

Basic Detail Report



Currency (Tevau)

Date

late 19th to mid 20th Century

Medium

Feather, bark, shell, fiber, resin and bead

Description

Rolls of feathered bands from the Solomon Islands are among the most beautiful and interesting of the world's

currencies. Called tevau, they are made of feathers from the scarlet Honeyeater and grey Pacific Pigeon. A single roll takes between 500 and 600 hours to produce, utilizing the feathers of over 300 birds. A complete roll is comprised of 155 overlapping platelets bound with a fiber cord. Tevau were used as payment to a bride's family as bride price, and as currency to buy pigs, canoes, taro root, and labor. All the red-feathered currency pieces from the Solomon Islands are made from a species of red-feathered honeyeater bird (*Myzomela cardinalis*). The birds are hunted by coating branches in either a nut paste or sap adhesive similar to bird-lime. A lure, baited with a living or dead decoy bird, was then placed nearby. When the birds land on the coated branches they are trapped, and men collect their bright red feathers and then release them back into the wild. These hunters sell their feathers to craftsmen who use them to make small patches of feathers, alternatively called plates, scales or lendu in Santa Cruz Island vernacular. Lendu are made from a base of grey Pacific pigeon feathers and a paste made from the fruit of the paper mulberry tree is used to glue on the red honeyeater feathers. Though both the gathering of feathers and the creation of lendu required specialized knowledge, the weaving of the tevau was certainly the most complex part of their creation. Over the course of the 20th century the number of master craftsmen capable of creating these coils dwindled from a little over twenty to none. When they were made, the coils were begun by tying two thick, parallel cords between a thin stick and usually a tree or stump. The distance between the two chords was set by using a small bone as a stretcher. The lendu were then tied to these two pieces of cord with thin string. It has been estimated that a single roll took between 500 and 600 hours to produce, using the feathers of somewhere between 300-600 birds. This number largely depended on the length of the coil—often around 30 feet when laid flat—and the density of feathers on lendu, both of which affected the value of the currency. The makers generally work from the center of the coil outwards in one direction, alternating every so often. The ends of the coil were terminated with triangular caps made from fiber and seeds, shell, bone, and hair. The value of these currency pieces was apparently more variable than early ethnographic accounts would lead one to believe. Lengthy passages explain that brides could be purchased for ten currency coils, with the quality of each twice that of the last one so that the value ratio of the first and last bands was 512:1. The reality of these exchanges was likely far more complex, though these objects certainly were used as payment for bride price as well as traded in exchange for pigs, canoes, taro root, and labor. But perhaps one of the most interesting aspects of tevau is

that it is a currency which depreciates over time. The most valuable pieces have the best maintained feathers and the reddest sheen, qualities which immediately deteriorate in the islands' tropical climate. To protect the feathered currency, they were often stored indoors high above fires so that they were kept dry and relatively pest-free.

Dimensions

6 × 15 5/8 × 16 3/4 in. (15.2 × 39.7 × 42.5 cm)