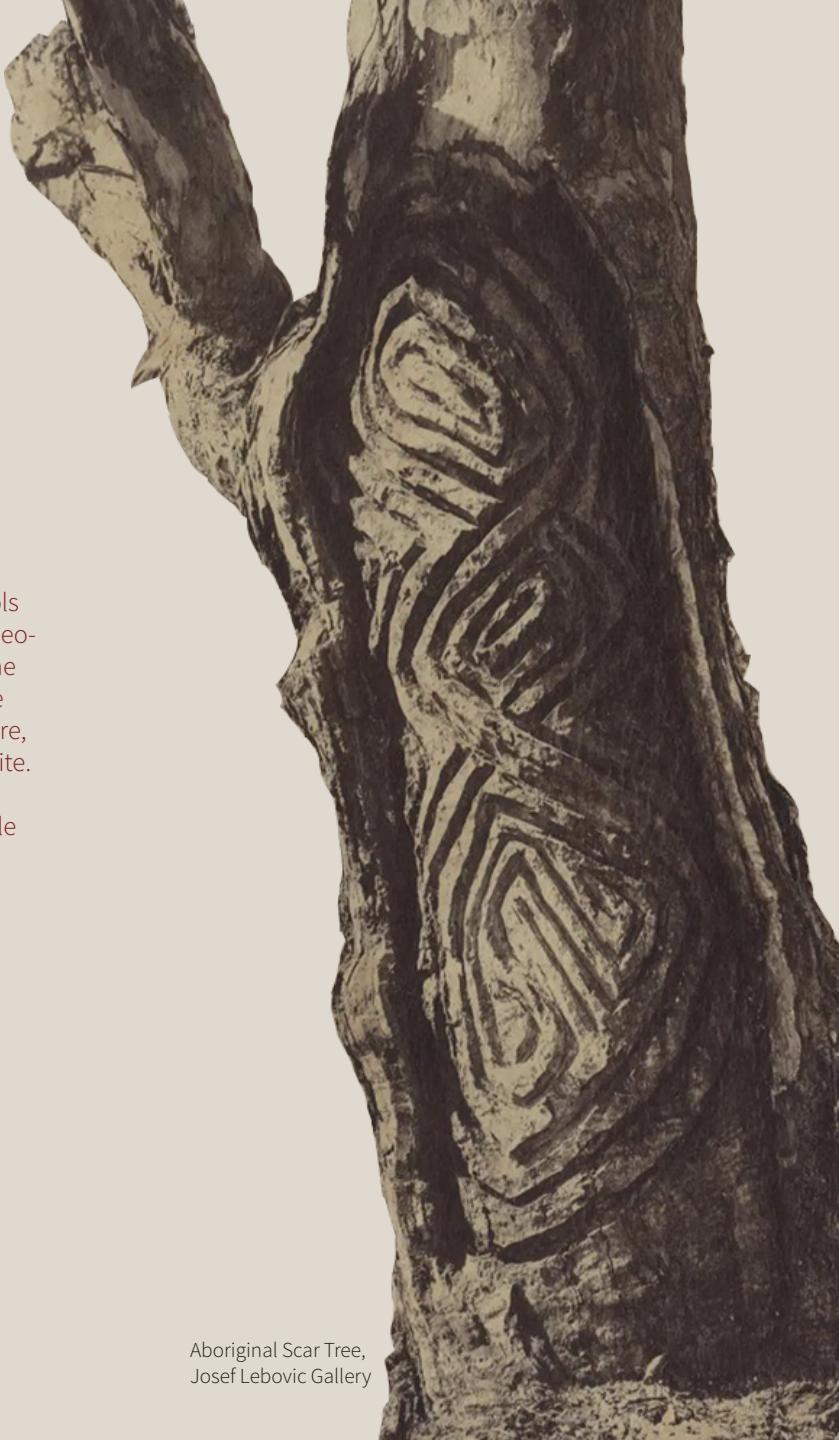


Dendroglyphs

Dendroglyphs are carvings of shapes and symbols into the bark of living trees, done by Aboriginal people. These trees are also known as Scar Trees. The purpose of these carvings can be different; some are ceremonial markings used for teaching culture, some are used to mark a place such as a burial site. The designs carved on the trees differ by region, some being of local animals such as snakes, while others are geometric motifs.

Dhari

Dhari is a headdress worn by men during warfare or ceremonial dances. The framework is made of cane and coconut fibre string, decorated by feather from birds local to the Torres Strait Islands. While the basic shape remains the same, there is regional variation in terms of design. These headdresses are an emblem of Torres Strait Islanders' national identity and feature on the region's flag.



Aboriginal Scar Tree,
Josef Lebovic Gallery



Star Dreaming Story of Seven Sisters, David Wroth, 2015

Dreamtime

Dreamtime is arguably the most significant part of Aboriginal culture. It forms the basis of their beliefs, behaviour, and culture. Dreamtime is said to be the period in which the Ancestor Beings created the natural world - trees, rivers, animals, humans, rivers, rocks, hills, plants. The stories of their creation are the basis of Aboriginal lore and culture and are also what are often painted by Aboriginal artists. The Dreaming explains how things came to be – why a rock is in a certain place or a particular shape, or why an animal has a tail. The Dreaming is not static or linear. It is the past, present, and future at once, constantly evolving to explain events and changes today

As such, Dreamtime can be considered a kind of mythology that the Aboriginal people believe in.

