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## Engaging aesthetically with tapa barkcloth in the museum

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### ABSTRACT

Tapa barkcloth was a fabric replete with materialities of cultural and aesthetic values in 18th- and 19th-century Oceania. In the modern ethnographic museum, remote in time (and frequently space) from its origin, what remains to be appreciated cross-culturally? I think through a tripartite model here, in which certain aesthetic responses are taken as universal, others as shaped by cross-cultural materialities, and yet others as dependent upon the spatiotemporal contexts of creation and appreciation.

### KEYWORDS

Materials; fabric; museums; oceania; tapa

*Tapa* barkcloth was a material of great cultural importance in Oceania until the late 1800s, and continues to be so in certain areas. Little known outside of the tropics, and increasingly rare there since the importation of woven fabrics began in the early 19th century, barkcloth is a non-woven fabric produced from sheets of the removed, cleaned and beaten inner bark (bast) of specific trees. Species primarily in the *Moraceae* family were used in tropical Oceania, notably Paper Mulberry (*Broussonetia papyrifera*), Breadfruit (*Artocarpus altilis*), and Banyan (*Ficus prolixa*). During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the materiality of this fabric *tapa* constituted a bright constellation of sensory qualisigns for Pacific Islanders – as everyday clothing, a wrapping for spiritually powerful artifacts, a marker of identity and status, and a storable commodity analogous to currency (Kooijman 1972; Neich & Pendergrast 1997; cf Munn 1992). What, however, can such antique fabrics now tell us about the values of their local aesthetic appreciation in the past? Encountered within the peculiar confines of the Western ethnographic museum, any *tapa* cloth is remote indeed from its original spatiotemporal contexts of production and aesthetic appreciation.<sup>1</sup> By engaging with a range of historical *tapa* cloths, however, we can begin to appreciate the aesthetic variation in this art form, and thereby come to some understanding of the nature of aesthetic assessment across the fuzzy boundaries of cultural formations. Substantial literature exists on the visual style and distinctive manufacture of *tapa*, and but little considering its perceived aesthetic qualities and their evaluation. Veys (2017: 160–67) noted this in a recent ethnographic and ethnohistorical study of Tongan *tapa*, emphasizing the importance of multisensory assessment to discerning *tapa*'s emic aesthetic valorization. This was unquestionably the case throughout the Pacific in earlier times, and I discuss *tapa*'s visual, tactile, olfactory and (to some extent) auditory aesthetics here.

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I believe that we can imagine three (artificially distinct) cognitive strata mediating our processing of sense-data before we experience it in the conscious, enculturated phenomenological lifeworld (Merleau-Ponty 1962; Habermas 1987). First, all object perception is articulated by tolerably universal systems of sense-data organization in the human brain and body (Koffka 1935; Csordas 1990). Beyond our shared perceptual architecture, material culture theorists have also conceived there to be a second archetypal stratum of *materialities* defining general culturally determined principles of ontological engagement with the material world.<sup>2</sup> Third, we also need to model a stratum of learned artifact styles, and the cognitive *prototypes* of individual objects which generate them inferentially (Gell 1998: 25–26; cf Reyna and Brainerd 1995). Aesthetic assessment and appreciation occur in all three strata as integrated components of sensation. Through increasingly conscious and culturally malleable strata, the recognized presence or absence of aesthetically *appropriate* qualities is projected onto material culture, and negotiated through interpersonal discourse (Hardin 1993). From such a perspective, the embodied experience and typological materiality of wearable fabrics like tapa drives the aesthetic assessment and artistic elaboration of their relationship with our anatomy and movement; our sensations of temperature and tactile texture; the body's visual concealment and display. The scale, complexity and nature of stylistic proliferation within artifact types reflect the relative importance of these qualities to the instantiation of aesthetic appropriateness. Given this, the nature of stylistic variation found in museum collections of historical tapa indicates central concerns for the aesthetics of color, iconographic complexity, texture, and olfaction.

