

Pitcairn tapa and the 'Ahu Sistas

Meralda Warren, Jean Clarkson, Sue Pearson, Pauline Reynolds.

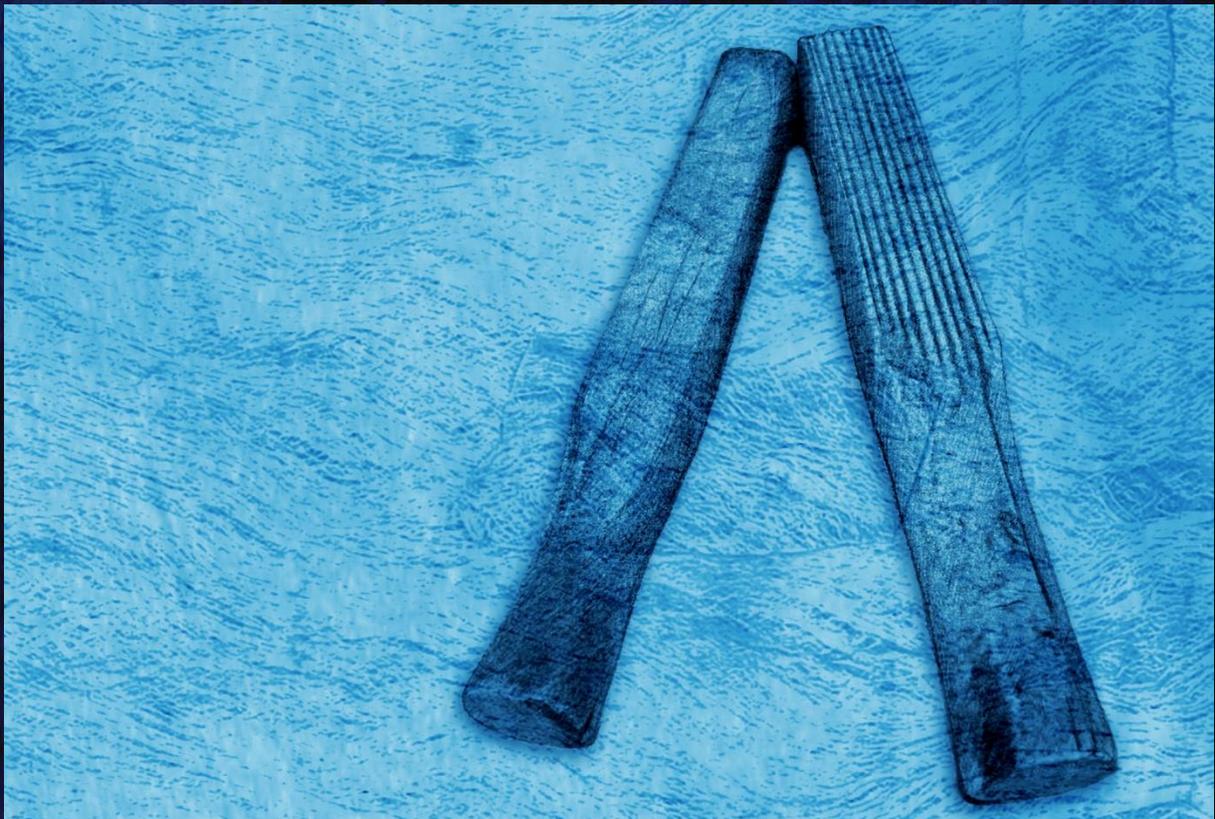


ILLUSTRATION CECILIA FAUMUINA

'Ahu Sistas

The 'Ahu Sistas include: Meralda Warren, Jean Clarkson, Pauline Reynolds and Sue Pearson. Together they have held exhibitions and book launches in Tahiti and Norfolk Island and exhibited in Aotearoa and Australia. They continue to actively document and interpret the 'ahu (tapa cloths) made by their foremothers held in collections around the world today; they are also invested in protecting other cultural practices of their heritage.

They share genealogy which leads them back the Polynesian women who left Tahiti's shores aboard the ship Bounty with the mutineers to settle on Pitcairn in 1790. While Meralda is a Pitcairn Islander, Sue, Jean and Pauline are Norfolk Islanders—their Pitcairn ancestors emigrated to Norfolk in 1856 and remained there, whereas Meralda's ancestors returned to Pitcairn. Both islands share language and culture to this day.



PHOTO BY CUSHANA WARREN-PEU

Meralda Warren

Meralda is a textile artist, tapa maker, and weaver. She is also a songwriter and author of two books including *Mi Base Side Orn Pitcairn* written with Pitcairn children. It is the first book to be published in Pitkern (the Pitcairn language) and English, and since 2005 she has been teaching Pitkern culture and language at the local school.

