



Tapa cloth

Not on display

Title/Description: Tapa cloth

Object Type: Textile

Materials: Bark

Measurements: h. 1410 x w. 1520 x d. 2 mm

Accession Number: 896

Historic Period: Early/mid 19th century

Production Place: Pacific, Western Polynesia

In tropical Polynesia the loom was not used and the principal material for clothing and bedding was bark cloth, generally known by the Tahitian term, *tapa*. This was, and in many parts of Western Polynesia still is, made by women from strips of the inner bark of the paper mulberry (*Broussonetia papyrifera*), which were soaked, beaten with wood mallets and then felted or gummed together to form large sheets of varying texture.

Decorated *tapa* was used as special 'seats', 'beds', clothing, wrappings and shrouds for ceremonies connected with birth, marriage and death and for other important rituals. The designs were applied by a variety of methods and are often distinctive and attributable to particular island groups (see Kooijman, 1972). However, the precise origin of this fragile and fine-textured example is not easy to identify, though the star designs, foliate border and reddish chevron background (produced by rubbing on a design tablet) point to a Western Polynesian origin, possibly Futuna, Uvea, Samoa or Niue (cf. Brigham, 1911 : pl. 17). This cloth has suffered some damp staining and a previous owner has restored damaged areas with bark cloth patches, coloured appropriately.

Steven Hooper, 1997

Entry taken from *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, Vol. 2: Pacific, African and Native North American Art*, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997) p. 38.
