

Fijian Art

[Chapter 2 in the forthcoming book *Fijian Artefacts in Tasmania*, 2014]

Fiji is geographically and culturally at the junction of the areas long referred to as Melanesia and Polynesia,¹ and in sea-craft design there were even commonalities in rigging from Micronesia. Fiji had, and has, cultural continuities with each, but most particularly with Tonga and Samoa, with which groups it continues also to have kinship links. The three Groups formed a trading triangle for centuries. As Hau'ofa summarized it: 'Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, Niue, Rotuma, Tokelau, Tuvalu, Futuna and Uvea formed a large exchange community in which wealth and people with their skills and arts circulated endlessly. From this community people ventured to the north and into Kiribati, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and New Caledonia, which formed an outer arc of less intensive exchange.'²

Archaeology and linguistics have established that Fiji was settled by Austronesian-speaking migrants from the northwest over 3,000 years BP (Before Present). They left behind them burial sites,³ and some beautifully-formed pottery.⁴ Some of the earliest art in Fiji may well have been left by one those early groups, in the form of cliff-paintings on the west coast of Vatulele Island.⁵ There are equally enigmatic rock-engravings in many places throughout the Group that testify to the artistic urge in prehistoric settlers.⁶ Some of them after a relatively short sojourn in Fiji journeyed east and evolved into the cultures we think of as Polynesian. There were perhaps two or more further waves of settlement. The emergence in Fiji of fortified sites about 800 BP indicates the incursion of warlike people with different origins. Fijians' appearance as well as their weapons of war at the time of first Western contact at the turn of the 18th/19th Centuries provide physical evidence of the legacy of these people, and their languages and other cultural elements show a melding of influences, but retaining particularly strong affinities with Polynesia.

The art of Fiji has been overshadowed, particularly in the eyes of Western collectors, by the dramatic (male) figurative art of island New Guinea and its neighbours, and of the Eastern Polynesians and their Hawai'ian and Maori descendants. Perhaps part of the reason is the Western obsession with "primitive" or "tribal" sculpture, of which Fiji produced relatively little. Certainly figurative sculptures were produced in Fiji, which were virtually without exception regarded not as *depictions* of spirits to be worshipped, but as their *vessels* (*waqawaqa*)—in the view of believers, they were those spirits, and like a number of other objects (certain stones, trees, shells etc.), were believed to have godly occupants, to be treated with reverence and fear.

However, Westerners *did* acknowledge the excellence of the *practical* male arts from earliest encounter, particularly in the construction of houses and temples, of weaponry, and of the great planked, double-hulled ships or *drua*.⁷ Of these only the weapons were readily collectable—though one enthusiastic collector did commission the construction of a relatively small *drua* early in the 20th Century, and today it forms the centrepiece of the foyer of the Fiji Museum.⁸

The exceptional craftsmanship, as well as the lethal efficiency, of Fijian weapons was unsurpassed in the Pacific—facts not lost on the Westerner males attempting to construct vicarious macho identities for themselves through their collections. But the richness of many other Fijian arts has been underrated in most surveys of Pacific art, in particular the female arts. Women's beautiful and serviceable pandanus mats and baskets, their extraordinarily diverse

¹ See Map 2.

² Hau'ofa (2008: 33). For more discussion see Kaeppler (1978) and Mageo (2002).

³ See Best (1981)

⁴ The literature concerning these immigrants and their ceramic assemblage is large. For the simplest overview (written for schoolchildren), see Sorovi-Vunidilo (2010), and for greater depth start with Birks & Birks (1977), Burley & Dickenson (2004), and Marshall (2008).

⁵ See Ewins (1995) <http://www.justpacific.com/fiji/fijianart/cliffart/cliffpaintings.pdf>

⁶ For example, see Palmer & Clunie (1970), Land (1919), Phillips (1951), Hill (1956), and Parry & Watling (1988)

⁷ To call them canoes is ridiculous—the largest of them were longer than Cook's *Endeavour*, and with a deck area capable of carrying over two hundred fully-armed warriors into battle. It has been suggested that these ships were wholly a Tongan/Samoan invention, a point I will debate in a later section of this book.