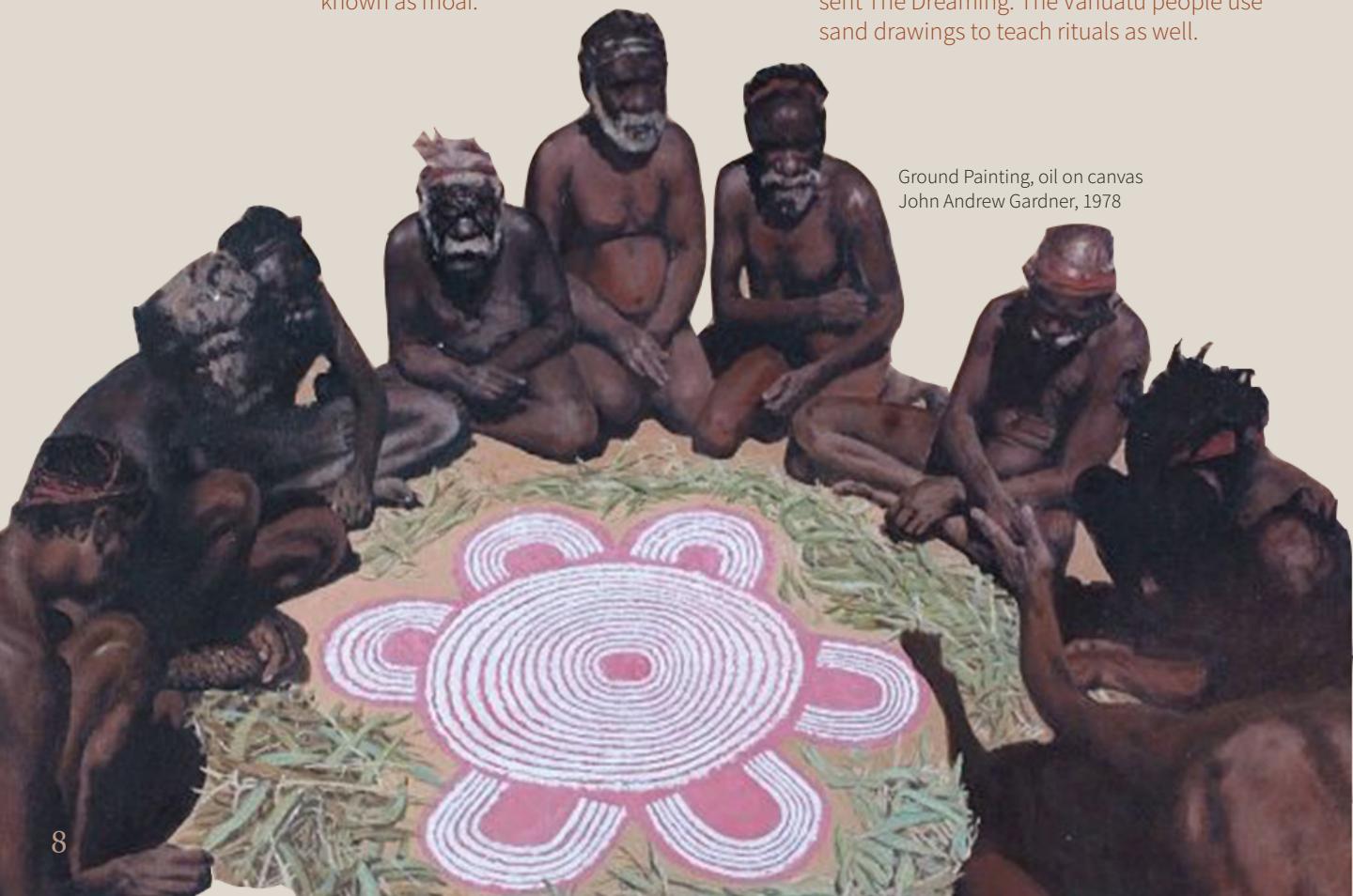
E

Easter Island (Rapa Nui)

Easter Island, known to its inhabitants as Rapa Nui, is one of the most well known areas of Oceania for the large stone 'head' statues spread across the island. The Rapa Nui people are the indigenous Polynesian people of Easter Island and they established the unique cultural tradition of monumental sculpture and architecture, including shrines and the stone sculptures known as moai.

Ephemeral Art

Ephemeral art is a form of art that is intended to be temporary and disappear after a period of time. For Aboriginal Australians and the people of Vanuatu (a group of Melanesian islands), this takes the form of sand art which is used to tell stories and pass down history orally. For the Aboriginal people, sand art is made up of round shapes, wavy lines, or any other symbols that represent The Dreaming. The Vanuatu people use sand drawings to teach rituals as well.



Featherwork

All across Oceania, feathers hold significant value as items that hold meaning. Items made using plumage, tails, and occasionally, beaks are most commonly found in Melanesia, where they are combined with other materials to make headdresses, costumes, cloaks, and capes to decorate the wearer. These items often denote the status of the wearer, especially since gathering enough feathers to make some of these pieces could take years. In Hawai'i, feathers are considered sacred, and only the ali'i (chiefs and nobility) had access to them. They symbolised the wearer's connection to the Ancestors' spirits.



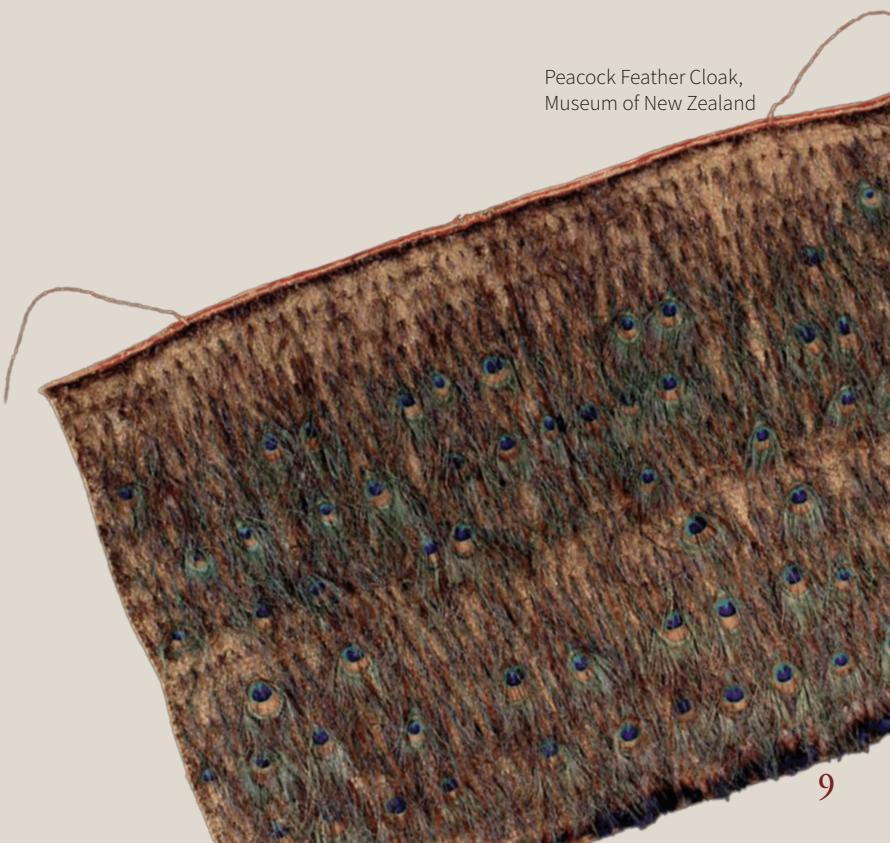
Featherwork Dhari,
Queensland Historical Atlas

