

Basic Detail Report



Tapa Cloth (Ngata)

Date

20th Century

Primary Maker

Tongan

Medium

Pounded tree bark and pigment

Description

This is a 20th century Tapa Cloth from Tonga, made of pounded tree bark and pigment. The brown designs across several panels depict either birds, animals, trees, or geometric figures. Tapa cloth, a barkcloth made from the inner bark of trees, is one of the most distinctive products made by the cultures of the Pacific Islands and remains at the heart of Pacific Islander identity. Tapa creation has continued to evolve throughout the history of the Pacific Islands and remains an important aspect of their society, religion, and culture today. This Tapa cloth was purchased in the 20th century in Nuku'alofa, the capitol of Tonga, a Polynesian kingdom of more than 170 islands. As is true for other Pacific Islander cultures, Tongan tapa--or ngatu as is it referred to by the Tongans--maintains a profound connection to the origins of the Tonga identity. The Polynesian tapa tradition likely originated from the Lapita people who explored the Pacific roughly three thousand years ago. The Tongans continue to be the most prolific tapa producers in the Pacific and the world. The Kingdom of Tonga is particularly well suited to the production of tapa cloth because their climate and soil conditions are ideal for the cultivation of paper mulberry (*Broussonetia papyrifera*), a common source of barkcloth. The functions of ngatu in Tongan culture are diverse. These monumental stretches of barkcloth are used to line processional pathways, to be carried as presentation pieces, or to be held up by people to form a type of three-dimensional sculpture site. In the course of these performative and presentational acts, the ngatu take on a sacred significance essential to the ritual's realization.

Dimensions

Overall: 78 x 152 in. (198.1 x 386.1 cm)