In 2007 Meralda revived the practice of Pitcairn tapa making. Her work has been displayed in museums and galleries in Tahiti, Norfolk Island and Aotearoa. In 2011 she was one of seven artists awarded a Commonwealth Connections International Arts Residency. This allowed her to work with artists in Aotearoa and to attend the Maori and Pacific Textile Symposium at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa in 2011 where she was the keynote speaker (Pacific).



PHOTO BY ANGELA FRASER

Jean Clarkson

Jean Clarkson is an artist and teacher born in Auckland. She has a diploma of Fine Arts with Honours from Auckland University and taught for 25 years at Auckland University of Technology in Fabric Printing and Design. She has run workshops in the community throughout New Zealand and the Pacific and worked for 12 years in the prison system.

Her interest began with the discovery of a photo of a small fragment of tapa made on Pitcairn in the late 18th to early 19th

century today held by the British Museum, and realised that something tangible from her foremothers still existed from that time. Inspired by the patterns on the tapa, she created her own images in her prints and in her family tatau designs. This pivotal moment of discovery was the seed that eventually led to the conception of the 'Ahu Sistas and their work around research and revival. Jean has exhibited throughout Australia and New Zealand and her work is held in Te Papa and the National Gallery of Australia.

Sue Pearson



PHOTO BY ALICE BOYCE

Sue Pearson grew up on Norfolk and has lived in New Zealand for the past 20 years. As a young adult she completed a Visual Arts Degree at Newcastle University, Australia, and has been a practising artist since the 1980s working predominantly in printmaking and textiles including tapa. Her works have been exhibited widely throughout Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa and in Australia, USA and Europe. Her work is held in collections around the world including Norfolk Island, New Caledonia, New Zealand, Cambridge University (UK), the US Embassy Liberia, and numerous university museums and private collections in the US.

Sue's work has always been about her heritage and telling Norfolk/Pitcairn stories. Since the inception of the 'Ahu Sistas collective, her creative focus has been on the Pitcairn foremothers and the tapa they made. She loves working within the 'Ahu Sistas and exploring ways to work in collaborative process bringing together ancient and new technologies and disciplines. Sue has been cultivating aute for making tapa in her garden in Whakatane since 2013. Recently she has enjoyed sharing tapa-making knowledge with other Pasifika women in the area.

Dr Pauline Reynolds

Pauline Reynolds is a Pacific historian, novelist and literary scholar. Previously, while living on Huahine, an outer island of Tahiti, she used traditional dyes and printed silks and cottons which were exhibited and sold throughout Tahiti and in her small family tatau studio/gallery.



PHOTO BY JULIE ADAMS

Since then, while studying at university in Australia, Pauline has become invested in thinking through how islanders can re-imagine, re-construct and re-write their own stories/histories. She has published widely and is well-known for her work on historic Tahitian and Pitcairn tapa in museum collections around the world. Pauline has developed her own tapa practice in which she is researching and recreating the methods used by her foremothers, and with her daughter Mauatua, has held workshops on Norfolk Island to support the growing practice there. One of her replicas of a tīputa (clothing created by the women on Pitcairn in the 1800s) is held in the collections of the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge. She recently completed a PhD by Creative Practice, in which she wrote about the vāhine who settled on Pitcairn in 1790 and created her own Mā'ohi-based methodology and conceptual framework for her research.

Front image caption & credit



Name: Eei (whalebone tapa beaters)

Place: Pitcairn Island

Photo: Meralda Warren

Description: These eei are whalebone tapa beaters that have been handed down through Meralda Warren's family and remain in her possession, where she is keeper of them. They

belong to Mauatua Christian (whose mark is engraved on the handle of one and the other is engraved on the side) and were passed down to her great great great granddaughter Mimi Christian (Meralda's step grandmother) who never had children of her own. Mimi married Meralda's grandfather Christopher Warren where she passed on the eei to her father Jacob Warren for Meralda to be the keeper of them. These eei are entirely unique to Pitcairn Island. Other almost identical Pitcairn eei exist in collections around the world today.

PITCAIRN TAPA AND THE 'AHU SISTAS

Meralda Warren, Jean Clarkson, Sue Pearson, Pauline Reynolds.



L-R: Fifi Bellais, Jean, Sue, Meralda, Mauatua (Pauline's daughter) and Pauline at Huahine in 2008 with the first tapa made by Meralda on Pitcairn. Photo by Arthur Baysting.

