



2.9 Introduction to Pacific Collections: Material Culture of the Marquesas Islands



The following material culture styles have particularly distinctive elements but broad collections are not commonly found in Scottish museums.

Marquesas Islands

Located in the eastern Pacific, the Marquesas Islands form part of French Polynesia. Fourteen of the fifteen islands in the group have volcanic origins and the terrain is generally mountainous and rugged. The largest island is Nuku Hiva, with the other inhabited islands being: Ua Huka, Ua Pou, Fatu Hiva, Hiva Oa, and Tahuata. Recent research dates the earliest settlement of the Marquesas Islands at around 1,200 years ago. Settlers came from western Polynesia and continued to travel south-east, colonising the Eastern Tuamotus, the Gambier Islands, Pitcairn and Rapa Nui. As in other parts of Polynesia, Marquesan social structure was characterised by a ruling hereditary lineage of chiefs.

Spanish explorer Alvaro de Mendaña de Neira was the first European to visit the islands in 1595. He named the groups Las Marquesas de Mendoza after his patron, the Viceroy of Peru, Garcia Hurtado de Mendoza. It was almost 200 years later that Captain Cook's *Resolution* landed there in 1774. Both Mendaña and Cook only visited the south islands of the group.

In the early 19th century the Marquesas Islands became significant for the provisioning of whaling ships. They also became a destination for sandalwood traders although the trees were depleted by the 1820s. The Marquesas Islands suffered a massive decline in population after European contact. At the end of the 18th century there were over 80,000 people, but by the 1920s only 1,500 remained. Admiral Du Petit-Thouars proposed the Marquesas to the French government as a strategic territory around 1840. He was instructed to annex the Marquesas as a French territory in 1842, using violent methods if necessary. The French met resistance for many years but ultimately the Marquesas Islands remain part of French Polynesia today.

The artistic style used in Marquesan sculpture and body adornment was extremely popular with Europeans. In the 19th century the islands inspired American writer Herman Melville and artists such as Paul Gauguin who died on Nuku Hiva in 1901. The market for Marquesan artefacts was such that by the late 19th century a high proportion of items were made for trade.

Figurative motif

A distinctive stylised figure is used across Marquesan art. The figure is squat and is characterised by large eyes and a wide mouth, usually with both hands clasped in front of the stomach, sometimes with one hand up to the mouth.



Bone toggle (*tiki ivi po'o*) [front and reverse], National Museums Scotland (A.1947.59)

This figure is exemplified on bone toggles (*tiki ivi po'o*) which are used to decorate other artefacts. A similar figure appears on stilt steps (used for recreational purposes), canoe prow ornaments and on the handles of fans. A more 2-D version of the figure and associated surface motifs can be found as decoration on the exterior of artefacts such as bowls. These motifs echo Marquesan body tattoo designs which are described in late 18th and early 19th century accounts of visits to the islands by Europeans.

The 'u'u club is a distinctive Marquesan weapon. Made of *toa* wood, it has a wide head carved in relief resembling a face. The three protrusions suggested by the design to be the eyes and nose of the head of the club are carved with smaller faces.

Several Marquesas Islands artefacts incorporate the use of black feathers or dark human hair. Locks of hair were wrapped around a stick and then smoked in order to make it curl. It can be seen in arm and ankle ornaments which were worn in dance and ceremonial occasions, and on the top of a type of staff (*tokotoko pio'o*) associated with men and women of status.



Detail of head of an 'u'u club, Marquesas Islands, late 18th century, National Museums Scotland (A.UC.357)



Staff (*tokotoko pio'o*) topped with human hair and coconut fibre decorative binding featuring lizard motif, Marquesas Islands, late 18th/early 19th century, Perth Museum & Art Gallery (1977.2425)

Further reading:

Ivory, C (1994), 'Marquesan 'u'u: A stylistic and historical review', *Pacific Arts*, no. 9-10(July) pp.53-63

Kjellgren, E (2005), *Adorning the world: art of the Marquesas Islands*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art

Linton, R (1923), *Material Culture of the Marquesas Islands*. Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press

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