Historically, artists from the islands of Remote Oceania relied almost exclusively on plant parts (and only very locally available ochres) for pigment production. With few exceptions, blues, greens and purples were absent from Pacific fabrics, and consequently, we generally see a palette of browns, blacks, oranges, reds and yellows. Despite a real environmental impoverishment, however, we see considerable variation in the aesthetics of tapa color between different Pacific islands cultures. Several participants in our *Sensing Art and Artifacts* exercise at the Hunterian Museum in Glasgow recognized a tasteful complementarity in the color schemes of tapa cloths they were shown. Such a sense of aesthetic resonance with the unfamiliar supports a view that certain basic principles of taste operate at a universal psychobiological level of perception rather than those defined by culturally fluid value systems. This can be recognized in one of the Hunterian's late-eighteenth century samples of Hawaiian *kapa* cloth (Figure 1). While its combination of red and pink seems to have a natural complementarity as a duality of intensity within the same hue, as does the lampblack with the ash-pounded grey of the base cloth, their combination with turmeric orange is perhaps counterintuitive. However, the relative proportions of each in the whole composition are balanced with such taste and care, the overall visual impression is entirely harmonious.

The bright scarlet-on-yellow color scheme of late eighteenth century Tahitian *ahufara* cloaks (Figure 2) entranced British and French naval explorers in the 1760s, but it has faded over the last quarter millennium to a muted burgundy-on-dun. This degradation of organic tapa pigments over time now greatly limits our capacity to appreciate their original aesthetic impact and meaning. This color scheme of red-on-yellow was prominent in several Polynesian garment forms associated with chiefly status, notably Tahitian regalia featherwork belts and Hawaiian chiefly cloaks (Rose 1978; Caldeira, Hellmich, and



**Figure 1.** GLAHM E598/1, *kapa kapala*, stamp printed and hand painted barkcloth. Late 18th century, Hawaii, Northern Polynesia. Author's image. By courtesy of the Hunterian, University of Glasgow.



**Figure 2.** GLAHM E595/1, *ahufara*, dyed and stamped cloak. Late 18th century, Tahiti, Society Islands, Central Polynesia. Author's image. By courtesy of the Hunterian, University of Glasgow.

Kaeppler 2015). The aesthetics of these colors can be attributed to their pre-Christian ritual efficacy: Turmeric-infused body oils and fabric dyes were warming imparters of *mana* or embodied supernatural efficacy (Firth 1954; Kirch 1994). Conversely, blood-letting and its application to tapa were acts of auto-sacrifice that alleviated *tapu* states of ritual impurity (Shore 1989; Mills 2016). These color associations were of great antiquity by the 1700s, however, and their achievement in textile pigments had been entirely superseded by the use of brilliant *nono* root yellow (*Morinda citrifolia*), and *mati-tou* scarlet (*Ficus tinctoria* fruit and *Cordia subcordata* leaves) for the bamboo-tube stamps (Kooijman 1972: 15–20).

The practice of applying pigment with bamboo stamps saw considerable development in Hawaii, as demonstrated by a second *kapa* in the Hunterian collection (Figure 3). This hand-printed composition of carved slender rectangular bamboo stamps (*'ohe kapala*) can be seen to operate aesthetically in two distinct ways: A summary aesthetic appreciation can be derived by our first-stratum perception of structural groupings and proportional relationships among forms founded upon principles of gestalt and our



**Figure 3.** GLAHM E667, *kapa kapala*, stamp printed barkcloth. Late 18th century, Hawaii, Northern Polynesia. Author's image. By courtesy of the Hunterian, University of Glasgow.

universal sensitivities to color complementarities (Kandinsky 2001 1911 1911), as well as our second-stratum constructions of their materiality of indexical and iconic signs – much as we might aesthetically appreciate a copse of trees or flock of birds. This *practical appreciation* contrasts with a second-to-third-stratum *discursive appreciation* founded on the analytical deduction of an artwork's structural organization and the symbolic signs it instantiates.<sup>3</sup>

In this case, a discursive appreciation of the composition reveals the transformation of a dualistic color-contrast into a sandwich-like triple zoning structure. This structure repeats at successively nested levels of zoning structure, creating a 27-element contrastive structure founded on a mathematical cube, which obliges the viewer to undertake interpretation shifts of interiority and exteriority for each compositional element. At the level of discursive appreciation, therefore, this *kapa* frames its own aesthetic appreciation as a kind of visual-cognitive puzzle, which is a trait encountered in a number of Polynesian art forms during the eighteenth century.

