One of the most arresting rooms in the exhibition features walls hung with barkcloth. These huge pieces of material made from the pulped interior of the paper mulberry tree, which was beaten flat using wooden clubs and left to dry, are covered with spectacular graphic designs. Some are painstakingly applied with tiny leaf stencils and red and black natural inks, others have texture and design rubbed on in much the same way as brass rubbing. In other places the pattern is simply painted on.

These abstract, graphic works are huge. In 1845 one missionary measured a piece of barkcloth stretching almost 170m. The longest in the exhibition — covering an entire wall — is tiny by comparison at 15m long. These cloths were used for everything from wrapping the body as part of a ceremony, leaving the wearer waddling in a vast swath of fabric, to providing a rug on which a chief could walk.

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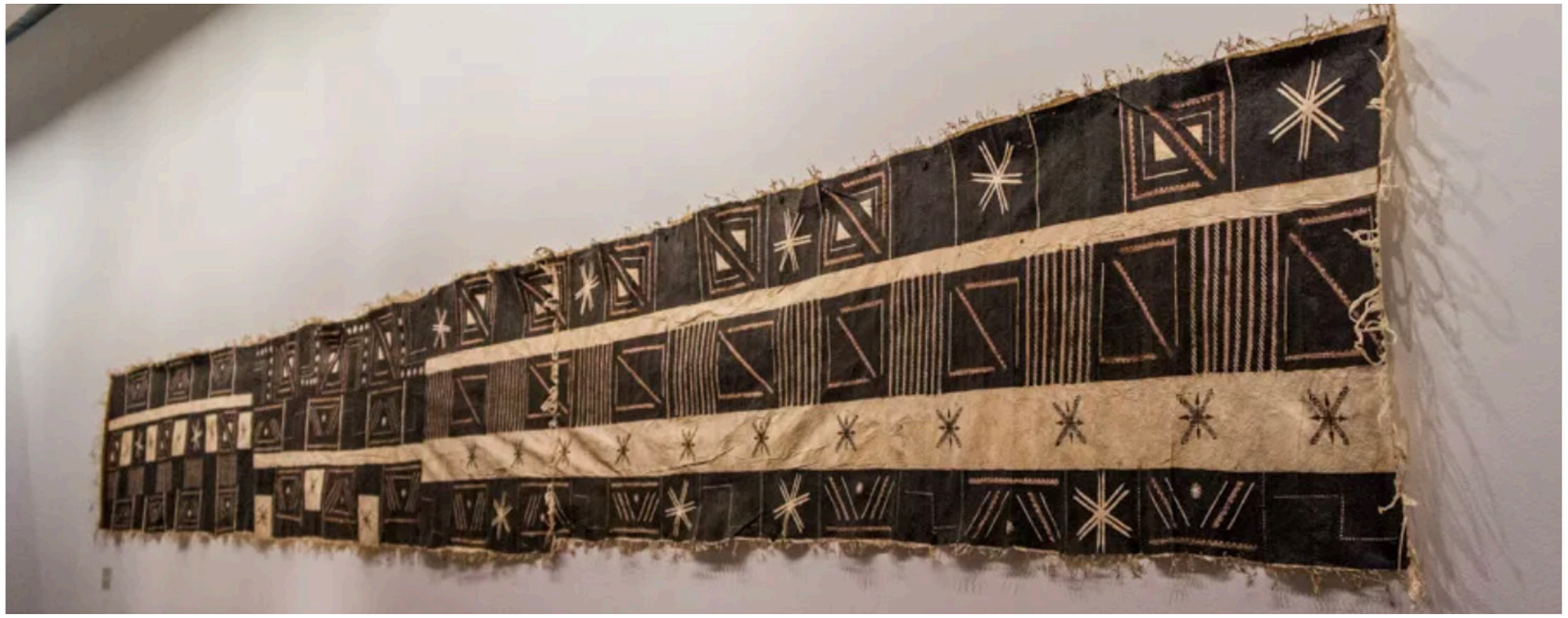

“The people who made these things really, really cared about what they were doing and had a marvellous eye for volume and form.”

“In traditional Fijian society objects were seen as embodying the power of their owners and were offered in elaborate gift-giving rituals, so they were beautifully made regardless of how mundane their purpose was.”

Painted Barkcloth (Masi kesa)
Fijian

late 19th–early 20th century
Not on view

This richly patterned textile from the Lau Islands in Fiji exhibits the complex imagery typical of many examples of Polynesian barkcloth. Often referred to using the general term tapa, barkcloth is a clothlike material derived from the inner bark of certain species of tree. Practiced exclusively by women, tapa making is one of the most important and diverse art forms in Polynesia. Both now and in the past, the display and exchange of large pieces of tapa form important components of ceremonial life in many areas of Polynesia. In earlier times, tapa was also among the primary materials used for clothing.

The creation of tapa is accomplished in several stages. Women initially remove small strips of bark from the tree, which are soaked in water and treated to make them soft and pliable. Using clublike wooden implements known as tapa beaters, they later beat the strips on a long rectangular block or “anvil” to form individual pieces of cloth. The edges of these smaller pieces are then overlapped and beaten again so that their fibers fuse, forming large sheets.

The finished tapa is decorated using techniques that vary from region to region. These include stencilling (as in the present example), printing, dyeing, and freehand painting. The repeating geometric motifs of many tapa cloths at times resemble those seen on pottery produced by the Lapita peoples, who were the ancestors of present-day Polynesians. This has led some scholars to suggest that the designs seen in some contemporary Polynesian tapa and tattoos reflect the continuity of earlier Lapita prototypes.

