We’re moving from the generally larger islands inhabited by Melanesian peoples with their relatively egalitarian societies in which advancement was based on individual achievement – whether in the growing of giant yams, the taking of heads or the raising of pigs to use in the exchange systems that linked communities, clans, and islands together to Polynesia marked by many and smaller islands, with the exception perhaps of New Zealand and Hawaii, whose peoples developed highly stratified societies in which position was inherited. Kula Canoe & the King of Tonga who took the throne in August 2008 but who pledged to transform the government into a democracy.
These very different social structures had consequences in terms of art production and art use (or, those works that fall into a broad and cross-culturally viable definition of art that I used earlier in the semester – culturally significant meaning skillfully encoded in a sensuous medium. In Melanesia the arts range from the ephemeral (whether the body painting of the New Guinea Highland peoples or the earthworks of the Australians of the Western and Central Deserts).
to the disposable (whether the monumental memorial poles of the Asmat left to decay in the swamps or sent out to sea to the Baining New Britain barkcloth over cane masks burned at the end of a night's celebration). Few works functioned as static heirlooms to be passed from one generation to the next.
Rather works were reconfigured and passed on – as with the shell valuables of the Moka or the Kula ring.

Kula Shell Valuables

The hierarchical societies of Polynesia with their emphasis on inherited positions used art not to mark out a moment's climactic achievement but to make very clear the prestige, power, authority and status of their owners. Objects were made of hardwood or stone, and were passed from generation to generation – acquiring greater value and prestige as they aged and as they belonged to a succession of individuals of importance. Individual objects acquired their own histories – provenance is what we call it in Western culture and the Western art market. Provenance is equally important for the value of objects in both contexts!
We will be looking quickly at a range of objects, their forms, use and meaning within different Polynesian and Micronesian cultures, hardly addressing all of them and skipping over the textiles at this point since they will be addressed by our guest lecturer, Dr. Ping-Ann Addo on April 8.
The many islands of Polynesia, from volcanic outcrops to coral atolls, are distributed within a large triangle east of the international date line, with Hawaii at the northern apex, Easter Island in the Southeast corner and New Zealand in the southwest. Culturally, Polynesia falls into three main groups – Western Polynesia that includes Tonga, Samoa, Uvea and Fiji – though Fiji is itself transitional to Melanesia in terms of both culture and objects; the Polynesian Outliers – none of which we are looking at – and the islands of East Polynesia, home of the best known and some of the largest Polynesian Islands and associated cultures: the Marquesas and Cook Islands as well as Hawaii, Easter Island (Rapa Nui), and New Zealand. About 30 of the Island or Island groups have their own language, though they are closely related—each having developed from a common language base. Adrienne Kaeppler in her book on the Arts of Polynesia and Micronesia indicates that Polynesians actually became Polynesians once inside this geographic triangle rather than having moved there carrying the culture we recognize today as Polynesian. The ancestral tradition derives from the Lapita complex [which I would like to return to as part of a summing up] who came from the west about 4000 years ago, with their first landfalls being in Tonga and Samoa. They adapted to an open sea and island environment, but as Kaeppler points out, even they could not have predicted how their ancestral sociopolitical systems would evolve into the hierarchical chiefdoms of Polynesia.
The underlying principles through which Polynesians interpreted the world and organized their social lives included the concepts of mana and tapu (taboo). Mana is supernatural power linked with genealogical rank, fertility and protocol. It is both similar and different (because of its source) from the kind of divine energy that enlivens the Melanesian world. Mana was protected by restrictions or tapu (taboo) – who could do what, where and with what.
According to these principles, Mana and Tapu, each Polynesian society developed its version of society based on hierarchy tied to sacred rituals in which special objects were used. Containers for precious or sacred objects were made widely in Polynesia. The container figure was probably a reliquary or container to hold ancestral bones – a concept and category of object widespread in Melanesia. The priest’s dish was probably kept in a ‘spirit’ or shrine house and used when yaqona was presented to an ancestor spirit which had possessed the body of its priest in order to speak with descendants. In an ancient fijian ceremony, the god was offered and drank yaqona through the medium of the priest, who knelt to suck the liquid from the dish through a wooden straw, it being drawn into the god within him without being defiled by contact with his outer person.
To belong to the group of hereditary chiefs, sea experts, craftsmen and warriors was to hold a rank or status of importance. The structure was pyramidal, as most hierarchies are, with chiefs at the top and commoners at the bottom. Sacred places with rituals based on the drinking of kava – a mild narcotic—characterized these societies, though each had its own variation upon this theme.
Kaeppler suggests that this social order has given rise to an aesthetic of inequality, manifest in unequal access to clothing and ornament. - Digression: Tattooing was practiced particularly in the Marquesas, among the Maori, in Samoa, Tahiti, Rapa Nui and Hawaii. The Polynesian word tatau is the origin of the English term tattoo. The designs themselves descend from those on Lapita pottery, the parent culture of Polynesia. However, the most extensive tattooing was done in the Marquesas, as this slide suggests. Marquesan tattooing marked social identity and the ability to pay and endure pain as well as indicated one’s association with a particular group of warriors, graded associations, chiefs’ banqueting societies, and groups of entertainers. Tattoos honored special events such as chiefly rites of passage, victories in battle, or participation in feasts. The individual depicted here was certainly high-ranking for only someone of rank and wealth could afford the time and expense for such full tattooing. Moreover, he carries objects that reinforce an interpretation of high status – a chief’s staff and fan, and wears ear ornaments. Moreover, he sports an elaborately prepared coiffure featuring two hornlike topknots. Engraving after Wilhelm Gottlieb Telesius von Tilenau, 1813. Ear Ornaments, 19th c., Bone, shell, wood. L. 1-1/4 in. Fan. 18th c. Wood, bone, fibre. H. 17 in. Chief’s Staff (detail). Wood, fibre, hair. 19th c.
