

TIFAIFAI OR THE ART OF PATIENCE

Tifaifai is the art of patchwork, adapted by the Polynesians. It is the art of patience and economy perfected by generations of women full of tenderness and skill. *Tifaifai* is the whole of the Pacific sewn onto a piece of cloth.

In Hawaii it is called *tivaivai*, in the Cook Islands *tivaevae*, and in Tahiti *tifaifai* and it means “mending”. It has the same origin throughout Oceania: it was the wives of missionaries who taught the technique of patchwork to the newly Christianised peoples of the Pacific.

In the eighteenth century, Protestant missionaries accompanied by their wives came to convert the Pacific islands. In their luggage the women brought quantities of fabric, a new material in Polynesia where weaving was unknown, because of the lack of fibrous plants or long-haired animals. These bales of cotton were turned into austere long dresses while the precious offcuts were applied with enthusiasm onto larger pieces of fabric, which was the origin of *tifaifai*.

Tifaifai now has a central place in the social and religious life of Polynesia. It is an indispensable element in interior decoration and its presence is essential at all the major occasions in life: birth, marriage and death.

Tifaifais can measure three metres by three, requiring great precision and are produced by a group of women. Some *tifaifais* made for important occasions contain thousands of tiny pieces of fabric and take several months of work.

The Polynesians have adopted the *tifaifai* into their daily lives. In the same way as they practised in a group the beating of the *tapa*, or bark cloth, that vegetable fabric made from the bark of certain trees, working on *tifaifais* enabled them to preserve the convivial aspect of working together.

The motifs used to decorate the *tapas* were often taken from the vegetable kingdom. There were leaves from the breadfruit tree or ferns coated with pigments and applied to the *tapa*.

The tradition has continued and current *tifaifai* motifs reproduce the luxuriance of the Polynesian flora. You can see hibiscus flowers, jasmine, tiare, pineapple, always with ferns and the leaves and fruit of the fabled breadfruit tree. The modernisation of the art of *tifaifai* and the skill of the craftspeople have led to new motifs being added, taken from tattooing or from marine life.

The colours have also changed. In the past they were more sober, now they are evolving into dazzling displays. Sometimes they even become fashionable or “trendy”, to the great joy of the purchasers!

There are two main techniques of composition. The *tifaifai pu*, where the motifs are made up of little pieces of fabric laid out like a mosaic and representing geometric shapes such as diamonds or stars, and the *tifaifai pa’oti*. On the latter, the largest motifs, representing flowers or fruit, are cut out in a very symmetrical fashion and applied to a large piece of fabric. The painter Matisse drew inspiration from these *tifaifai pa’oti* that he had admired during his time in Polynesia to create his paintings and cut-outs with great areas of flat colour.

Today, this craftsmanship elevated to the rank of art has found its way onto the walls of art galleries in New Zealand and Hawaii as well as into numerous museums all over the world.