

Adorned by the Trees

Painted Bark Cloth (Siapo), Unidentified Uvean Artist

Imagine making clothing from a tree. What do you think it would feel like? How would you make it?

There is a global tradition of creating fabric, called by various names but most commonly bark cloth, from the inner bark of trees. On some islands in the South Pacific, bark cloth is called *tapa* and is made from the paper mulberry tree. A *siapo* is a large piece of tapa, like the one in the BMA's collection. Tapa appears in nearly every aspect of daily and ceremonial life in Wallis and Futuna. Wallis and Futuna is an island chain in the Pacific Ocean about 3,000 miles northeast of Australia and 5,000 miles southwest of California. There, tapa is used to create clothing, gift wrapping, and funerary coverings, and it serves as a gift and decoration at weddings and during political events.

The process of making tapa is shared in a community, primarily among women. First, workers remove branches from the trunk of a growing paper mulberry tree. Once the trunk is one-to-two inches in diameter, the tree is cut down, and the bark is peeled off. Tapa-makers carefully remove the outer bark from the soft white inner bark, called the bast. These long narrow strips of bast are used to make tapa. Pieces of bast are dried before being coiled and placed in water. After soaking, tapa-makers pound the bast with a mallet repeatedly until the two-inch-wide strips become six-to-eight-inch-wide strips. The strips are then connected with a natural glue to make massive pieces of cloth that are hung to dry. Holes are patched with small pieces of bast, and then the tapa-makers decorate the fabric with natural dyes created from plant matter, soil, and soot. Designs are often inspired by the natural world.

The tapa in the BMA's collection was acquired by an officer in the Marine corps during World War II. International travel to the Pacific Islands increased during and after the War because of the attention drawn to the region. While many makers continue to create tapa that resonates with their own culture, artists also produce tapa that appeals to tourist buyers.

Challenges for students

- Many people work on a singular piece of tapa. To replicate this process in the classroom, give each student a piece of paper to draw designs inspired by the BMA tapa and the natural world. Once finished, hang drawings next to each other, creating one large tapa-inspired artwork.
- Tapa is decorated with natural dyes. Ask students to gather various natural materials, such as acorns, beets, and soil to make dyes in the classroom. Invite students to guess what colors the materials might produce and then paint with the natural dyes.

For directions and suggestions, visit artbma.org/plant-dyes

- This video shows how tapa is made in Tonga, another island in the South Pacific. Tongan tapa is similar to tapa made in Wallis and Futuna. Invite students to research bark cloth from other regions, such as Uganda and Vietnam. Ask students to compare and contrast the designs and materials used in different regions.

To watch how tapa is made, visit artbma.org/tapa-tonga



Unidentified Uvean Artist. *Painted Bark Cloth (Siapo)*. 1940–1942. Futuna Island, Wallis and Futuna, France. Bark cloth, pigment. The Baltimore Museum of Art: Gift of James J.O. Anderson, Baltimore, BMA 1988.162

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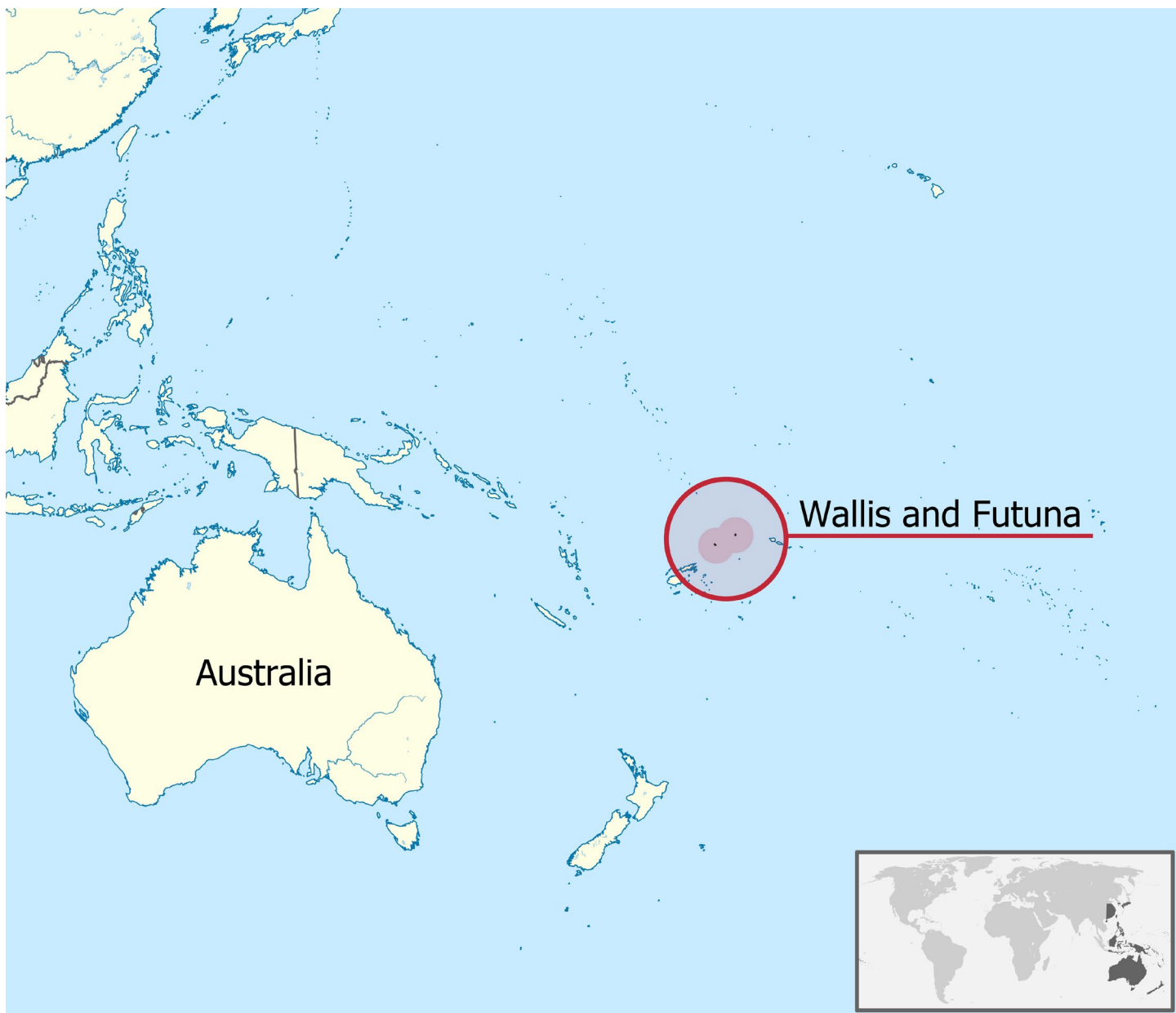
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Map of Wallis and Futuna