The Collection
The Michael C. Rockefeller Wing

https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/310412

https://www.michaelbackmanltd.com/object/fijian-barkcloth-cloth-masi/

“In traditional Fijian society objects were seen as embodying the power of their owners and were offered in elaborate gift-giving rituals, so they were beautifully made regardless of how mundane their purpose was.”

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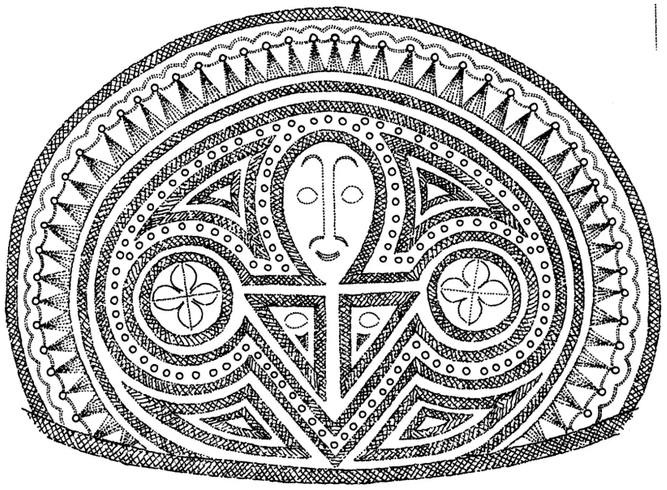
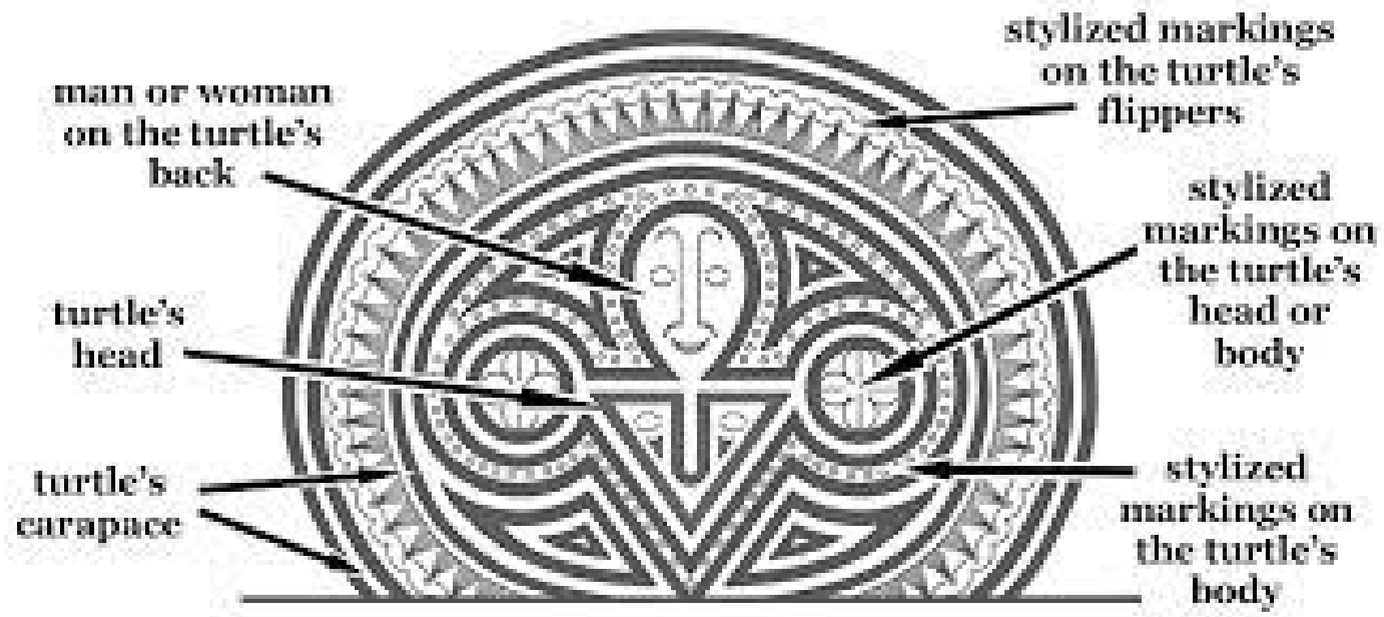
Lapita Ceramics

The meaning and importance of the Lapita face motif

ABSTRACT
The principal design motifs characteristic of Lapita ceramic iconography are conventionally described as anthropomorphic both in appearance and in symbolic intent. Based on recent systematic research by a number of archaeologists, it is now possible to offer a more nuanced interpretation of the meaning and importance of this iconography to Pacific Islanders during and after the widespread popularity of Lapita as a pottery style. We argue that the most likely interpretation is that most but not all of the faces on Lapita vessels may be variant representations of sea turtles, not human beings. Furthermore, while this distinctive ware has been used to support broad inferences about the social organization, motivations, and religious ideas of its makers and users, Lapita designs may not be 'saying' symbolically what many now evidently believe them to be saying, and their historical importance may be other than what many currently say it is.





https://www.designweek.co.uk/issues/may-2012/fiji-airways-works-with-local-artist-on-new-branding/