

# IKON

Ikon Gallery, 1 Oozells Square, Brindleyplace, Birmingham  
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tel. +44 (0) 121 248 0708 / fax. +44 (0) 121 248 0709  
website. [www.ikon-gallery.co.uk](http://www.ikon-gallery.co.uk)  
Ikon Gallery is a registered charity no. 528892

## ***Tapa: Barkcloth Paintings from the Pacific*** **1 May – 14 July 2013**

Ikon presents the first major European gallery exhibition of tapa, the great painted barkcloths from the islands of the Pacific. For millenia, Pacific Islanders have made traditional cloth from the bark of trees. Often taking on ceremonial significance, its decoration is extraordinary, with patterns that are enjoyed for their abstraction as much as their symbolism. Curated by Nicholas Thomas, material for this exhibition is drawn from the world-class collection of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology at the University of Cambridge, dating from the 18<sup>th</sup> century until the present day.

Barkcloth is made by soaking and beating the inner bark of specific trees, most commonly the Paper Mulberry (*Broussonetia papyrifera*). Across the region, from New Guinea to Hawai'i, barkcloth has been decorated, in some places in the form of huge sheets featuring optically dynamic abstract patterns, while elsewhere barkcloth garments feature plant and animal life, sacred creatures and mythic narratives. Some barkcloths were wealth objects, spectacular fabrics many metres in width and length which operated as vital valuables, presented by one clan to another on great ceremonial occasions. Others marked sacred spaces, or were incorporated into masks and other ritual assemblages. Cloth was often understood as a kind of skin, a powerful wrapping for the body which revealed its inner state and identity. Primarily created by women using inherited clan designs, the manufacture of barkcloth formed a major vehicle for both creative expression and social cohesion, maintaining and communicating the artists' deep connection to their ancestors and country.

This exhibition includes cloths spanning over 200 years, from Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, the Cook Islands and elsewhere in the Pacific. On display are several large Fijian barkcloths which feature complex geometric patterns, a kind of Oceanic Op art. These huge fabrics can be literally dazzling, their motifs seeming to dance; brilliant expressions of the energy and vitality of a people. A rare and spectacular cloth from the tiny island of Niue combines abstract patterns with naturalistic motifs of animals and plant life, whilst a cloth from the island of New Britain, off the coast of Papua New Guinea, was originally intended to be part of a powerful ceremonial mask. A large cloth from Tonga is decorated with images of flying foxes, animals deemed to belong to the Tongan monarchy, suggesting this cloth may have belonged to a chief or individual of high rank.

Although the painted barkcloths collected by European museums have remained largely hidden from public view, the tradition remains alive in the Pacific. Ikon's exhibition includes several works from the small Ömie community who live in the

mountains of Oro Province, Papua New Guinea. There, a remarkable group of women are adapting the ancient tradition to create work for the contemporary world. They have emerged as brilliant painters, each with highly distinctive and personal styles.

Coinciding with this exhibition, on our second floor, Ikon presents a selection of paintings by the acclaimed French artist François Morellet (b.1926) demonstrating the profound influence of tapa on his abstract style.

This exhibition is accompanied by a publication with original text by Nicholas Thomas and details of the culture of tapa in six of the Pacific islands.

**Ends.**

#### **Note to Editors:**

1. Ikon is open Tuesday – Sunday and Bank Holiday Mondays, 11am - 6pm. Admission is free.
2. A selection of images is shown below.
3. Ikon Gallery is a registered charity and is supported using public funds from Arts Council England and Birmingham City Council.
4. For more information, high-res images and to arrange an interview with the curator please contact Helen Stallard on 0774 033 9604 or email [h.stallard@ikon-gallery.co.uk](mailto:h.stallard@ikon-gallery.co.uk)

#### **Sample Images**



Barkcloth from Niue, detail (circa 1880s)

156 x 372cm

Courtesy Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology, University of Cambridge

*Cont.*

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Barkcloth from Samoa (late 19<sup>th</sup> century)

226 x 279cm

Courtesy Museum of Archaeology &  
Anthropology, University of Cambridge



Barkcloth from Fiji (late 19<sup>th</sup> century)

274 x 199cm

Courtesy Museum of Archaeology &  
Anthropology, University of Cambridge



Ömie Barkcloth from Papua New  
Guinea, made by Lila Warrimou, detail  
(2011)

110.5 x 70.5 cm

Courtesy Museum of Archaeology &  
Anthropology, University of Cambridge