Functionality

Art in Oceania permeates every aspect of life, created to portray the various deities, to enhance the human body, and to adorn objects and architecture used in daily life. The concept of 'art' in Oceania differs from the Western conception of it; art is not something performed simply for aesthetic enjoyment or purpose, but to create, represent, and utilize something correctly. From sacred religious images to mundane utilitarian items, all Oceanic objects are, or were, intended to be used. Art was intended to be functional and functional items were intended to be beautiful



Peacock Feather Cloak,
Museum of New Zealand





Loincloth, Denver Art Museum



Turtleshell Breastplate (tema),
The Metropolitan Museum of Art



Tapa Cloth,
Denver Art Museum



Shield,
The Metropolitan Museum of Art



Ritual Mask,
The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Geometry



The Rainbow Serpent, Edward Blitner

Geometry

A commonly seen pattern in art across Polynesia is geometric shapes combining to create intricate designs that are often symmetrical. There are repeating motifs of similar shapes which can symbolize different things. Spiral and circular motifs can be found quite frequently.

Gods (and Spirits)

In Oceanic cultures, the deities that are worshipped are considered to be spirits of nature. These spirits can come in a variety of forms, be it serpents, rivers, stars, or anything else belonging to the natural world. The spirits are considered to be Ancestors and are treated with reverence and respect. These Ancestor spirits are depicted in almost every piece of art created, acting as guides and protectors. Each spirit represents a different domain, such as rainfall, fertility, abundance etc. Treating the spirits with due respect ensures prosperity.



H



Hos, Caroline Islands,
The Metropolitan
Museum of Art

Hei Tiki

Hei Tiki is a small personal adornment made from jade that is worn around the neck. *Hei* means something looped around the neck, and *tiki* is a generic word used throughout Polynesia to denote human figures carved in wood, stone, or other material. Tiki are considered to be sacred guardians that protect memories and traditions. In some areas of Polynesia, tikis are also thought to hold a certain god's spiritual power within them. Hei tikis are considered treasured heirlooms and are passed down from one generation to the next, carrying memories of revered ancestors. No two hei tiki are the same, and each has its own personality imbued within.

Hula

Hula dancing is an ancient storytelling performance art of the people of Hawai'i, who believe the art form was gifted to them by the gods. Traditional hula (*hula kahiko*) includes chants and music played on traditional instruments made of carved gourds and bamboo sticks, while modern hula (*hula auana*) uses modern instruments as well. While performing hula, women wear skirts made of tapa or leaves, men wear a loin cloth, and both adorn themselves with foliage from plants like ferns around the head, neck, wrists, and ankles.

Hos

Hos are weather charms used to protect voyagers from harsh, turbulent weather on their journeys. With subtle facial features and stylized angular torso, most hos embody the spare, minimalist approach to the human figure typical of Micronesian sculpture. The legs of these charms are made from the sharp spines of stingrays, which are believed to be the source of its supernatural power. Before beginning a voyage, a ritual is performed with the hos to drive away any approaching storms. The hos is then kept within a spirit house aboard the canoe.

Young girls performing hula



Iconography

The iconography within Oceanic art has consistently revolved around using the natural world - water bodies, plants, the elements, animals, human figures - to represent the supernatural. Each line or shape in a carving symbolizes something significant, the same way each feather used in a cloak imbues more spiritual energy within it. Every single thing that exists is supposed to have a meaning and a purpose; this is the belief of the people of Oceania, so it only makes sense that the items they create all hold some kind of value, and represent something important.

Iwi

Iwi means tribe, which was the largest political group that existed in pre-European Maori society. Iwis had clans (*hapu*) within them that usually consisted of large groups of extended families. These groups would have access to multiple resources within their territories that they would share with each other. Ceremonies and rituals would also be performed within these groups, and significant value was placed on an individual's *hapu*.

Ivory

Ivory is a material that can be seen quite often in adornments made in the Oceanic region. Whale tooth and boar tusks are used most frequently to create headdresses, breastplates, necklaces, pendants, bracelets and other adornment. Whalebone and ivory are considered sacred in Polynesia because whales are believed to be manifestations of the ocean god, imbuing these materials with divine essence. Wearing these items visually reinforces the wearer's connection to the gods.



Boar Tusk Bracelet, Peabody Essex Museum

J



Jade

Jade, known as *pounamu* in maori, is an important material used primarily by New Zealand Maori people to fashion jewellery, tools, weapons, and ceremonial objects. Adzes created using jade were used in ceremonial rites and were considered a symbol of authority. The aforementioned *hei tiki*, one of the most treasured items to be made out of jade, is created from nephrite jade or greenstone which is found near the rivers of southern New Zealand. Sometimes, jade was gifted as a treasure to mark an important agreement.

Jeu

In the southern area of the Melanesian region, the Asmat tribes can be found inhabiting the area along the rivers of New Guinea. The Asmat people hold wood carving in high esteem, and thus, the first being to exist on earth was also the first to begin carving wood. This being is known as Fumeripits, and it believed he created the first *jeu* or ceremonial men's house, where community issues are discussed, artwork is made, and ceremonies are held. He is believed to have carved human figures from trees and placed them inside the *jeu*, creating the first humans. For this reason, the *jeu* is a significant place in Asmat culture.