⁸ *Ratu Finau, Tui Nayau* is 13.4m long, and was built for J.B. Turner in Vulaga, in 1913-14. Illustrated in Clunie (1986: 16, Fig.21).

and formally sophisticated ceramics, and the complexity and originality of their *masi* barkcloth (widely though misguidedly called *tapa*) all combined aesthetics and function at a level second to none in the Pacific, and they continue to do so.

Fijian art has almost always been functional. Only in their jewellery and body ornamentation could aesthetics be seen to be the primary function. But the pursuit of beauty was certainly very important in the production of the full range of productions, and as well, differing levels of meaning were assigned to different objects, over and above their practical function. Here aesthetics and semiotics, or beauty and meaning, met, with each informing the other.⁹

An example is the importance of balance and symmetry in Fijian objects and their ornamentation, which even the most casual observer must notice. Their cosmology conceived of the temporal and spiritual worlds as balanced but coextensive realities, so symmetrical balance defines their social and aesthetic worlds as well. Much attention was given to carefully maintaining that balance. There is an often-quoted remark made to the anthropologist Hocart by an elder that “all things go in pairs, or the sharks will bite,”¹⁰ in which one can read the sharks biting as a metaphor for the cosmic disruptions that would ensue were this balance disturbed. The hierarchy of gods and spirits passed down through chiefs (vehicles of the gods on earth, and actual gods in death) to the lowliest commoner, but responsibility was in both directions. That reality has not so much been replaced by Christianity, as supplemented by it, though of course some of its practices have been displaced—full manhood was achieved through bloodshed, which honoured the gods, so warfare did not merely enlist their gods’ support, it was waged on their behalf. For example, manhood was achieved first through the rite of passage of circumcision, then by what Lawry called the “manly art of warfare,” at each stage publicly ratified (as was chieftainship, for those eligible), by the donning of the barkcloth women made and controlled. Barkcloth does not merely tell a story about the group’s identity, it carries it in itself, along with their cosmology, their beliefs and customs. Thus while men dominated the political and economic world, formalisation of their status was dependent on this physical expression of female mediation.

For Fijians, therefore, art has never been arcane or remote from most of the community, as it has become in Western society today. It has always produced and used as a participating social actor, a marker of a group’s identity but also essential to the rituals which mark life stages, rehearse social structures and hierarchies, and forge social bonds.¹¹

I would like to comment on one other issue that in my view, often distracts the study of Fijian art and that of its neighbours from a productive study of its form and social function. This lies in the attempt to determine, on sometimes ambiguous historical, or often questionable prehistoric, evidence, putative origins of objects and practices—employing a purely diffusionist view of culture. While the study of commonalities and patterns is the time-honoured practice of anthropology, insisting on diffusion rather than original creativity as the source of these is limiting.¹²

It is, therefore, important to look at and think about Fijian art on its own terms, and not to attempt to deform it to fit the artistic canons of its neighbours, much less those of some imagined “world art” in the manner that the music of many cultures has been blended (blended?) into “world music”. It is not merely laziness, but impertinence, since it discounts the autonomous creativity, artistic traditions and social imperatives of the indigenous makers and users.¹³

⁹ See Ewins (2004).

¹⁰ Hocart (1952: 57).

¹¹ These matters are much more fully argued in Ewins (2009) than is possible in this small book.

¹² Williamson ((1939) 1975)

¹³ McEvelly (1992: 67) pointed out that it is totally valid for a “community of similarly conditioned people” to determine their own standards of quality. This is at odds with the “high modernist” credo enunciated some 80 years ago by Gladys Reichard (1933), and still depressingly common today. As Haddon (1935: 165) wrote in a review of her book: ...the problem she set herself was primarily aesthetic rather than ethnological ...[and] she adopted the following criteria: 1. The objects studied must be beautiful from my own point of view. 2. Each sort should have a fairly wide distribution. 3. There should be some overlapping in the occurrence of the objects chosen within a given area. 4. The art should be as free as possible from symbolic or religious significance since that may be understood only by questioning the natives. Which, of course is exactly the reverse of my position, which is that one *should* question the “owners” about meaning, symbolic and religious significance, as well as *their* aesthetic canons, and not be smugly satisfied that things must be “beautiful from [our] point of view.”