Tattoo designs are also found on wooden arms and legs in the Marquesas used as offering stands or parts of larger pieces of furniture. In contrast, in Hawaii, tattooing was often asymmetric across the body and here the designs seem to have had a protective function – created while prayers were chanted to capture the prayer in concrete form on the body.
To get back to the aesthetic of inequality -- unequal distribution of valuables during ceremonial exchanges, unequal elaboration of rites of passage, inequality of celebrity status as reflected in artistic performance, inequality of living conditions, unequal access to sacred places, and special status given to artists. In Micronesia, a similar status system prevailed – and the architectural examples are drawn from there. Architectural sites, some dating as early as 1000 AD consisting of double rows of megalithic columns called latte were the bases for large wooden structures, much like the restored meeting house you see on the left. Even in 1742, when the engraving was made, the Taga site was no longer in use, but such houses were said to house the high ranking chiefs and their families.
Kaeppler notes that in Polynesia, art includes all cultural forms that result from creative processes that use or manipulate, i.e. handle with skill, words, sounds, movements, materials, spaces, or smells in such a way that the 'informal' becomes 'formal' or structured. Though we privilege the visual arts, notably painting and sculpture, in the West, the most important art forms in Polynesia were oral—poetry and oratory or speech-making to be specific—with the various 'literary forms' delivered in a formal way. Music was sometimes an accompaniment, and dance was specifically a stylized visual accompaniment to poetry.
If skill is an essential aspect of art, equally important is 'indirectness' - hidden or veiled meanings meant to be unraveled or unwrapped layer by layer until the underlying metaphor can be comprehended. Thus performance or object cannot be understood by superficial observation - but must be understood within the context of the culture. The idea of indirectness or layering becomes literal in the use of barkcloth in formal presentations. The Fijian chief depicted here wore 180 yards of barkcloth. In Fiji, a chief presents himself to a higher chief clothed in hundreds of yards of barkcloth and disrobes, either by spinning to unravel wrapped barkcloth or by dropping a huge looped barkcloth dress as an aesthetic gesture in honor of the receiving chief. In the Cook Islands, images of gods and ancestors were wrapped with cloth and fibre attachments.
The making of 3-D sculptures in wood and other materials was men's work as was relief carving and incising. Figural sculpture is not uniformly distributed throughout Polynesia – being most important in the Eastern areas and virtually absent elsewhere. Let us look at the Marquesan Tiki or portrayal of the human figure. Regardless of size or material, the tiki have similar characteristics – they face frontally, have heavy and squat bodies, flexed knees and arms with hands resting on the rounded stomach. The head, the most ‘tapu’ or protected part of the body, is rendered dramatically larger than would be appropriate in a naturalistic representation to indicate its importance. The eyes and mouth share this use of size to signal importance. Tiki, unlike actual human beings, have little body ornament. Carol Ivory, a specialist on Marquesan art and culture, says that the meanings of the word tiki are complex and multi-layered. Tiki uncapsulated refers to all statues and designs in human form, often representations of gods or ancestors. Tiki is also the term for tattoo. Used as a verb, it can mean to sculpt, to draw or design a motif. Tiki with a capital T refers to a figure from Marquesan legend, a kind of culture hero who taught the Marquesans everything they know, good and bad. He is central to the legend describing the origin of carving and the creation of humankind. Underlying the diverse meanings and use of the word are ideas of fertility, male virility, creativity and abundance. Indeed, at least one scholar has suggested that the tiki form in the marquesas is less a human figure than an anthropomorphized phallus. The large stone Tiki were permanent fixtures at ritual sites, and the focus of ritual activity. The smaller figures appear to have been used during acts of private devotion.
The making of textiles or working with fibre was usually the work of women, and it ranked equally with and in some cases ranked more highly than carving traditions. Thus Polynesians recognized the contribution of women to the arts, even if Western museums fail to do so – often relegating textiles to the decorative arts, a minor art form, compared with sculpture. One of the particularly interesting features of men's and women's art forms here is that the intricate relief carving that characterizes the surface decoration of many prestige objects, particularly clubs and staffs, mimic the patterning of twined or hand (but not loom) woven mats.
Micronesia, the small islands, derive their culture and traditions ultimately from migrations from Asia beginning about 2500 years ago – the most recently settled part of Oceania – enriched and complicated by cultural exchanges with Melanesians and Polynesians. Of primary importance to Micronesians was their relationship to the sea, how to move across it, how to access it for food, and how to cope when devastated by it.
The ever-present possibility of destruction encouraged linkages between islands with the result that each island produced something special—fine mats, unique dyes, special shell ornaments—and exchanged it for something else.
Cultural diversity seems to be Micronesia's hallmark. Material objects here are fewer and less spectacular than in Polynesia, but exhibit a similar interest in durable materials and an emphasis on form – stone pillars for supporting the high gabled houses used by important people and the distinctive ancestor figures from Nukuoro Atoll that range in size from 10” to 3 feet high.
and a fundamental interest in the water—sea spirits, canoes, fishing, navigational charts.
Though not from Micronesia – this bark cloth from the MFA Collection is a good example of a kind of mapping of interest in the sea – with outrigger canoe, the coral border and the many different sea creatures associated with life in the Islands – whether for domestic or ceremonial purposes.
Sources for this presentation include:


Various web sites including
the Metropolitan Museum Collections data base