Koru Jade Pendant,
Mountain Jade, NZ



Kapkap



Kapkap is a circular shell ornament worn as a pendant, forehead, or belt ornament by men in the Solomon Islands of Melanesia. It symbolized personal wealth and status; the bigger and higher quality it was, the higher the social status. The white disk is ground from the shell of a large sea clam, while the brown inner disk is carved from boiled tortoiseshell and attached by a beaded string. The addition of beads further increased its value and prestige.

Karakia

Karakia are prayers or incantations used by Maori people to invoke spiritual guidance and pay acknowledgement to the spirit world and their ancestors. Most families use karkaia in their daily lives. Karakia can be used to bless objects and cleanse them. In modern times, many artists create works that feature different karakia on them, to be used as decoration.



Koru

Koru is a spiral motif that is extremely important in Maori culture. The shape is inspired by the unfurling frond of a native silver fern. It is a fundamental symbol in Maori art, carving, and tattooing. The spiral symbolizes hope, new life, growth, and peace. The koru is an integral element of kowhaiwhai designs, traditionally painted on meeting houses or on canoes.

Kowhaiwhai

Kowhaiwhai are elaborate designs made up of patterns that come together to tell a story. Each pattern has a unique meaning, and these patterns come together to tell a story of the tribe's history. The colours used for *kowhaiwhai* are usually red, representing warmth, blood, and life; black, representing the earth; and white, representing purity, promise for the future, and awakening. The *ko whaiwhai* are usually found on meeting houses, storehouses, canoes, and even boat paddles.



Kapkap,
Minneapolis Institute of Art



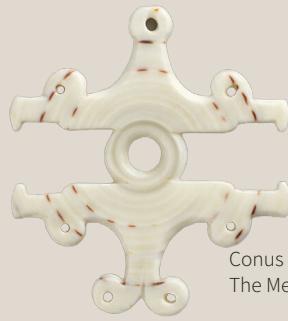
Sperm Whale Tooth Pendant,
Museum of New Zealand



Korwar Pendant,
Te Papa



Hei Tiki,
Mountain Jade, NZ



Conus Shell Pendant,
The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Pendants of Oceania

Lapita People

The Lapita people are the Neolithic Austronesian people who settled in Melanesia. Their pottery style is distinct and is known for its intricate repeating geometric patterns that occasionally included anthropomorphic faces. The patterns were stamped into wet clay using stamps that had one design, combined with others to create complicated patterns. The reason the Lapita people and their art is significant is because they are believed to be the common ancestors of the people of Polynesia, Micronesia, and some parts of Melanesia. This can be seen in the influence Lapita art has obviously had on the art through these regions.



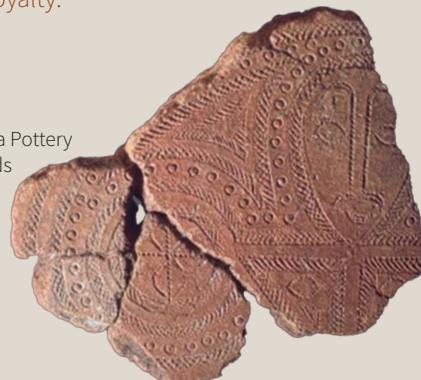
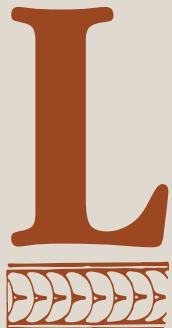
Lono

In Hawai'ian culture, there are numerous gods known as *akua*. They are represented in images or statues known as *ki'i* that serve as symbolic representations of them. These can be carved in stone, wood, sea urchin spines, and even made into ornate feathered images. Amongst the various *akua*, there are four major gods: Kū, Kanaloa, Kāne, Lono. Lono is associated with growth, fertility, weather, and wisdom. The *ki'i* are a significant part of Hawai'ian art, culturally and aesthetically.

Lono-o-makahiki, National Historical Park, Hawai'i

Lei

Leis were commonly worn by ancient Polynesians and are primarily attributed to the people of Hawai'i. A *lei* is a garland primarily made of flowers and leaves, while nuts, shells, feathers, and seeds can also be used. They are symbols of affection, honour, celebration, and respect. Oftentimes they are given as gifts as a sign of respect. Native Hawaiians also wore them to signify their ranks and royalty.



Lapita Pottery Shards

M

Marae

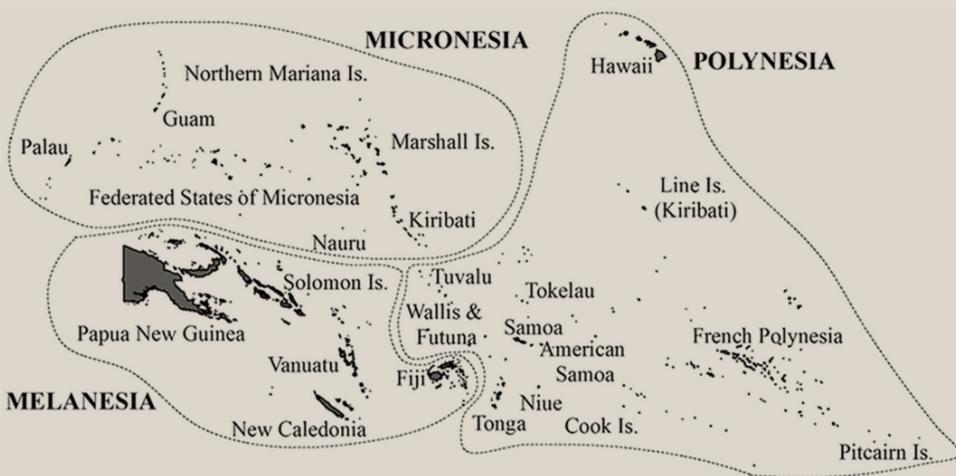
In Polynesian culture, *marae* is a large complex that takes the form of an enclosure. Within the *marae*, there is a meeting house, kitchen and dining area, and washing area. The ceremonial grounds and *ahu* can also be found here. Different parts of the *marae* embody different deities. The *marae* is the base of community life, and celebrations, rituals, and meetings are all held here. Because of this, the *marae* is always well decorated by carvings and paintings related to that tribe.

