



## 2.10 Introduction to Pacific Collections: Material Culture of the Hawaiian Islands



**The following material culture styles have particularly distinctive elements but broad collections are not commonly found in Scottish museums.**

### **Hawaiian Islands**

The Hawaiian Islands are an archipelago of volcanic origin located in north east Polynesia. There are eight main islands as well as smaller islands, atolls and islets. The largest island is Hawai'i. The other main inhabited islands are: O'ahu, Maui, Kaua'i, Moloka'i, Lana'i, Ni'hau, and Kaho'olawe.

The islands were first settled in 1,300 from the south, most likely the Society Islands. The distance from other parts of Polynesia meant that Hawaiians developed distinctive forms of chieftainship, religious practices and material culture.

The first European recorded to have visited the Hawaiian Islands was Captain James Cook in early 1778 on his third voyage, who named the archipelago the Sandwich Islands after his patron the Earl of Sandwich. Cook met his death there in February 1779. Kamehameha, who was a late 18<sup>th</sup> century Chief on the island of Hawai'i, attempted to gain control over the whole island group. By 1810 he had established a monarchy which ruled for most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. At this time the Hawaiian Islands were recognised by foreign powers as a sovereign nation. Kamehameha's son Liholiho (Kamehameha II) and Queen Kamamalu visited London on a state visit to George IV where they tragically died in 1824 after contracting measles. Their bodies were transported back to Hawaii on HMS *Blonde* in 1825.

Today the islands politically constitute the state of Hawaii, one of the fifty United States of America. The state capital, Honolulu, is on the island of O'ahu.

### **Featherwork**

The use of featherwork in Hawaiian material culture is of particular note. Hawaiian cloaks of red and yellow feathers which came from honeycreepers unique to the islands are distinctive. Yellow indicated a person's political power and red, as in other areas of the Pacific, was a signifier of sacred power. Hundreds of feathers were attached to a base of knotted *olona* plant fibre to form bold geometric patterns.



Chief's feather cloak, Hawaiian Islands, early 19<sup>th</sup> century, National Museums Scotland (A.1948.274)



Detail of underside of chief's feather cloak showing knotted *olona* fibres, Hawaiian Islands, early 19<sup>th</sup> century, *National Museums Scotland* (A.1948.274)



Feather cloaks were worn by people of status. Contact with such an individual meant that the cloaks also came to be imbued with power. They were traditionally passed down by men to their sons but they would not then have been able to wear the garment because of the presence of this sacred power from another individual. This was the case with other status items such as helmets. Head gear of this type consists of a basketry frame covered in *olona* fibres again with attached with feathers. The technique of basketry overlaid with *olona* fibres and feathers is also used for a particular type of god image which has sharp dog's teeth and represents the god of war, Lono. Feathers are often in a poor state of preservation.

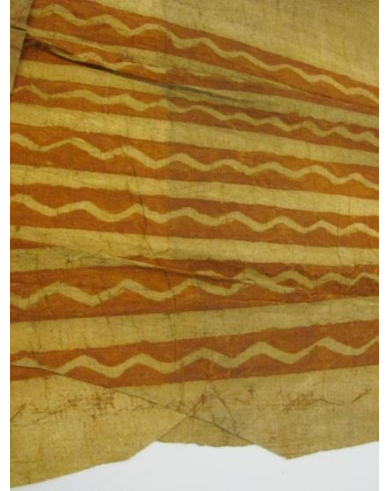
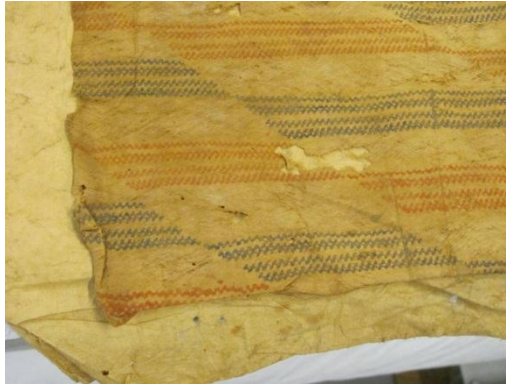


God figure which would have previously been covered with feathers, 18<sup>th</sup> century, Hawaiian Islands, *University of Aberdeen Museums* (ABDUA: 4023)

### Barkcloth

Hawaiian barkcloth (*kapa*) is recognisable by the use of red and black pigments to make bold linear and geometric designs including squares, triangles and chevrons. The art of making *kapa* was practiced by women. A fine undecorated type of *kapa* was highly prized for its thinness as it was very difficult and labour intensive to make to such a fine weight. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries barkcloth was often cut into small sections and given by collectors to friends, colleagues and museums. The barkcloth sample books compiled by Alexander Shaw from

textiles collected on the voyages of Captain Cook are particularly well known and feature examples from the Hawaiian Islands as well as Tahiti.



Barkcloth from the Hawaiian Islands, 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century, *National Museums Scotland* (L-R: A.UC.406; A.UC. 373A; A.UC.394)

**Further reading:**

Anon (1915) *'Bishop Museum Handbook, Part 1, the Hawaiian Collections'*, Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press

Arbeit, W (2011) *Links to the Past: The Work of Early Hawaiian Artisans*, Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press

Kaeppler, AL (2010) *Hawaiian Featherwork: Catalogue Raisonné of pre-1900 Feathered-God images, Cloaks, Capes, Helmets*. Berlin: Neue Nationalgalerie

Rose, RG (1980), *Hawai'i: The Royal Isles*. Honolulu: Bishop Museum Press