In this paper the 'Ahu Sistas discuss their various approaches to art, the practice of making tapa, and their commitment to protecting heritage. The 'Ahu Sistas consist of four women: Meralda Warren from Pitcairn Island; and Jean Clarkson, Sue Pearson and Pauline Reynolds who are Norfolk Islanders living in the diaspora. All four women share genealogy which goes back to the settlers who arrived at Pitcairn aboard the ship *Bounty* in 1790. The settlers consisted of twelve Polynesian women along with a baby girl, six Polynesian men and nine of the infamous *Bounty* mutineers. The Polynesians originated from the Society Islands (Tahiti, Huahine, Ra'iatea) and Tupua'i of the Austral Islands in today's French Polynesia. Of this original group, only six women (from Tahiti and Huahine) and six of the British mutineers had children. Between 1790 to 1856, the Pitcairn community flourished and increased, and in 1856 all the inhabitants resettled on the larger island of Norfolk Island at the western periphery of Polynesia. After several years, two groups of families returned to Pitcairn. For this reason, our people populate both islands and call themselves Pitcairn or Norfolk Islanders.

In 1995 Jean Clarkson discovered a short chapter in Simon Kooijman's Tapa in Polynesia detailing some pieces of Pitcairn tapa in the British Museum collections. This discovery of a tangible link to the women who have been made invisible in the many historical and more recent narratives representing the Bounty-Pitcairn story planted the seed for the creation of the 'Ahu Sistas. While the group found inspiration from historical tapa, they were also inspired to begin their own tapa practices, and in turn, the practice of tapa inspired each of them in their different creative pursuits. In addition, the discovery of historic Pitcairn tapa held in overseas collections led to a period of activism when there was a move by a third party (not associated with the British Museum or the 'Ahu Sistas) to commodify designs of some of the Pitcairn tapa in the British Museum collections. After achieving their aim of blocking two such attempts, the Sistas have continued to actively explore, study, reproduce and interpret Pitcairn tapa held in collections around the world.

Here we present our various views on art, our creative practices, and our common heritage in the form of a talanoa. We use a dialogic approach where we each have an equal voice which is a cultural feature of our heritage. Throughout this essay, the reader will note the different tones of our voices, our different ways of expressing ourselves, even our variations in spelling cultural words. We invite the reader to lean in toward our circle and listen in on our conversation.

In our talanoa we answer the following questions: what does art mean for you; is art culture, survival, knowledge, or something else; how does the way you see the world inform your creative practice; how would you describe your way of knowing, seeing and doing in the world; how does tapa tie in with your practice?

Before we continue, we are also mindful to make an essential distinction: Jean and Sue live in Aotearoa-New Zealand and Pauline currently lives in Australia, and they are Norfolk Islanders of Pitcairn descent; Meralda is a Pitcairn Islander who lives on Pitcairn Island.

What does 'art' mean for you?

Meralda:

Art is what I use to express myself and what I use to show people what I do and where I come from. It helps me to portray my inner Pitcairn self and to share my culture which is steeped in Bounty history and of our Pitcairn people who have at times struggled to live on this small and isolated island. Part of my art practice is making tapa just like our tapuna who came on the Bounty to Pitcairn in 1790. Through this art, I express my feelings as I pound the aute bark, melding pieces together which is just like our community, where we share our minds and our work, and build strong connections, a stronger community, and better friendships.

Jean:

Art provides the opportunity to engage with the creative part of myself which brings a sense of fulfilment and joy. It comes on many levels and takes many different forms. It enriches my cultural knowledge and expands my ability to engage with different practices.

Sue:

For me art is the visual expression of a subject or concept that usually involves a conscious aesthetic, purposeful nuances and skilfulness in rendering. I would like to think it is always an authentic and truthful expression by the artist. I know that “art” is often considered a fairly recent and an exclusively “Western” concept and assigned to work that is exhibited in art galleries and other places. However, for me art also encompasses design, customary and cultural practices of object making and functional visual expression, and I enjoy working between these different realms of “art”. Art making is a necessary part of my life – if I don’t do it I get grumpy.

Pauline:

I used to dye and print on silks using natural tapa dyes like those used by my Pitcairn foremothers, in my home on the island of Huahine (in the Society Islands) where we ran a small gallery and tatau studio at the front of our land. Heritage arts such as tapa and tatau, allow us to access the worlds of our tupuna and the understanding they had of the world.