Mana

Mana is the supernatural energy of the elements that is embodies within each person and object. It is the spiritual life force or healing energy present everywhere. Mana is a central concept within Polynesian and Melanesian belief systems. While everything is believed to have mana within it, some people and object have more mana than others, which makes them sacred and special. Objects made and decorated for ritual and ceremonial purposes possess a great deal of mana, meaning they should be handled specially.

Micronesia and Melanesia

Micronesia and Melanesia are 2 of the regions in Oceania. Though they have their fair share of similarities, their art styles differ. Micronesian art pays less attention to ornamentation, emphasizing line and form, while Melanesian art draws attention to the human body, using heavy ornamentation as a means of decorating the body.



Mo'ai

Mo'ai statues are massive monoliths that exist on Easter Island (Rapa Nui), created by the Rapa Nui people. They are carved out of rocks made of compressed volcanic ash using stone carving tools called *toki*. These statues are probably the most recognizable work of art to come from Oceania. Moai statues were built to honor chieftain or other important people who had passed away. They were placed on rectangular stone platforms called *ahu*, which are tombs for the people that the statues represented. The moais were intentionally made with different characteristics since they were intended to keep the appearance of the person they represented. A pukao (top knot) of red stone would be placed atop the statue to represent the deceased's long hair, which was a sign of great mana. The spirit of the deceased was meant to look over the tribe in the form of the staggering monolith.



Mo'ai, Rapa Nui

N

Nature

Nature is obviously something that tribes across Oceania place heavy importance on, which can be seen in how they revere it and depict different facets of it in their art. However, their expert utilisation of the materials available to them in nature to create these artworks is a feat in and of itself. Anything that existed in the natural world had the potential to be a medium through which art could be created; bird beaks, animal bones, fruits, leaves and so on. Even the human body was a canvas on which art could be made, and meaning could be created.



Shield with human hair,
The Metropolitan Museum of Art



Dance Mask made of boar tusk and shells,
Oceanic Art Gallery, Australia



Ceremonial flywhisk made of wood, coconut fiber, and human hair,
The Metropolitan Museum of Art

New Guinea

There are tribes scattered across New Guinea that have their own distinct specialties in terms of art. The *Sawos* people art is characterized by the complex curvilinear carving style that depicts different animals. The *Kwoma* people are known for their elaborately decorated ceremonial house ceilings, made up of hundreds of complex paintings that depict animals, plants, supernatural beings in abstract geometric figures. The *Kerewa* people's most sacred object is a flat, board-like figure used to display human skulls. These boards were carved by the person who was to display the skull, usually of a figure supposedly revealed to them in a dream.



Ceremonial house facade decoration made using
sago palm, bamboo, and natural pigments
Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco

Ohana

The word *ohana* means family in Hawai'ian culture and refers to strong familial bonds. The concept of ohana involves creating loving relationships with more than just blood relatives. Embracing ohana means developing a sense of familial care and devotion to all members of the human family. The word *ohana* is tied to the root word *oha*, which refers to the taro plant, which holds great significance in Hawai'ian culture. It represents growth and connection. The taro plant is represented often in Hawai'ian art, as a singular plant, as a sapling, as taro leaves, or as a field of taro plants.



Hei matau (pendant),
Mountain Jade, NZ

Ono

Ono, *matau*, or *makau* are all names for fish hooks across Polynesia. Fish hooks are not significant only as an object, but also as a motif in art. Fish hooks represent strength, prosperity, connection to the ocean, and safe passage across the sea. The fish hooks used for fishing were also made in a variety of shapes, depending on the kinds of fish present. The fish hooks were made out of wood, shell, and bone; the iridescent nature of the shell would draw fish nearer to the hook. The fish hook motif can be seen across mediums, in tattooing, ornamentation, and storytelling.



