



Object type: Throwing Club
Indigenous name: U'u
Culture/ location: Fiji
Date: 20th Century
Materials: Wood
Dimensions: 16 1/4 in. x 4 3/8 in. x 4 1/8 in.,
16-1/4 x 4-3/8 x 4-1/8 in.
Institution and accession number:
Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University, 1998.49



Object Type: Pictorial Tapa (Barkcloth)
Indigenous name: N/A
Culture/ location: Wallis Island
Date: Mid to late 20th Century
Material: Pounded barkcloth with pigment
Dimensions: 31 5/8 x 126 3/4 in.
Institution and accession number: Museum of
Fine Arts of Boston: Arts of Asia, Oceania, and
Africa Gallery (Gallery 177), N/A

In Polynesian culture, two of the most prominent objects are war clubs and tapa, or barkcloth. These items highlight the advanced ability of the artists, the detail and meaning put into each one, and the indigenous technology used to create each work of art. Although each was intended for functional uses, today Polynesian war clubs and decorated tapas are displayed in museums for safe keeping and the preservation of culture.

Both items are infused with a great deal of mana by artists who created them. Associated with the indigenous people in Oceania, mana refers to a spiritual force used in a hierarchical manner to indicate ones' social status in the community. Artists were usually nobles and, commonly, they were also the priests of the community. They would have been responsible for making carved wooden objects such as the war clubs. In contrast, women were entrusted with the creation of the barkcloth. When the tapa was made and the war clubs carved, they were infused with mana. The more complex the design, the more mana in the object. For example, the tapa, created by an unknown artist on Wallis Island, Polynesia, must have created this work of art for someone very important in the community, or the tourist industry. The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston writes, "This tapa is interesting for its lack of perspective...the symbolic size of its figures...the octopus, which is important in [the indigenous peoples'] mythology and has a special status, occupies a larger space reflecting its symbolic meaning replacing reality (MFA 2003, 1)." Women and the master artists focused on the natural aspects of life and painted animals to reflect those aspects, in order of importance to the community. Both the level of detail and the use of few colors to depict details is remarkable. Also for the war club, all the etchings on the head are an indication of the amount of mana the owner possesses.

Tapa is also known as barkcloth because of the material used to create it. It is made from the inner bark of the mulberry tree, and beaten out with special tools that form specific patterns on the cloth, creating a larger canvas to paint on (Rowley 1966, 3). Each strip of cloth is joined together with an indigenous type of glue, made from sap, and placed carefully along the edges for the best adhesion (MFA 2003, 1). Attention to detail while designing the image on the tapa is as important, if not more so, than how the piece is held together. All the materials used to create tapa are from local plants because the indigenous people did not have much to trade with, or know what to trade for. Each island in Polynesia had its own version of a tapa, but they were all created from local materials. Tapa was used in daily life for the indigenous people, and many ceremonies were conducted while people wore tapa. For example, many traditional weddings were conducted while the husband and wife wore as much tapa as possible to ensure the best relationship with each other (MFA 2003, 2).

War clubs were one of a man's most prized possessions while he was alive. He would have carried the club with him all the time as a sign of power and strength to the rest of the community. This club was made using only wood, and carved by an expert in wood carving from the local community. Another name for it was a "throwing club" or "U'u". In battle these weapons were extremely versatile because of their portability and multiple uses. Up close and personal they would be used to strike an enemy down, or kill them if necessary, but they were also light enough to be useful, and accurate, when thrown from a distance (Mills 2009, 14). When not in use in a battle, they were handled with care in order to keep each club in prime condition for battle. For example, "Certain types [of clubs] in addition to being used for warfare are employed in mortuary rites..." (De Vere Bailey 1947, 3). Clubs were very versatile in Polynesian communities, and even so sacred that they were taken to the afterlife with their owners. While this particular club is not as ornate as some, it still shows the impressive artistic ability used to create it, and it suggests that a good amount of mana went into its carving. War Clubs were generally passed down from generation to generation, so they have a high patina from all those all those who touched these objects (De Vere Bailey 1947, 3).

I chose these two artifacts because they represent the intense artistic history of Fiji (war club) and Wallis Island (tapa), as well as the indigenous technologies used to create each object. Both of these objects were found in or around the 20th century and are considered key objects into the Polynesian art history by being kept in well-known museums around the world. I have had the fortune of traveling around the world, experiencing many different cultures, and a variety of indigenous customs, and these have led me to become more interested in nonwestern cultures. The throwing club and barkcloth show the amount of detail that went into each object,

but also shows how cultures in the same proximity can be so diverse. When traveling abroad I noticed every culture has its own unique characteristics that make it special and the Polynesian Islands pay special attention to the relationship between humans and the natural environment.

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