

Basic Detail Report



Tapa Cloth (Masi Kesa)

Date

20th Century

Medium

Bark cloth and pigment

Description

Though tapa cloth is a widely-accepted disambiguation for Oceanic barkcloths, in Fiji barkcloths are better known as

masi kesa, the Fijian words for its media: paper mulberry (masi) and vegetable or mineral pigments (kesa). The same materials are used almost exclusively throughout the Pacific to make barkcloths. Traditionally women would have been the only ones allowed to make barkcloth. A few factors make barkcloth from Fiji particularly unique. The first of which is that while many island clusters throughout Oceania stopped producing barkcloth for a time, it never stopped being made in Fiji. The process of decorating Fijian barkcloth is also different, especially compared against Tongan ngatu cloths which were the most prolifically made throughout Oceania. Rather than painting over a “stamped” pattern created by rubbing the tapa against a dye-covered design tablet (kupeti), which creates the light brown color many Oceanic barkcloths have, a stencil and black pigment is instead used. Altogether it gives Fijian masi the high contrast they are known for. There is still a great demand for the cloth in the form of an export industry. Based on the cuts around the edge of this barkcloth, it was likely made recently. Interestingly, ‘for export’ is culturally consistent with traditionally Fijian barkcloths which were often given as gifts or traded.

Dimensions

47 9/16 × 64 1/2 × 1/16 in. (120.8 × 163.8 × 0.2 cm)