



## 2.1 Introduction to Pacific Collections: Material Culture of the Austral 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.

### **Austral Islands**

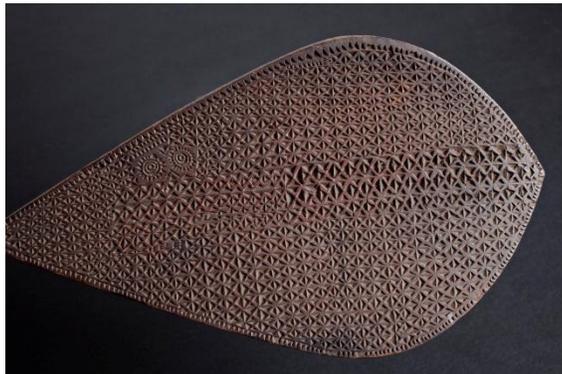
The Austral Islands are located in the eastern Pacific Ocean. There are five main inhabited islands: Rimatara, Rurutu, Tubua'i (also known as Tupuai), Ra'ivavae and Rapa Iti. The islands were inhabited around 1,200 years ago via the Society Islands and there was a longstanding historical relationship between these two island groups.

Captain Cook passed Rurutu on his first voyage in 1769 and Tubua'i in 1777, but on neither occasion did the ship land. Ra'ivavae was first visited in 1775 by Spaniards Ganyangos and Andia y Varea. The mutineers from HMS *Bounty* attempted to settle on Tubua'i in 1789 where they remained for two months before moving on. From around 1800, the Austral Islands became a destination for traders and whalers as well as missionaries sent by Pomare II of Tahiti who had already converted to Christianity. The islands were annexed by France in the 1880s and today are administratively part of French Polynesia.

The Austral Islands have a rich tradition of wood carving. Rurutu, Tubua'i and Ra'ivavae provided a source of hardwood and became home to master carvers who by the 1700s were also making items for the Society Islands.

### **Ceremonial Paddles and Scoops**

The artefact most likely to be found in Scottish museum collections from the Austral Islands are intricately carved wooden ceremonial paddles. These have a wide petal shaped blade and a handle with a long narrow shaft. The handle will either be circular in cross-section with a round butt, or square in cross-section with a cuboid end. The end of the handle is carved with multiple anthropomorphic figures. The surface decoration incorporates variations of crosses, scallop patterns, chevrons, and motifs of suns and stars.



Carved paddle, Austral Islands,  
Perth Museum & Art Gallery  
(1978.6)

Ceremonial scoops which are carved with the same style of surface decoration as the paddles with a bowl instead of a paddle blade are sometimes seen in collections.

### Drums

Wooden drums from the Austral Islands are rare compared with ceremonial paddles. They take the form of tall, narrow hollow cylinders that stand vertically with a slightly flared base. The tympanum is usually of sharkskin and attached and tightened around cleats circling the middle of the drum with plant fibre cordage (probably coconut). The cleats and lower portion of drums are carved in a similar manner to the paddles, often with dancing figures. Both National Museum Scotland and the Hunterian Museum at University of Glasgow have examples of these instruments.

Drum, Austral Islands, *National Museums Scotland (A.L.357.12)*



### Feathers

Makers on the Austral Islands are known to have produced fine featherwork and there are some examples in Scottish collections including a headdress worn by chief Tamatoa of Tubua'i in Perth Museum and Art Gallery which consists of feathers mounted on a cap wrapped in barkcloth. The status associated with feather artefacts combined with the risk of pest damage means that this type of material is rare in museum collections.



Feather headdress on cap of barkcloth, Tubua'i, Austral Islands, *Perth Museum & Art Gallery (1977.1418)*

### Stylistic Connections

Stylistic similarities exist between material from certain parts of the Cook and Austral Islands. When combined with the exchange network between the Austral and Society Islands, some artefacts become difficult to provenance. For example, a fly whisk handle of whale ivory at University of Aberdeen Museums (ABDUA:4024) and a complete wooden fly whisk at National Museums Scotland (A.UC.403) are both recorded as collected in the Society Islands before the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century but are of the style associated with artists from the Austral Islands. It is not uncommon either to find ceremonial paddles like those described above attributed to the Hervey Islands, which is a historical name for the Cook Islands.



Fly whisk handle of carved whale ivory collected in Society Islands but of Austral Islands style, probably 18<sup>th</sup> century, *University of Aberdeen Museums (ABDUA: 4025)*



Top of a fly whisk, collected in Society Islands but of Austral Islands style, probably 18<sup>th</sup> century, *National Museums Scotland (A.UC.403)*

### Further reading:

Aitken, RT (1930), *Ethnology of Tubuai*, Bulletin 70. Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press

Brunor, MA (1969), *Arts and Crafts of the Austral Islands: a special exhibition*. Peabody Museum Press

Ellis, W (1831), *Polynesian Researches during a residency of nearly eight years in the Society and Sandwich Islands* (2 volumes). London: Fisher & Jackson [Available online <https://archive.org/>]

Richards, R (2012), *The Austral Islands: History, Art and Art History*. New Zealand: Paremata Press

Produced as part of *Pacific Collections in Scottish Museums: Unlocking their knowledge and potential* project 2013-2014. For full information and resources visit [www.nms.ac.uk/pacific](http://www.nms.ac.uk/pacific)