3 different kinds of fish hooks

P



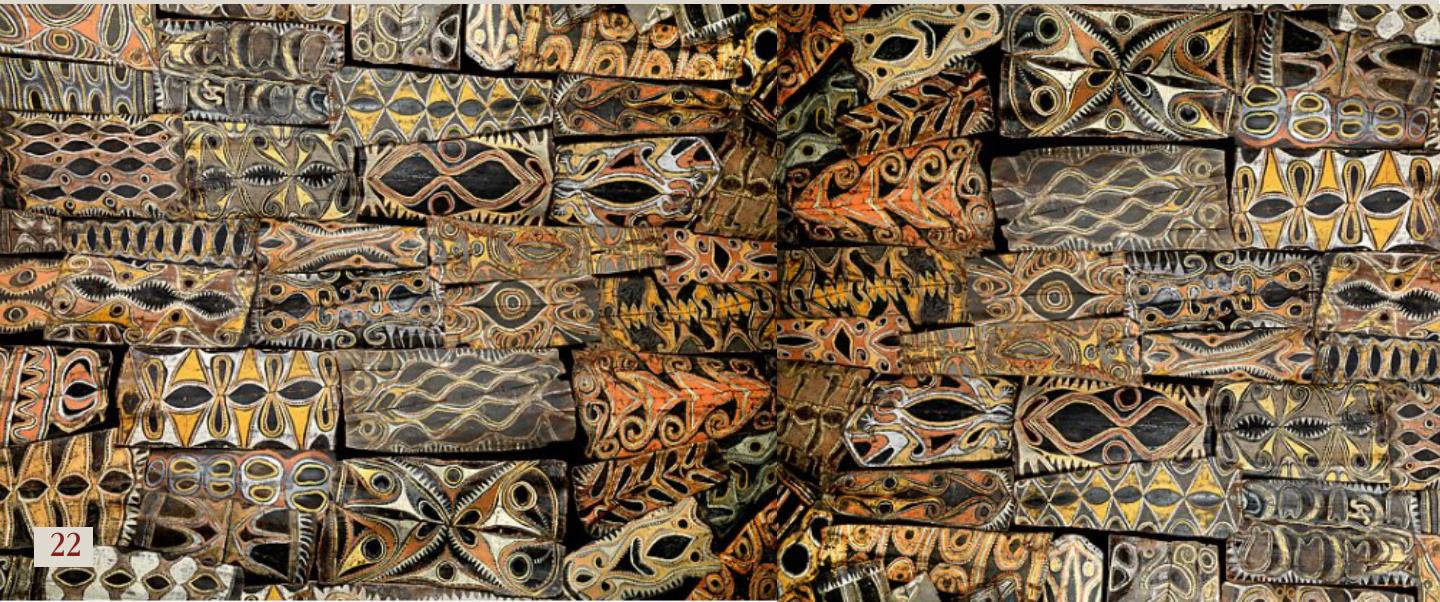
Peitatanga

Peitatanga is the Maori term that refers to painting on a wooden surface. The most commonly seen form of peitatanga in Maori culture is the kowhaiwhai patterns, but painting isn't only relevant in Maori culture. Across Oceania, painting is a primary form of art, seen in cave paintings, paintings on bark cloth, on wood, as a form of storytelling and ornamentation. Paintings were created using natural pigments from plants and fruits, and certain processes were developed to create dyes as well. Painting has long been a way for people to communicate.

Petroglyphs

Petroglyphs, or rock art, refers to images that are etched or carved into stone surfaces. The rock art found in Polynesia is quite repetitive and reflects early Polynesian beliefs and ideals. The same motifs found etched onto these rocks are motifs that recur in tattoo and carving art as well. Commonly seen are anthropomorphic depictions of what are presumed to be Ancestors, as well as animals such as turtles.

Multiple paintings places together to form Ceremonial House ceiling,
The Metropolitan Museum of Art



Polynesia

Polynesia is a region within Oceania made up of over 1,000 islands. It is well known for its strong cultural beliefs and varied art style. The most distinct art from Polynesia comes in the form of carved human figures - *tiki* - which are meant to act as guardians. The moai of Easter Island (Rapa Nui) are another example of the unique carved humanoid figured to come from Polynesia.

Pounamu

Pounamu is the Maori word for jade, but it also refers to any jade ornament worn around the neck. Pounamu is considered sacred, which makes it restricted and untouchable. For this reason, pounamu are blessed, to make them ordinary and allow people to wear them. Pounamu are generally gifted and are treated as treasures that can be passed down through generations. There are various kinds of pounamu depending on the form they are crafted into. There are the aforementioned hei tiki, as well as hei matau (hook), koru (spiral), pikorua(twist), and many more. They all symbolize something different, depending on the motif they are shaped as.



all pounamus from
Mountain Jade, NZ

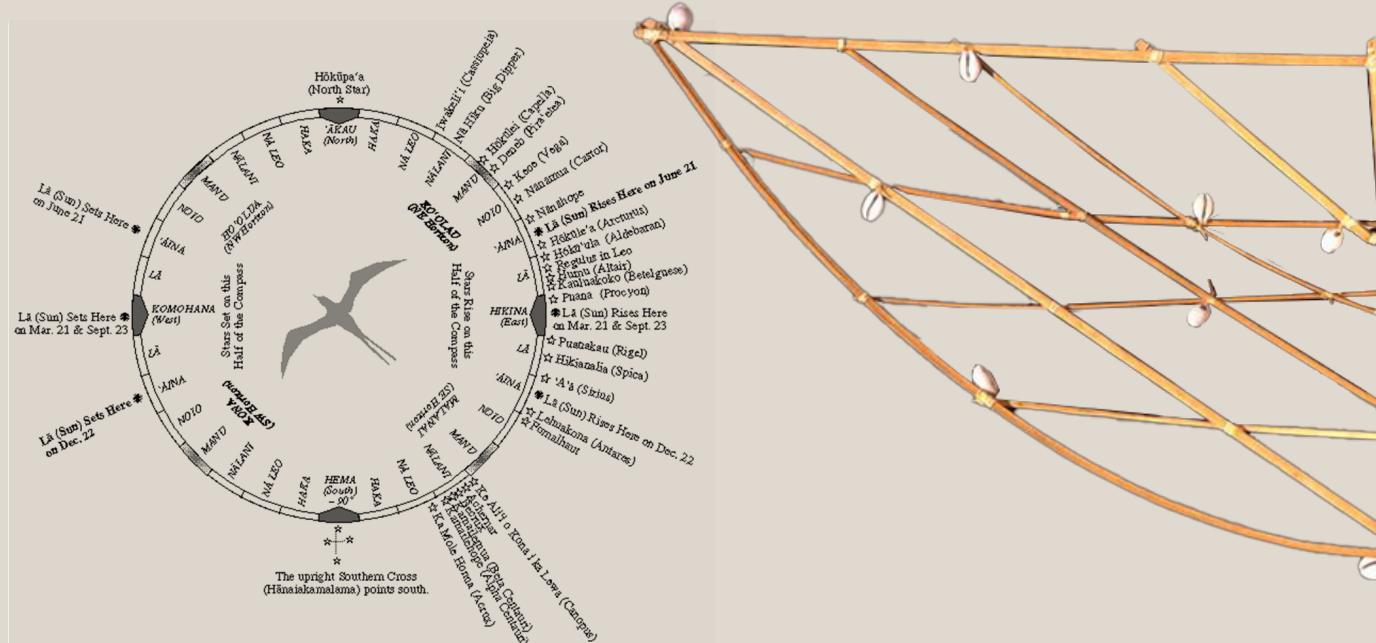
Hei tiki

Q



Quadrants

Voyaging and wayfinding are a large part of all Oceanic cultures, and for navigation, they frequently used star compasses and stick charts to make their way. The Hawai'i'an star compass was widely used, and diverging from expectation, it was a mental compass, not a physical one. The compass is divided into quadrants using the cardinal points, which are located using the horizon and positioning of celestial bodies. These quadrants are named for the different kinds of winds in Hawai'i, and the quadrants can be found using the swells of the ocean and winds. Identifying the quadrants was an essential part of wayfinding. The knowledge gained from observing the heavenly bodies so closely also led to art that revolved around the stars, celestial bodies and the spirits that embody them.



