NOTICE OF ORDINARY MEETING

The next meeting will be held in the Museum Education Building, North Terrace, Adelaide at 8.00 p.m. Monday 26 August 1974.

AGENDA

1. Apologies.
3. New Members.
   - Mr. Philip Patrick Fitzpatrick C/- S.A. Museum
   - Mr. Craig Hoskyns C/- S.A. Museum
   - Mr. William Frederick Jeffery C/- S.A. Museum
5. Speaker.
   Due to the fact that DR. NAKAMURA will not arrive in Adelaide in time to attend this meeting, PROF. KAPFERER has agreed to provide a series of films for showing at this meeting. These films will be on ASIAN ART AND CULTURE

6. Next Meeting.
   The meeting for September will be Monday 23, when, subject to his arrival in Adelaide DR. NAKAMURA will address the meeting on INDONESIAN ART.

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Tongan Arts: A Personal View

Mr. Roger Cowell

A paper given to the Society at the General Meeting Monday 22 July 74.

The nature and variety of Tongan arts is continually changing. Some aspects, such as pottery, and ancient forms of wood carving, are no longer practised, and few people in Tonga are even aware of their previous existence. Other arts, such as canoe-building and house-building, are less important now, with the advent of modern boats and building materials. But the production of bark cloth (ngatu or tapa cloth) and mats is still very important in traditional production and exchange. Indeed, with the acceleration of tourism, it may be increasing in importance and diversity.

I firstly want to mention a little about early accounts of the arts of Tonga, then refer again to modern practices, and their significance in Tongan society today. I am no art historian, so my observation may be little better than a layman with similar experience and knowledge of Tongan culture and society to mine, or of any anthropologist with field experience.

The first major contact between Tongans and Europeans was the second voyage of James Cook. He observed the performance of large dances, took part in feasts, and was given, generally in exchange for cloth, red feathers and iron nails, a number of war clubs, cloth and matting. The descriptions given by Cook are very useful in discussing Tongan society in the eighteenth century. Similarly, George Vason, the renegade London Missionary Society worker, and William Marinier, the castaway ships clerk, give some details of Tongan manufactures, and the size and scope of their houses and canoes. Canoe-building is but one example of the continued exchange of ideas and resources between Tonga and other Pacific communities such as 'Uvea, Samoa, and Fiji. Tongan leaders frequently travelled to islands of Fiji, some six hundred miles, to gather the larger timber needed for strong, large sea-going vessels, in return for Tongan manufactures, alliance by marriage, or the supply of Tongan mercenaries to bolster local disputing forces. A number of the dance forms exhibited today, such as a sitting dance (me'ulu'ulu), and a war dance (kailao) are the result of contact with neighbours.

Missionaries have done a great deal to suppress some Tongan art forms, especially the puritanical Wesleyans. Dancing for example was strictly prohibited by the Wesleyan ministers, the carving of 'idols' suppressed, and the use of male and female fertility stones discouraged.

1. Samoa
2. 'Uvea (Wallis Island)
I should now like to turn to modern arts. I think that too much has been said by Europeans of the need to preserve 'authenticity' in Pacific cultures. To me, and to most Tongan artists, what they are producing is authentic, for it is their work. The attitudes which have been common in the past are clearly shown in referring to a 1940 Syllabus of instruction to Public Primary Schools, which said, in reference to craft:

"..."mat weaving - use of coloured wool for fringes to be discouraged. More attention to be paid to design."

And concerning tapa making:

"..."Tapa making ... aim at more finished and varied designs. Discourage use of such motifs as "bicycles" etc. in favour of motifs more representative of Tongan art."

But what right does this European Director of Education have to decide what is 'more representative of Tongan art'? Tongan art is influenced by processes within Tonga, and by long established relations with other societies. To talk of one form or another as 'more representative' is, in my opinion, absurd.

The weaving of mats, and the manufacture of bark cloth, is women's work. Groups of women may gather in houses or special buildings, to share the work and ease the boredom by gossip and singing. Many kinds of mat are produced for different purposes. Large rolls are made for floor coverings, bedding or sleeping. These are usually, though not always, fairly coarse and durable, and often have coloured wool for attractive fringes. Fine mats, usually smaller than floor mats, are made from pandanus, softened in seawater, dried in the sun, and cut into narrow strips. These may be used for ceremonial exchange or gift, at such times as courtship-marriage negotiations, official inter-village visits, the welcoming or farewelling of guests, at first (and perhaps twenty-first) birthdays, weddings and funerals. Fine mat may be worn around the waist as ta'ovala a sign of respect for higher ranked people in Tonga, perhaps similar in meaning to the neck-tie.

