

Barkcloth



Brief description: Piece of barkcloth from the Pacific Island of Tonga

Date: about 2000

Composition: Bark, dye

Origin: Tonga, Pacifica Island

How it came to the Museum (including date): Gifted in 2017 by a member of staff in the Department of Africa, Oceania and the Americas

Object information

Historical context

Barkcloth is, literally, cloth made from the bark of trees. Historically, it was made across the islands of the Pacific from Rapa Nui/Easter Island in the east to New Guinea in the West and from Hawaii in the north to Aotearoa/New Zealand (albeit in small quantities)

in the south. In many islands it continues to be made today. Barkcloth is known by a variety of terms: *masi* in Fiji; *kapa* in Hawaii, *ngatu* in Tonga, but the term *tapa* has become a generic term, used as a lingua franca across the region.

How the object is made

The cloth was and is made mainly from the bark of the paper mulberry tree (*Broussonetia papyrifera*) but is also made from fig or sometimes breadfruit bark. The bark is stripped, soaked and pounded using wooden beaters across wooden ‘anvils’ (see photograph). As it is struck, the bark becomes sticky and flexible allowing it to be beaten out very thinly and new sections to be added to it in a method similar to felting.

Early European visitors to the Pacific Islands commented on how the tropical landscapes resonated with the constant sound of barkcloth being made. Sometimes women sustained their beat to a song, one woman leading and the rest replying in a kind of chorus. Because of the tropical climate, the cloth did not last long and so new barkcloth was always required for clothes, for gifts to be presented at weddings or funerals and for ceremonial and ritual purposes. Some cloths were enormous, many metres in length.

Barkcloth today

Today, the art of barkcloth making is flourishing across the Pacific region. Fashion designers create wedding dresses from *tapa* and large bales of barkcloth continue to be presented at important ceremonies. This piece was purchased from a market in Tonga in 2005. Its designs were painted on by hand and imprinted onto the cloth using a ‘*kupes*’, or pattern board. They were created using a dye made from the koka tree (*Bischofia javanica*). Typically, the patterns on Tongan barkcloth combine geometric designs with figurative details such as doves, which represent the Tongan king.

Originally, this cloth was part of a much larger sheet that was cut up, divided and gifted to members of the purchaser’s family. In the past, many *tapa* were made to be divisible

and were cut up and distributed amongst groups who had participated in an important occasion.

Handling guidance

The object is large and should remain flat on the desk rather than being lifted by visitors. Encourage visitors to handle the barkcloth by touching the surface and feeling the texture.

Similar objects on display

A Royal barkcloth can be seen in Room 25, display case 10. This object can also be found on Collection online here -

https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E_Af1901-1113-2

Collection online

The following web links provide examples of similar objects in the collection that are not on display.

Apron - https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E_Oc1951-07-176

Barkcloth - https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E_Oc1986-01-1

Arrow - https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/E_Am-5205-d-m

Did you know...

In 1972, presenters from the children's TV show Blue Peter helped to make one of the largest barkcloths ever to leave Tonga. In 2013, this cloth was gifted to the British Museum. It is over 4 metres long and 2 metres wide.

Further reading

Traditional Tapa Textiles of the Pacific by Roger Neich and Mick Pendergrast (1997)

Oceanic Art by Nicholas Thomas (1995)

Additional Pictures

All of these pictures are available as laminates and can be used on the desk to complement the object.



Bark being pounded using wooden beaters across wooden 'anvils'



Barkcloth being made



Contemporary barkcloth fashion in Fiji



Wedding dress made from barkcloth by a Samoan designer living in Auckland (2014)



A paper Mulberry Tree and bark detail