



2.2 Introduction to Pacific Collections: Material Culture of Fiji



The following summary provides an overview of material you are likely to come across in Scottish collections. These are written according to island region.

Fiji

Fiji is an archipelago located in western Polynesia consisting of over 300 islands, 110 of which are inhabited, and around 500 islets. The majority of the population live on the large islands of Viti Levu and Vanua Levu. Lapita pottery found in Fiji has shown that the country was first populated around 3,000 years ago.

By the 18th century a large number of chiefdoms were established on the islands, often competing for dominance. European contact was limited; Captain Cook had called at the island of Vatoa in 1774 and Bligh sailed through Fiji twice, once after the Mutiny on HMS *Bounty* in 1789 and again in 1792. Dangerous reef systems and the warlike reputation of Fijians kept Europeans away until the early 19th century, when traders were attracted to local sandalwood and *bêche-de-mer* (sea cucumbers), which could be sold profitably in China. These traders brought items such as iron, cloth, muskets, gunpowder and sperm whale teeth, the last obtained from whalers and highly valued by Fijians. Missionaries followed, then settlers, and in 1874 Fiji was proclaimed a British colony. The first Governor was Sir Arthur Hamilton Gordon, son of the 4th Earl of Aberdeen. He brought his cousin Arthur J. L. Gordon as private secretary and William MacGregor as chief medical officer, both from Aberdeenshire. Sir Arthur introduced a system of indirect rule, permitting Fijian chiefs to retain some authority, and announced that 'any useful native customs shall be retained, but improper customs shall be given up', encouraging traditions such as the drinking of kava (*yaqona*) and the exchange of ceremonial whale teeth (*tabua*).

Fiji gained independence from Britain in 1970. Since 1987 there have been several military coups. Free elections took place in September 2014 and Fiji was readmitted to the Commonwealth.

Until the 20th century there was a well-developed network of exchange relationships between Fiji and other island groups in the area, particularly Samoa and Tonga. The active exchange networks of materials, objects and ideas led to stylistic similarities in material culture that can be confusing if one is unfamiliar with the artefacts. There are, however, some examples of key object types and styles that distinguish artefacts as being from Fiji.

Clubs

Warfare in Fiji ceased soon after Cession in 1874. Clubs made of wood were collected avidly and are very common in museum collections. Clubs were commonly made of *Casuarina* (ironwood) and other tropical hardwoods and are often found with incised surface carving in lines and zigzags. This is also seen on Tongan clubs. Some examples, associated with chiefs, are inlaid with segments of sperm whale ivory or white trade beads. Whale ivory was often cut into crescent, star and disc shapes. It is also possible to find human teeth embedded into a club, although this is relatively uncommon. Look out for the following styles:



Three *kiakavo* clubs, handles bound with coconut fibre and the central club with red fabric, Fiji, 19th century, *Perth Museum & Art Gallery* (1978.22; 1977.2434; 1977.2435)



Two *totokia* clubs, one with handle bound with coconut fibre, Fiji, 19th century, *Perth Museum & Art Gallery* (1978.2448; 1978.31)

Two *vunikau* clubs, one with handle bound with leaves, Fiji, 19th century, *Perth Museum & Art Gallery* (1977.2433; 1977.2450)



Kinikini club (of atypical shape), Fiji, 19th century, *Perth Museum & Art Gallery* (1977.2442)



Detail of style of carving often found on Fijian clubs, 19th century, *Perth Museum & Art Gallery* (1978.7)

Short clubs (*iula*) were used for throwing and have a slender handle leading to a bulbous end that is either spherical or carved in a lobed shape.



Short throwing club with lobed head (left) and detail of throwing club with bulbous head (right), Fiji, 19th century, *Perth Museum & Art Gallery* (1977.2417; 1977.2432)

Whale ivory

When European traders arrived in Fiji at the beginning of the 19th century they found that whale ivory was highly prized. *Tabua* (pronounced tambua) are sperm whale teeth that have been smoothed, smoked and rubbed with coconut oil to give them a rich reddish-brown patina. The teeth are pierced at the tip and base. Through these holes coconut fibre cordage was usually attached, braided to form a thick cord almost square in cross-section. In some examples this cord is lost. *Tabua* are valuables that were, and continue to be, presented with speeches on important occasions such as weddings and funerals. They were not worn as neck ornaments.



