RISD
MUSEUM

Cloth Without Weaving: Beaten Barkcloth of the Pacific Islands,
November 1, 2000-February 18, 2001

Unlike most textiles, which are made of interworked yarns, beaten barkcloth is made of strips of the inner bark of trees such as the paper mulberry, breadfruit, or fig, pounded together into a smooth and supple fabric. It is an ancient craft, practiced in southern China and mainland Southeast Asia over 5,000 years ago. From there, the skill spread to eastern Indonesia and the Pacific Islands. While the technique is also known in South America and Africa, it is most closely associated with the islands of Polynesia.

In Polynesia, the making of beaten barkcloth, or *tapa*, as it is commonly known, is primarily women's work. The technique is essentially the same throughout the Pacific Islands, with many local variations. Bark is stripped from the tree, and the inner bark separated from the outer. The inner bark is then pounded with wooden beaters to spread the fibers into a thin sheet. Large pieces of *tapa* can be made by overlapping and pounding together several smaller sheets. Women decorate the cloth in many ways, and techniques are often combined. Mallets carved or inlaid with metal or shell designs may impart a subtle texture to the surface. Color may be applied with stamps, stencils, freehand painting, or by rubbing dye into the *tapa* over a patterned board. Glazes may be brushed onto the finished cloth. Each *tapa*-producing culture has its own vocabulary of recognized decorative motifs. Many pattern names are drawn from the natural world, and the motifs appear as highly stylized images of local flora and fauna or simple geometric shapes. Still other motifs hold special clan significance. Polynesian cultures use beaten barkcloth to fashion serviceable and practical clothing and furnishings, but have also employed it to create objects with ceremonial or ritual significance.

The arrival of Captain Cook and other European explorers in the 18th century changed Polynesian *tapa*-making traditions. Islanders began to use imported cloth for their practical needs, and barkcloth manufacture turned largely to production meant for sale to travelers and tourists. Today, *tapa*-making continues in some parts of Polynesia as an expression of women's creativity and cultural pride. While time may have stiffened the once supple texture and dulled the once bright reds to browns, the barkcloth in this exhibit remains a tangible connection to island cultures past and present.

CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Samoan
Wrap skirt, 1900-1945
Beaten bark fiber, freehand painting with cut border fringe and overall glazing
Gift of Captain and Mrs. Robert Chew 46.488

RISD
MUSEUM

These wrap skirts feature prominent crossed stripes that form parallelograms and triangles in the negative spaces between them. The saw-tooth edging on the stripes is an ancient design element common throughout the Pacific. The hemline fringe on both skirts is cut to echo the bold painted patterns of the *tapa*. These pieces feature the heavy resinous glaze typical of Samoan tapa painted with *'o'a sap* mixed with a black dye from *lama nut* kernels.

Samoan
Wrapper, late 1800s - mid 1900s
Beaten bark fiber, freehand painting and overall glazing
Gift of Captain and Mrs. Robert Chew 46.490

Siapo mamanu is the Samoan term for a spontaneous freehand painting method. The entire sheet is divided into pattern blocks. The orientation of the main motif, four elongated triangles, changes in alternate blocks, adding a sense of motion to the composition. The background is *o 'a* glaze in multiple coats, which provides the barkcloth with a degree of water resistance.

Samoan
Hanging, 1800s-early 1900s
Beaten bark fiber, freehand painting
Gift of Mrs. Henry F. Carr 26.027

The size of this *tapa* (86 x 64") suggests that it could have been used as portable architecture, perhaps a room divider, mosquito screen, or ceremonial backdrop. The brown-and-black color scheme, the checkerboard and starfish motifs, and the overall composition of this freehand painted design are all characteristic of Samoan manufacture.

RISD
MUSEUM

Hawaiian
Room divider, 1800s
Beaten and fermented bark fiber, stamping
Gift of Brown University 22.066

Indian printed cottons may have been the source for this design, while the decorative repeat patterning is achieved by two methods thought to be unique to Hawaii. The striped elements are stamped with a liner (*lapa*), a long strip of bamboo upon which several carved bamboo cross- sections have been arranged in a pattern. The liner is dipped into paint and pressed onto dry, bleached barkcloth. An individual bamboo stamp is used to fill the ground between the stripes with scattered circular motifs.

Samoan
Textile fragment, early 1800s - early 1900s
Beaten bark fiber, burnishing with pigment and freehand painting
Museum Collection 46.328C

Siapo tasina is the Samoan term for the fine line patterning produced when barkcloth is rubbed on a *upeti*, or design board. Early, delicately constructed design boards were made from the ribs of leaves, sewn into geometric patterns and mounted on wood. Leaf *upeti* were used until the 1930s, when wooden boards carved by men became predominant. This shift in technique also meant that men became involved in the design phase for the first time. The *upeti* technique is combined here with overpainting of the borders and the scattered circles and bars.

Samoan
Long wrap skirt (lavalava), 1900-1945
Beaten bark fiber, freehand painting with cut border
Gift of Captain and Mrs. Robert Chew 46.489

According to one Polynesian legend, the *tapa*-making goddess Rina was banished to the moon by the god Tangaroa because he was disturbed by the incessant noise of her anvil. Beating the thick bark strips into thin sheets is often a communal activity for the women, and some groups harmonize their rhythmic beats during *tapa*-making or even telegraph messages to nearby villages by the ringing of their *tapa* anvils.

