



2.7 Introduction to Pacific Collections: Material Culture of the Solomon Islands



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

Solomon Islands

The sovereign state of the Solomon Islands comprises six large islands, a further forty smaller islands and many atolls and islets. The capital, Honiara, is located on Guadalcanal Island, the other five large islands being Choiseul, Santa Isabel, New Georgia, Malaita, and San Cristobel. The Santa Cruz Islands are geographically closer to Vanuatu but form part of the Solomon Islands. Tikopia is the best known of the Santa Cruz Islands. The two atolls of Rennell and Bellona, although politically part of the Solomon Islands, are culturally associated with the Eastern Pacific (Polynesia). Bougainville and Buka Islands form the northern part of the Solomon Archipelago but are in Papua New Guinea.

Population of the Solomon Islands began around 20-25,000 years ago and further waves of settlement occurred around 4000 BC and between 1200 and 800 BC. The first European contact was with Spanish navigator, Alvaro de Mendaña de Neira. During the nineteenth century, contact with Europeans increased significantly due to labour recruiting and the establishment of the Melanesian mission in 1848. The Southern Solomons became a British protectorate in 1893. Independence was achieved in 1978.

Europeans visiting the Solomon Islands were fascinated by head-hunting and warfare and many of the artefacts in museums and the early literature about the region represent this European obsession. There is a large number of 19th century wooden fighting clubs as well as bows and arrows. The rich material culture from across the islands is diverse and there are particularly fine examples of body adornment and sculpture.

Shell ornaments

Shell plaques with filigree of turtle shell or coconut shell are associated with areas in the Solomon Islands and beyond. They are commonly called *kapkap*, which is a Melanesian pidgin word for body ornament, but local names differ. The shape of the turtle shell ornament can reveal where the kapkap was made. For example, those from Santa Cruz (called *tema*) often incorporate a distinctive frigate bird shape.



Breast ornament (*tema*) of shell with turtle shell overlay in shape of a frigate bird, Santa Cruz Islands, *National Museums Scotland* (A.1922.664)

Trade of designs among the Solomon Islands can however make identification challenging. Similar ornaments can also be found from New Ireland, the Admiralty Islands, New Britain and the Gulf of Papua New Guinea. Familiarity with styles will enable identification and the most effective way to achieve this is through looking at examples on other online museum databases and in exhibitions.

Other shell plaques which were worn throughout the islands of Malaita and Makira are incised with blackened designs with a hole pierced at the top. They are made using tridacna shell and worn on the head or as breast ornaments. The designs associated with Malaita incorporate frigate birds or a star. These had all but ceased to be produced by the 1970s but have undergone a revival in recent years. On Makira a frigate bird design was also found or a depiction of fish with human bodies.



Shell plaque with frigate bird design, Solomon Islands, 19th century, *University of Aberdeen Museums (ABDUA: 3250)*

Pearl shell inlay

One of the most distinctive artistic styles found in the Western Solomons is the use of pearl shell inlay. This technique is used in combs, bowls, shields, ceremonial batons (*wari hau*), canoe prow figures, standing figures and body ornaments. The shell is cut into small pieces, often with dentate edges, and these are inlaid into artefacts using putty made of plant material.



Food vessel (*kumete*) with pearl shell inlay, Solomon Islands, *National Museums Scotland (A.1896.403)*



Canoe prow figure head (*totoishu*) with pearl shell inlay, Solomon Islands, 19th century, *National Museum Scotland, (A.1954.129)*

Body adornments

Body adornments worn on important social occasions from the Solomon Islands are highly decorative. They take the form of face ornaments for the nose and ears as well as those worn on the body. Combs were worn in the south east Solomon Islands by men. A particular style of comb from Malaita (*fa'a*) was made using yellow stems of an orchid and part of a coconut palm dyed with red pigment.



Combs (*fa'a*) made using vibrant red and yellow plant fibres, Malaita, Solomon Islands, *National Museums Scotland*, (A.1898.300)

Weaving from Santa Cruz

The Santa Cruz Islands are one of the few places in the Pacific which use a back strap loom for making fabrics. Looms are also used across Micronesia. Banana fibre is woven to make textiles which are often formed into bags. These bags incorporate a design made with dark brown or black banana fibres and they sometimes have attachments of leaves. Bags were worn by men and used to carry equipment for the process of chewing betel, a plant that acts as a mild stimulant.

Woven bag of banana fibre, Santa Cruz Islands, *Stirling Smith Art Gallery & Museum* (17241)



Further reading

Burt, B (2009), *Body ornaments of Malaita, Solomon Islands*. London: British Museum Press

Davenport, WH (2005), *Santa Cruz Island figure sculpture and its social and ritual contexts*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology

Guppy, HB (1887), *The Solomon Islands and their natives*. London: S. Sonnenschein, Lowrey & co.

Ivens, WG (1927), *Melanesians of the south-east Solomon Islands*. London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner & co.

Waite, D (1983), *Art of the Solomon Islands: from the collection of the Barbier-Muller Museum*. Geneva: Barbier-Muller Museum

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Waite, D (2008), *Solomon Islands art: the Conru collection*. Milan: 5 Continents