Ceremonial whale tooth (*tabua*), Fiji, 19th century, *National Museums Scotland (A.1896.58)*

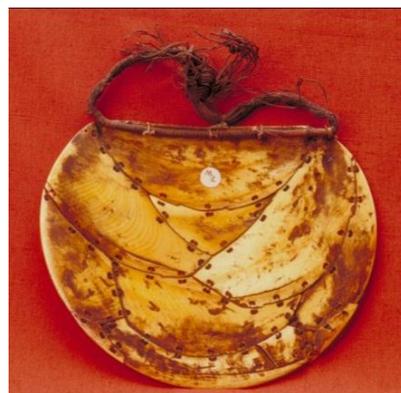


Tabua without cordage, Fiji, 19th century, *University of Aberdeen Museums (ABDUA: 4582)*

Using European metal saws, sperm whale teeth were cut lengthwise into slices that were used to make disc-shaped breast ornaments, worn by chiefs and used as great exchange valuables. These can be composed of several pieces pegged or sewn together with coconut fibre, the lashing hidden on the back. Other examples are made of a combination of whale ivory and pearls shell. The craftsmen who made these breastplates were specialist canoe-builders of Samoan and Tongan descent, living in Fiji and working for Fijian chiefs. By the middle of the 19th century iron and lead rivets were being used on composite breastplates, replacing the fine lashing. Soon afterwards they ceased being made as chiefs adopted European clothing, and later in the 19th century many were given or sold to Europeans such as Sir Arthur Gordon and William MacGregor.



Breast ornament of whale ivory and pearl shell attached with iron nails, Fiji, 19th century, *National Museums Scotland (A.1924.771)*



Reverse of breast ornament showing sections of whale ivory bound together using canoe building technique, Fiji, early 19th century, *University of Aberdeen Museums (ABDUA:63728)*

Another use of sperm whale teeth in the 19th century was in collars (*wasekaseka* or *waseisei*) composed of a series of split and polished teeth strung together, usually on coconut fibre cordage. Similar collars were later made and worn in Samoa. Polished whole teeth from young sperm whales were also used for collars (*sisi*), which sometimes have European cloth or bark cloth binding. Occasionally one or more larger teeth on a *sisi* will have a hole pierced in the tip indicating that they were likely previously used as a *tabua*.



Waseisei neck ornament of split whale teeth, Fiji, 19th century, *Perth Museum & Art Gallery (1978.44)*



Sisi neck ornament (back view), Fiji, 19th century, *National Museums Scotland (A.1906.392)*



Detail of coconut fibre binding of *waseisei*, Fiji, 19th century, *Perth Museum & Art Gallery (1978.44)*

Barkcloth (*masi*)

Fijian barkcloth is characterised by bold designs in black or ochre colour. These are usually applied with rollers and stencils. Historically, women used leaves to make stencils but today it is more common for people to use paper and sometimes x-ray film. Common *masi* designs include triangles, chevrons, a four pronged windmill-like motif and floral shapes with multiple petals.

Barkcloth (*masi*), Fiji, late 19th century, *National Museums Scotland (A.1898.469)*





Barkcloth (*masi*), Fiji, early 20th century, *Perth Museum & Art Gallery (1977.1789)*

One style of bark cloth is known in Fiji as *gatu vakatoga*, or ‘Tongan-style large bark cloth’. These can be 4m wide and over 60m long and are still used on important ceremonial occasions as special pathways and gifts. These have a rich ochre ground running down the centre produced by rubbing dye over pattern boards with a variety of designs. The patterns are then highlighted by over-painting the lines and applying a series of infilled circles. The borders of the cloth are left plain with some diagonal brown or black lines and, since the early 20th century, numbers marking the length of the cloth.



Detail of large piece of *gatu vakatoga*, Fiji, early 20th century, *University of Aberdeen Museums*

Kava bowls (*Tanoa*)

Kava (*yaqona*, pronounced yanggona) is a drink made from the root of the species of pepper plant (scientific name *Piper methysticum*). Kava is not alcoholic but has sedative properties and is claimed to ease anxiety. It is consumed in several South Pacific countries both socially and ceremonially. In Fiji, kava is traditionally prepared in large wooden bowls (*tanoa*). These are commonly round or elliptical in shape. The former tend to have four legs and a perforated lug on the underside for a hanging cord. Serving cups are made from half coconut shells. This method of drinking kava is still commonly in Fiji today. In order to tell whether a bowl has been

used, look for residue inside and signs of wear on the wood. This type of Fijian kava bowl, like the breastplates, was made by Samoan and Tongan carpenters resident in eastern Fiji.



Kava bowl (*tanoa*), Fiji, 19th century, *National Museums Scotland* (A.1892.74)

Further reading:

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Ewins, R (1982), *Fijian Artefacts: The Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery Collection*, Tasmania: Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery

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Roth, J & S. Hooper (eds) (1990), *The Fiji journals of Baron Anatole Von Hügel: 1875-1877*. Cambridge: Fiji Museum in association with Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology

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