The color scheme of Tongan *ngatu tahina* (Figure 4) is rendered significantly more homogenous and muted than any of the foregoing cloths by their overwhelmingly solitary use of *koka* (*Bischofia javanica*) resin pigment. In this fabric style, visual aesthetics are instantiated by the decorative iconography transferred onto the cloth from a *kupes* rubbing board during composition. Constructed from coconut leaflet pinnules finely



**Figure 4.** GLAHM E417/8, *ngatu tahina*, rubbing decorated white tapa. Late 18th century, Tonga, Western Polynesia. Author's image. By courtesy of the Hunterian, University of Glasgow.



stitched onto a durable pandanus base in complex rectilinear schemes of meaningful motifs, *kupesi* were used repeatedly to decorate a single cloth, and used to produce many cloths before they were exhausted. By this means, an element of mechanical reproduction was introduced into tapa decoration, articulated through their ownership by chiefly women and their use at the village level – the iconography of each cloth consequently possessing a discernible local identity, which instantiated qualities of the native and the exotic that in turn actuated sentiments of aesthetic value. Veys (2017: 185–186) has particularly emphasized the auditory aesthetics of *ngatu tahina's* rustling movement as the breeze plays across it in ceremonial contexts. This focus on auditory qualities, however, is quite distinctive, and receives virtually no other discussion in historical or ethnographic accounts of tapa more generally.

These distinctively Polynesian concerns for the aesthetics of geometry, rectilinearity, and facsimile repetition contrast sharply with the hand-painted composition of a *nemas-itse* cloak from Erromango (Figure 5). When we presented it to our exercise participants in Glasgow, it was compelling to note how they immediately responded to the recognizable iconic signs of the composition – a centipede and a headless male human figure – rather than its more chaotic, agglomerative web of linear elements. Aesthetic comprehension occurs incrementally, and iconic elements notably come to consciousness (and perhaps to positive affect) quicker than others. Participants drew analogies to Abstract Expressionist paintings, which I view as an interpretive struggle to comprehend the culturally unfamiliar; explicitly aniconic works offered the closest reference point. One participant rightly lamented that the cloak's accession as a museum object rendered the vital sensory encounter of donning and feeling its weight, its insulating qualities, and the friction of the coarse banyan bast against bare skin, unavailable to us. This is a defining limitation of all museum-based art encounters; without a handling collection, we are reduced to merely imagining the tactility of intrinsically tactile objects.

This is particularly regrettable for fabrics such as tapa, as every tapa-making tradition placed considerable emphasis on the varied textural qualities of fabric – achieved through a plethora of retting, fermentation, layering, beating, rubbing, and decoration techniques. In marked contrast to the *nemas-itse*, the light and brilliant white plain cloths of eighteenth century Tahiti clung to the body with paper-like smoothness and wrinkled into fine drapery lines that prompted visiting European artists to evoke the statuary of Classical antiquity.



**Figure 5.** GLAHM E458/1, *nemas-itse*, ochre painted cloak. Mid 19th century, Erromango, Vanuatu, Eastern Melanesia. Author's image. By courtesy of the Hunterian, University of Glasgow.

Several bales of this superfine cloth (one seventh of a millimeter thick) can be found in the collections made on European exploratory voyages of the late eighteenth century. Their presence reflects this fabric's role as a standardized diplomatic gift approaching the function of a currency. It seems impossible, however, that such material qualisigns of specifically alienable value could be sensed by cultural outsiders in the museum store – so completely was that value constituted by its cultural context. The most notable textural feature of Tahitian tapa is its beater mark of millimeter-wide ridges and furrows imparted by a corresponding grooved texture on the face of the barkcloth beater. Almost imperceptible to the touch, the beater mark's micro-scape of light and shadow has a subtle relationship to the aesthetics of the cloth's wearing; both rendering the cloth pliant and emphasizing the body's contours to enhance its display.

