



2.8 Introduction to Pacific Collections: Material Culture of the Cook Islands



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

Cook Islands

The Cook Islands lie in Polynesia in the Eastern South Pacific, spread across an area of 1,600 km of ocean. The islands are divided into the northern and southern groups with the capital Rarotonga amongst the Southern Cook Islands. There are 14 further islands: Mangai, Mauke, Atiu, Mitiaro, Takutea, Manuae and Aitutaki in the south and Pukapuka, Nassau, Manihiki, Rakahanga, Penrhyn, Suwarrow and Palmerston in the north. The majority of the islands in the north are coral atolls. Its nearest island neighbours are Niue to the west, the Austral islands to the south-east and the Society Islands to the north. The principal island of Rarotonga is just over 67km² in periphery, with a large central peak, Te Manga, in its centre. As the only volcanic high island it has fertile soil, higher rainfall and forest cover and can support the largest population on the islands as well as the most populous town, the capital Avarua.

Although the northern Cook Islands may have been settled 2,000 years ago, the southern islands were populated around 800-900AD. Inter-island trade and voyaging took place across the region prior to the arrival of Europeans.

The Spanish explorer Alvaro de Mendaña de Neira was the first European to encounter the islands when he sighted Pukapuka in 1595. Captain James Cook visited on all three of his voyages in 1773, 1774, and 1777 and named them the Hervey Islands after a Lord of the Admiralty. The name Cook Islands was given later in 1824 by a Russian cartographer, Adam Johann Ritter von Krusenstern. Other explorers and sandalwood traders followed and eventually missionaries in 1821. In 1888 the Cook Islands were proclaimed a British protectorate and were annexed by New Zealand in 1901. They continue to be politically linked to New Zealand and all Cook Islanders are legally citizens of New Zealand.

Cook Islands artefacts are not well represented in Scottish collections with most museums that do have material holding less than ten items from the region. There is often some doubt as to the specific island provenance of objects and many items attributed to the Cook Islands have subsequently been identified as Austral Islands in style and vice versa.

Ceremonial Adze

The Cook Islands artefact most likely to be found in museum collections is a carved ceremonial adze. These were made on the island of Mangaia, the most southerly of the group, and are understood to be a form of god image. They are characterised by a polished adze blade of dark volcanic stone bound to a carved handle, or haft, using finely plaited coconut fibre.



Ceremonial adze, Cook Islands, 19th century, *National Museums Scotland* (A.1904.170)

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The surface carving incorporates a distinctive triangular motif resembling the letter 'K'. In the Cook Islands Barkcloth and feathers were often attached to ceremonial artefacts with godly qualities therefore their presence can be indicative of that. There is a Cook Islands adze in Glasgow Museums' collection, for example, with an uncarved haft adorned with barkcloth and feathers.



Ceremonial adze with pedestal base and detail of the fine coconut fibre binding, Cook Islands, 19th century, *National Museums Scotland (A.1956.1028)*

Ceremonial adzes were increasingly made for the tourist trade after the early 19th century when islanders had converted to Christianity. As such there are variations in the quality of the carving and the size of examples – often being cruder and bigger when made for sale to visitors. It is likely that earlier examples have a straight handle but through the 19th century a form was developed which had a pedestal like base.

Further reading

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