RISD
MUSEUM

Tongan
Wrapper or furnishing fabric, 1800s
Beaten bark fiber, burnishing with pigment
Museum Collection 46.329

One method of decorating *ngatu*, the Tongan term for barkcloth, employs sewn strips of leaf ribs arranged in a pattern and attached to a board. The barkcloth sheet is placed over the design board, known as a *kupesi*, and pigment is rubbed onto the sheet. The pattern of the leaf ribs is burnished into the sheet. The plain border is typical of Tongan *ngatu*.

Samoan
Wrap skirt, 1900-1945
Beaten bark fiber, freehand painting with cut border fringe and overall glazing
Gift of Captain and Mrs. Robert Chew 46.491

These wrap skirts feature prominent crossed stripes that form parallelograms and triangles in the negative spaces between them. The saw-tooth edging on the stripes is an ancient design element common throughout the Pacific. The hemline fringe on both skirts is cut to echo the bold painted patterns of the *tapa*. These pieces feature the heavy resinous glaze typical of Samoan tapa painted with *'o'a sap* mixed with a black dye from *lama nut* kernels.

Probably; Samoan
Hanging, 1900s
Beaten bark fiber, design rubbed on over pattern board, additional freehand painting
Gift of Daphne Peabody Murray 82.289.25

The surface design of this barkcloth was applied using a combination of techniques. The light-brown pattern was applied by rubbing the white *tapa* surface over a carved pattern board with a pad of old tapa dipped in dye. The design was transferred to the *tapa* wherever the barkcloth was in contact with the carved pattern board. Freehand painting with a darker dye was then used to highlight selected areas of the rubbed design. The technique, color scheme, and motifs of this piece indicate Samoan manufacture. Since the 1970s, sheets of

RISD
MUSEUM

barkcloth this size decorated with pattern boards have become the main type of *tapa* produced in Western Samoa for domestic use as well as for sale to tourists.

Samoan
Long wrap skirt (lavalava), ca. 1940-1950
Beaten bark fiber, freehand painting with cut border
Gift of Captain and Mrs. Robert Chew 46.494

Slight design variations within the 12 similarly patterned panels add rhythmic movement to this freehand painted composition. The piece appears to have been inspired by nontraditional sources. The 12 panels are reminiscent of striped zebra hide, and the scalloped border could be the *tapa*-maker's interpretation of European lace edging. Throughout the 20th century, new motifs derived from other cultures entered the visual vocabulary of Pacific barkcloth designers.

Samoan
Cover, 1800s
Beaten bark fiber, freehand painting and overall glazing
Gift of Captain and Mrs. Robert Chew 46.493

The resinous brown-black glaze is a mixture of sap and charcoal that makes the tapa durable and waterproof. With its four borders evident, this heavily painted piece may have been a waterproof covering for domestic use.

RISD
MUSEUM

Textile fragment, 1800s
Beaten and fermented bark fiber, stamping and freehand painting
Gift of Lillian M. Potter 92.002

Circles appear rarely in *tapa* patterning. Here the hand-painted circular outline is filled with stamped red and blue V-shaped marks, which divide the circle into quarters. In comparison to other Pacific islands, Hawaii utilized a broader spectrum of colors in their *tapa*: blue paint from crushed berries was unique to Hawaii.

Textile fragment, 1800s
Beaten and fermented bark fiber, stamping
Gift of Lillian M. Potter 91.011

In 1778, Captain Cook wrote in his journal, "One would suppose that they had borrowed their patterns from some mercer's shop in which the most elegant productions of China and Europe are collected, being some patterns of their own... The regularity of the figures and stripes is truly surprising." Carved multipronged stamps, known as *lapa*, have been used to apply paint to the cloth. By varying their configuration and using only one paint color, the maker has made diamonds and stripes into a composition with overall visual coherence.

Polynesian; Samoan; Tongan
Tapa (bark cloth) fragment, 1800s
Paper mulberry (Broussonetia Papyrifera), pigment; processed inner tree bark
Gift of Brown University 22.065

The hand-painted comb design on this cut fragment demonstrates a high level of skill in the manipulation of detailed motifs. The dark, resinous pattern of the borders is most likely the result of a combination of paint and charcoal. Extra shine could be obtained with the glaze derived from the toga plant.

RISD
MUSEUM

Polynesian
Textile, late 1800s - early 1900s
Beaten bark fiber, freehand painting with cut border fringe
Gift of Mrs. Jesse H. Metcalf 46.072

This large *tapa* was perhaps used as a wrapped garment, as the edges are cut into a decorative fringe. The fringe border was first painted in diagonal stripes and then cut in straight lines to give the appearance of twisted fringe.

The bold pinwheel design evident on the lengthwise borders and the four-pointed star design of the central panel are ancient motifs used throughout the Pacific. These particular patterns are commonly seen on *tapa* from western Polynesia, especially Tonga, Samoa, and Fiji .

Samoan
Long wrap skirt (lavalava), 1900-1945
Beaten bark fiber, freehand painting with cut border
Gift of Captain and Mrs. Robert Chew 46.486

Bordered on three sides with a cut saw-tooth pattern, this large piece of barkcloth is probably a *lavalava* or wrap skirt worn as ceremonial dress by both men and women. The plain edge would be wrapped around the waist and secured with a belt, also made from *tapa*. Bold, freehand painted designs are typical of Samoan *tapa*. Here the artist depicts bamboo-patterned stripes, panels of palm leaves, and feathered triangles.