Conversely, Tongan *ngatu 'uli* (Figure 6) employed double or triple thicknesses of thick bast, in combination with the stiff glazing of soot-darkened *koka* resin, to determine its textural aesthetics (Lythberg and Herda 2016: 131–135). *Ngatu 'uli* was exclusively produced and used by the chiefly classes in Tonga. The darkness of the achieved black, and the gloss of the surface, constituted its visual beauty (*malie*) and indicated the wearer's moral rectitude and gravity. Despite its dark color and thickness *ngatu 'uli* was particularly valued as a cooling fabric for warm and humid weather, while thinner and lighter *ngatu tahina* was preferred in cool weather. To the non-Tongan (and perhaps the modern Tongan also) such evaluations highlight precisely how culturally and historically determined our aesthetic sensibilities may be at the point of conscious experience.

The dusty pine-like scent of *koka* (and other resinous pigments) determined the olfactory aesthetics of all similarly glazed Polynesian cloth styles. In other styles, however, different olfactory aesthetics were consciously pursued. The perfuming of tapa was formerly prominent in Hawaii and (to a lesser extent) the Society and Cook Islands, drawing on the scents of



**Figure 6.** GLAHM E417/11, *ngatu 'uli*, black glazed tapa. Mid 19th century, Tonga, Western Polynesia. Author's image. By courtesy of the Hunterian, University of Glasgow.

specific flowers, leaves, timbers, seeds and oils (Hiroa 1944:71; Kooijman 1972: 118–120, 164). Without the technology to bind them in alcohol, such olfactory enhancements were short-lived, but this mattered little as tapa can only be washed a few times before disintegrating itself. Even when carefully stored it will usually only last 10–15 years before the tropical climate destroys it. Two centuries and half a world away in a cool-temperate museum store, however, such olfactory beautifications have entirely evaporated away. Instead, all fabrics gain the olfactory materiality of the ethnographic museum accession; a melange of Victorian coal soot, the dust and must of systematic neglect, and the carbolic and arsenic of its cheap twentieth century resolution. The aesthetics of olfaction have generally collapsed as a communicative bridge to the ethnohistorical realities of the past.

A cross-cultural aesthetic engagement with tapa cloth shows that (logically enough) aesthetic conventions anchored in the more embodied universal elements and ordering principles of sensory data readily translate across ethnic boundaries without the benefits of enculturation. Because they are so intimately articulated to the skin, and their sensation activated by bodily movement, cloth and costume are particularly suited to such an examination of aesthetic assessment processes. Cross-culturally consistent typological materialities equally inform our aesthetic appreciation and stylistic proliferation of material culture, meaning that wearable fabrics are consistently invested with the manipulation of visual and tactile stimuli. Nonetheless, many elements of culturally-specific meaning and taste remain opaque to cross-cultural appreciation unless contextually elucidated. Yet others – notably those functioning around our olfactory and auditory sensations, and those dependent upon our mobility and physical interactions with material culture – are almost entirely erased by the museum environment and the passage of time.

## Notes

1. This question presented itself in 2017, during my organization of *Sensing Art and Artifacts* exercises (Classen and Howes 2006) for members of the research network *Evaluating Methods of Aesthetic Enquiry across Disciplines*. Using the ethnographic collections of the *Hunterian Museum* (University of Glasgow) and the *Pitt Rivers Museum* (University of Oxford), we sought to create a rich and memorable sensory experience of world art objects for our participants. In achieving this, the facilitation of Malcolm Chapman and Lizzie O'Neill at the *Hunterian Museum*, and of Nicholas Crowe at the *Pitt Rivers Museum*, were indispensable and gratefully appreciated.
2. By which term I include the culturally and historically specific materialities described by Meskell (2005), as well as the typological materialities described by Mills (2018: 133-5).
3. After the fashion of Giddens' (1986) distinction between practical and discursive consciousness.

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## Notes on contributor

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