Hawai'i'an star compass with 4 quadrants, each containing 7 directional points,
Polynesian Voyaging Society

Raranga

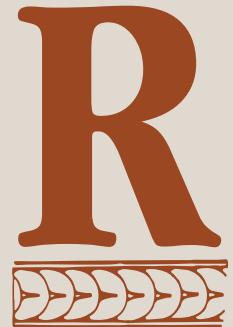
Raranga, or the Maori art of weaving, is one of the primary forms of Maori art. Each piece is meant to tell a story and symbolize something. A variety of items were made from this art form, items for daily use such as baskets and mats, as well as skirts and sacred garments known as *Korowai*. Weaving was carried out using cloth made from plants, and decorative threads and feathers were added as the piece progressed. Natural dyes were also used to achieve various colours.



Raranga Cape, Museum of New Zealand
The British Museum

Rebbilib

Rebbilib, or navigational stick charts originated from the Marshall Islands. These stick maps were used by navigators during long ocean voyages to provide information on the locations of individual islands as well as wave patterns. In some instances, small cowrie shells are also used to indicate the positions of individual islands. Rebbilis were typically used as memory aids for personal use or to instruct novices.



S



Scarification

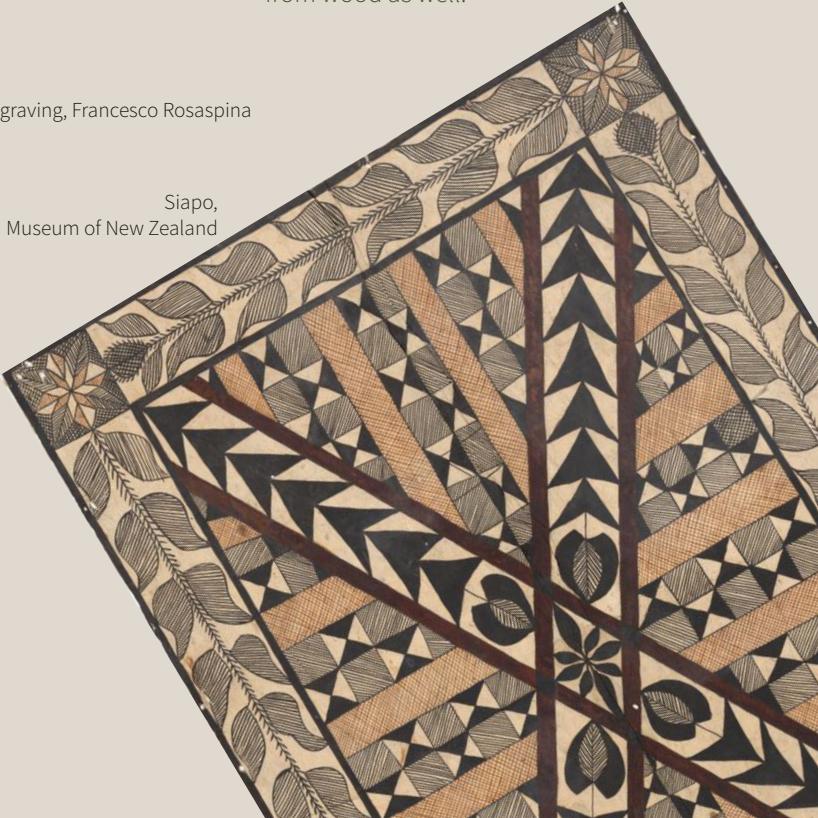
Scarification is body modification technique that has been prominent amongst Melanesian and Aboriginal peoples. It involves etching, branding, or cutting skin to create permanent markings on the body. It can be treated as a rite of passage, or to tell stories of growth, perseverance, identity on one's own body with each deliberately placed scar.



Scarification,
copperplate engraving, Francesco Rosaspina

Siapo

In the Samoan Islands of Polynesia, a form of art called *siapo* is well known. *Siapo* refers to a form of bark cloth that's painted with patterns resembling the local flora and fauna. There are two ways in which the painting is done. *Siapo mamanu* refers to siapo that has been painted by hand. The brushes used for such painting are traditionally made from pandanus fruit leaves. *Siapo 'elei* are siapo cloths that have their pattern applied with a pattern board called *upeti*, which was originally made of coconut fiber, but can be made from wood as well.



Siapo,
Museum of New Zealand

Taonga

Taonga is a Maori term that refers to treasured possessions. Taonga are considered sacred and the person who they belong to is their guardian. Taonga is not just material, it can refer to ideas, techniques, and rituals. Taonga are often family heirlooms passed down through many generations.

Taumi

Taumi is a feather breastplate that was worn in pairs, one on the front and one on the back. These breastplates were typically worn by high ranking chiefs and warriors of the Society Islands. Worn in the correct way, they visually give the effect of the wearer's head rising from the jaws of a shark.



Tatau design for the male body (back)

Tatau / Tā Moko

Tatau (Samoan) or tā moko (Maori) are the terms for tattooing. In Polynesian culture, the body is considered a link between heaven and earth, with the upper body representing the spiritual world and the lower body representing the earth. Tattoos were believed to connect the physical and spiritual, imbuing the wearer with mana. The placement and design of the tattoo denotes its exact meaning and tells the story of the wearer. Tattoos marked one's identity and told the story of their life.



Taumi,
The British Museum

U

'Uala and 'Ulu

Sweet Potato ('uala) and breadfruit ('ulu) are two of the staple crops of Oceania that have sustained the people for over 3,000 years. Breadfruit is a versatile crop, it can be eaten at all stages of maturity and even its seeds are edible. Breadfruit is one of the plants used to make tapa (bark cloth) which is the primary cloth material used across Oceania. It has also been hypothesized that the introduction of sweet potatoes to Easter Island may be correlated to the construction of the ahu and moai, since the large harvests of sweet potato allowed people the time to create the massive structures.