Baskets are also woven, and these fall into two distinct types - utilitarian and decorative. Utilitarian baskets are generally coarse and expendable, perhaps made from the stem and leaves of coconut palms, quickly and loosely plaited in a manner similar to that used to make wall panels in Tongan traditional houses. Being still green when made, they dry and shrivel quickly, and may lie discarded around villages, occasionally used for gathering rubbish or carrying raw food. The decorative baskets, finely woven and plaited, and perhaps embellished with shells or tapa designs, are nowadays made mainly for the tourist industry, though a woman may have one or two as handbags.
The manufacture of ngatu (Tongan bark cloth or tapa) is usually carried out by women also, working alone or in groups. Bark cloth in Tonga is made from the paper mulberry tree, from which strips are torn off, and dried. They are then joined together by beating and the use of arrowroot (or tapioca) paste to form a several layered quilting, which is laid over a raised bark pattern, and rubbed again, to imprint the design over the sections of cloth. The final outlines, designs, and colours are then stained and painted on manually, and in some cases, a gloss is added. Designs often include legendary figures, local pigeons or sea birds, ancient patterns, but may include stylised clocks, bicycles, or the Tongan coat of arms. I must admit, however, that these stylised designs are not frequent on cloth manufactured for very special occasions, such as a Royal birthday, wedding or funeral. Apart from the use of tapa in ceremonial exchange, and, incidentally, as ceremonial dress, it is also useful as bedcovering - very warm on cold Tongan nights - ceiling, or wall dividers. There is theoretically no limit to the length of cloth which may be made, and I have seen some several hundred yards long. More recently, small pieces of cloth are being made, mostly for sale to tourists, and frequently incorporating contemporary designs and finishes. These pieces could possibly be used as small table cloths or wall decorations.

The acceleration of tourism in the last decade has encouraged diversity. The production of table mats, trays, model canoes and houses are an indication of this trend. Similarly, modern carvings are being produced in large quantities. In a village where I worked a group of men gathered regularly at one house to cut the wood, carve and varnish it. They freely admitted that they made up their own designs, and I feel that a new tradition is emerging. This, surely, is not a bad thing? Increased opportunity to gain cash advantage using dyes made from berries, applied with sticks or brush-like fibre from coconut husks. Modern paints, varnish and brushes are now used on occasions, though I don't think this is widespread yet.

Nevertheless, some of the best examples of Tongan carving, whale tooth ivory for example, was actually collected by missionaries, and survive today. These pieces are especially interesting, as the ivory turns a honey-golden colour with handling and age.

Carved and named clubs, collected by early missionaries and explorers, still hold great interest for Tongans today. The recent return to Tonga of one such club, previously souvenired by a missionary from Australia, sparked fierce controversy over its origin, ownership and history, in the weekly newspaper, and in general village discussions, such as during evening gatherings of men, to drink kava. A number of claimants produced convincing accounts, which, according to them, showed their opponents story to be a lie.
The stone structures on Tongatapu are not well accounted by traditions. The large stone slabs at Nu'a, the former capital of the island, were the royal tombs or Langi of the sacred king or Tu'i Tonga, and remain intact. But further along the coast a trilithon, the Ha'amonga a Maui, still remains a mystery, and the centre of conjecture, if no firm conclusions. Comprising two great upright slabs of coral limestone, with a third lying across-wise, it must have taken a vast amount of labour to cut, transport and erect. Some have suggested that it formed the gateway to a palatial royal residence. The present king surmised that it was used to determine the season, having found markings which aligned with the sunrise at the winter solstice, and a further theory is that it was a guide for astronomy. Probably we shall never really know.

One of the most interesting discoveries of recent archaeology in the Pacific has been the unearthing of fragments of pottery, of a style now known as Lapita. Radio carbon dates indicate the earliest known fragments, in Tonga and Fiji, and New Caledonia, and later pot making in the southern Solomon Islands and New Hebrides. There is as yet little indications of reasons for the disappearance of Lapita pottery, but archaeological trowel work is continuing.

The art of pottery is totally unknown to modern Tongans, and they have no traditions about it. When a friend of mine, New Zealand anthropologist Garth Rogers, showed some fragments of Lapita pottery he found on the Tongan outlier, Niutoputapu, the people were amazed. They had merely called the pieces moka 'umea (clay stones), and thought them of no interest.

From the making and sale of handicrafts has increased the amount of time, energy and materials spent on it, and perhaps increased quantity does not always ensure quality and precision of individual manufacture but no study has been made to demonstrate the social effects of this trend. Besides, buyers can usually shop around, and the Women's Progressive Association of Tonga, or Langa Fonua, sets high standards on their products. Although I have no confirmation of this, it may be that hand craft production has declined again in the last twelve months, when rocketing world prices for copra may have encouraged people to put more time into their gardens, and copra production in particular again.

Tongan artists have been very willing to adopt and adapt art forms, to enrich and further diversify their art forms. It is probably this very ability which has allowed Tonga to retain its independence and pride against outsiders throughout its history. Although the advent of cruise ship and jet flight tourists has further altered Tongan arts, and continues to do so, production and use of, for example, fine mats and bark cloth, for significant ceremonial purposes, is an indication of the continued importance of the arts in Tonga.

3. Perhaps some seven hundred years ago.
4. Tonga 1140 B.C. Fiji 1290 B.C.
5. See the work of Davidson, Green, Groube and Rogers.
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