

FIJIAN ART



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Introductory notes for a presentation to the Oceanic Art Society, Sydney, on March 17, 1999

Fiji is geographically and culturally at the junction of the areas long referred to as Melanesia and Polynesia and there are cultural continuities with each. In the area of sea-craft design, there are even some with Micronesia. Archaeology and linguistics have established that Fiji was settled by Austronesian-speaking migrants from the northwest over 3,000 years Before Present, some of whom after a time journeyed east and evolved into the cultures we think of as Polynesian. There were perhaps two or more further waves of settlement. The emergence of fortified sites about 800 BP (Before Present) indicates the incursion of a warlike people with different origins. Fijians' weapons of war and physical appearance at the time of first Western contact at the turn of the 18th/19th Centuries may indicate the legacy of these people, but their language and most other cultural elements hold true to their Austronesian stock and therefore maintain most affinities with Polynesia.

The art of Fiji has been overshadowed in the eyes of Melanesian collectors in particular by the dramatic art of island New Guinea and its neighbours, and of Polynesian collectors by the rich art of the Eastern Polynesians and in particular their Hawai'ian and Maori descendants. Part of the reason is perhaps the Western obsession with 'primitive' figurative sculpture, in which art in particular Fiji produced relatively little, particularly compared with either the New Guinea region or New Zealand. There was contemporary acknowledgement of the practical male arts. The great planked, double-hulled ships of Fiji (to call them canoes is ridiculous — the largest of them was longer than Cook's *Endeavour* and had a huge deck area capable of carrying 200 armed warriors) were for probably at least two centuries the fastest voyaging ships in the world, capable of averaging speeds of over ten knots over long distances—far faster than Western exploring vessels of the same era. These were hardly collectables — though one enthusiastic collector did commission a small one from the traditional canoe-builders of Vulaga Island, called the "Ratu Finau," and today on display in the Fiji Museum. The exceptional craftsmanship, as well as the lethal efficiency, of Fijian weapons was unsurpassed in the Pacific — facts not lost on the male Westerners constructing macho identities for themselves through their collections.

But the richness of many of their other arts has been understated in most surveys of Pacific art. In particular the female arts have been underrated. The extraordinary diversity of form and sophistication of Fijian ceramics, and the complexity and originality of Fijian bark-cloth (widely though incorrectly called *tapa*) were both arguably second to none. and equalled only by those of New Guinea and Hawai'i respectively.

Fijian art was, and is, almost always practical rather than purely aesthetic, but differing levels of meaning were assigned to different objects, over and above their practical function. The early missionary surgeon Lyth remarked perceptively that “they certainly carry their religion into everything.” There was, and is, a symmetry to all relationships in Fijian society and to all cultural devices also. Their cosmology conceived of the temporal and spiritual worlds as coextensive realities. The hierarchy of gods and spirits passed down through chiefs (gods on earth, and spirit gods in death) to the lowliest commoner. That reality has not been replaced by Christianity, so much as supplemented by it, though some of its practices have been displaced — full manhood was achieved through bloodshed, which honoured the gods. That manhood was publicly ratified, however, as was chieftainship, by the donning of the bark-cloth women made. Thus while men dominated the political and economic world, formalisation of their status was dependent on female mediation.

Art has thus never been a “thing apart” for Fijians, as it is in the West today. It has always been a participating social actor, a marker of a group's identity much as a Scottish clan tartan is, but also essential to the rituals which rehearse the social structures and forge social bonds. The only figurative sculptures were regarded not as *depictions* of spirits, but as spirits. The whale's tooth *tabua* which is the most powerful talisman in Fijian society is the embodiment of the female element — and in some respects, a surrogate woman. Just as women were exchanged between groups, so were *tabua*. Barkcloth does not tell a story about the group's identity, it carries it in itself, along with their cosmology, their beliefs and customs. So when a chief is installed, it is said he is given the *masi*, and in fact he may be referred to from then on as *Masi*.

In looking at, and thinking about, Fijian art, therefore, it is important to look at it in its own terms, and not to attempt to “re-aestheticise” it in terms of some imagined “world art” in the manner that the music of many cultures has been blended (blended?) into “world music”. To do so would be yet another act of colonialism, not of the physical or economic resources of the people, but of their identity.

All of the photographs of Fijian art shown during this address were taken by the author in the storerooms of museums in Fiji, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, USA, England, Scotland and Ireland, Switzerland, Holland and Germany.

Further reading:

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