Breadfruit bark cloth,
The British Museum

Utility

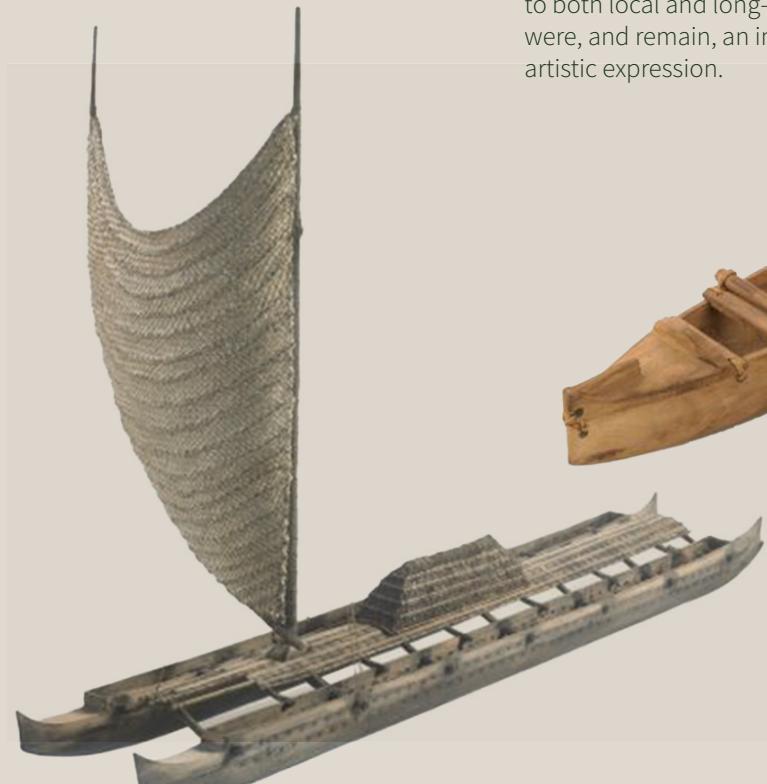
The people of Oceania place emphasis on utility, not only of every object they created, but also the natural world around them. They utilized every resource available to them, while being mindful to not deplete it. They would use perishable materials for everyday items, while using materials that would last long for objects that required it, like canoes. The Oceanic peoples were experts in using the resources around them efficiently and effectively.



Model sailing canoe,
Museum of New Zealand

Vanuatu

Vanuatu is an island region in Melanesia, characterized by its rough hewn environment. The most commonly seen art forms in Vanuatu are sand drawings and sculptures carved from black palm. These sculptures are occasionally of humans, with oversized heads, globular torsos, and stick-like limbs.



Hawaiian sailing canoe model,
Museum of New Zealand

Voyaging

The origins of the Pacific's peoples can be traced back to mainland Asia, where people set off in simple rafts and eventually reached Australia and New Guinea. Polynesians developed advanced sailing and navigational technology, including the double-hulled canoe, also known as a catamaran. These canoes were stable and could carry heavy loads. Canoes, essential to both local and long-distance travel, were, and remain, an important focus of artistic expression.



Outrigger canoe model,
Museum of New Zealand

W



Wakahua

Wakahua, or treasure boxes, served as containers for various family heirlooms and taonga. Tail feathers of the rare huia bird were also often stored inside. The wood carvings on the handles of wakahua usually depicted a protective figure, which would guard the precious items.

Warfare

Warfare, which in almost all Oceanic societies was a male activity, was associated with a wide range of art forms, including shields, clubs, and personal ornaments, some of which were believed to have supernatural properties that protected the wearer from harm or magically hindered his enemies.



Wakahua
Museum of New Zealand



Wakahua
Maori Arts and Crafts Institute, NZ



Warrior's Neck Ornament,
The Metropolitan Museum of Art



Aboriginal Boomerang,
National Museum of Australia



Jade Hand Club,
The Metropolitan Museum of Art



Carved Wooden Club,
The Metropolitan Museum of Art



Painted Wooden Shield,
The Metropolitan Museum of Art

War Ornaments



X



Xenophobia

Xenophobia is the dislike of or prejudice against people of different countries and cultures. Ironically, xenophobia against Aboriginal/Maori people runs rampant in Australia, even though they are the native settlers of the area. Colonisation painted the people of the native tribes of Oceania in a negative light, and the image still persists. Oceanic art and culture is often not provided due respect, and the native people have had to fight to have their rights and values upheld by the government. There is a sense of superiority present in those who treat the tribal people with disgust, believing they are of better station and knowledge.

Aboriginal peoples “bowing” to Captain Arthur Phillip



Aboriginal prisoners in neck chains in northwestern Australia

Yalulawei

Yalulawei were known as benevolent water spirits in Micronesian belief. The hos (weather charm) used as protective devices against storms and evil spirits represented Yalulawei. Before setting off on a voyage, the power of the Yalulawei would be summoned by the navigator through chanting. It would then be taken along in the canoe to ensure a smooth and safe voyage.



Polynesian fertility figure,
Ren Clark's Expedition

Yupin

Yupin or *yupini* were basketwork fertility figures made of coiled up woven cane fiber. These figures are few and far between, and can only be found in Melanesia, but play an important role in rituals related to growth and fertility. The yupin are a fascinating work of fiber art and are held in high esteem. Other areas in Polynesia also created fertility figures for rituals and ceremonies.



Yupin, fertility figure

Z

Zoomorphism

Zoomorphism refers to giving animal characteristics or qualities to non-animal subjects, such as people, objects, or ideas. This is one of the most prominent characteristics of art throughout Oceania, where deities and spirits are given anthropomorphic physical forms. Carvings are often fashioned to look like different animals and ceremonial masks are usually in the form of some animal or the other. There is a lot of intention behind each representation of an object or person as an animal; it always holds meaning that is connected to the characteristics of the specific animal being represented.



One of the earliest zoomorphic figures found, perhaps depicting an echidna, New Guinea



bird head hook, depicting a cassowary



Ceremonial mask depicting a monkey-like face shape



Hei manaia, depicting the shape and scaly body of a serpent

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