I moved into academia to explore how to tell the stories of my Pitcairn foremothers in a structured way while studying the tapa women created. Even after all this time, I’m still dazzled by the extraordinary range of tapa they produced—not the design features, but the variations in textures of tapa. I am often preoccupied by this in my museum work, research and creative writing. My PhD reflects this dialogue between creative and scholarship in the form of a novel and an exegesis focused on telling the stories of our tupuna vāhine who settled on Pitcairn in 1790.

Is art culture, survival knowledge, or something else?

Meralda:

The art that I pursue is cultural. Had it not been for the tapa and the necessity of making it for clothing, the skills of making it would have been long gone as our Bounty foremothers made tapa for clothing as well as bedcovers. They also wove pandanas for matting and coconut fronds were used for talhi (baskets). They scraped the niau from the fronds to make brooms. This tradition is its own art form and has been passed down to us through the generations.

The knowledge to make tapa was almost gone from Pitcairn, and had it not been for one woman, named Bernice, who insisted we keep the plants growing that had been cleared away from the lands which used to grow really well. Bernice passed the plants onto my mother, Mavis, and onto her niece, Thelma. For 75 years the sound of the eei (barkcloth beater) being beaten was silent until, being influenced by the 'Ahu Sisters, I picked up Mauatua's Eei and not wanting to use her's, I carved my own from frangipani trees that were so old the wood was very hard. On 7 November 2007, I pounded my first tapa from the aute plants grown from the one that Bernice gave to my mum.

Sue:

I think art is a cultural response to the world from the artist's point of view and art can shape culture as well. I think our revival of tapa practice is contributing to the shape of our culture. The motivations for making artwork can be different: it can be expression and it can be survival too. I'm an artist, that's how I try to support myself financially, so sometimes that need does shape what kind of artwork I create for different spaces. For our Pitcairn foremothers, their art of tapa making was about practical survival.

My formal background is in printmaking. I make works that I know will speak to Norfolk and Pitcairn salan (Norfolk and Pitcairn people), and if I can tell stories about parts of our culture and history and issues of importance to us and to wider audiences through artwork, it makes me feel that my life is useful.

How does the way you see the world inform your creative practice?

Meralda:

Previously, I was encouraged by the 'Ahu Sistas who kept in contact through email, and as they researched our tapuna, I made more tapa and experimented on how to make dyes. I was encouraged by my mum Mavis and my aunty Royal who witnessed the last making of tapa in 1942 under the big flamboyant tree down Norris here on Pitcairn. They also told me that the turmeric makes a good yellow dye. I learned from reading information from my 'Ahu Sistas as well as other sources: the nano (*Morinda citrifolia*) root's inner bark makes a good dye; the doodwi (candlenuts) are collected and cracked, then the kernels are burnt and the smoke is collected, which is then mixed with liquid. This makes a very good black. Experimenting and keeping it 100% natural, I discovered mixing doodwi nut smoke with doodwi nut bark liquid dye was most effective.

The 'Ahu Sistas had our first exhibition together in 2008 in October in Arue, Tahiti. From there we went to New Zealand and then onto Norfolk. The coverage reporting the events became

worldwide. I learnt more after returning home and made more tapa. The demand to own a piece was out there and the art of putting my work mainly of the Bounty and Pitcairn on tapa took off. It was being recognised worldwide.

There have been many documentaries on Pitcairn and so my artworks have featured in most of them over the past ten or more years. It makes me appreciate what my foremothers did to preserve their creations. The cruise ships offered some sales as well as the online website but mainly people contact me. Mother nature here has played her part in how well the plants grow and I have had to respect that as over-harvesting the aute almost caused me to lose them.

Jean:

It has helped to guide my research and to provide a whole realm of possibilities for creating work. When I was young, my mother took me into the bush by her land on Norfolk Island and we gathered the spines of the palms which we brought home and bound into a niau broom. By example she had a natural way of explaining the life she had grown up with and the values important for life. Her way of relating to the world and people have informed my attitudes. She grew up in a time when life on Norfolk was about caring for land and supporting your family and community through collective sharing of knowledge and resources. These parts of our culture were handed down from our Pitcairn ancestors, and I strive to pass these values onto my children and grandchildren.

Sue:

My way of seeing the world affects my artwork because I look to celebrate our heritage, connect with others, pay tribute to our ancestors and present our island, people and culture from a Pacific/Norfolk/Pitcairn viewpoint. I see our place in the world as a small part of the Moana Nui a Kiva story. I draw a lot from my Pitcairn/Norfolk ancestors: in particular, the women; as well as from my grandmother's memories; and my life on Norfolk as a child and present-day Norfolk. In addition, the tapa practice of my foremothers has become more prominent in my life and in shaping my work.

Pauline:

My creative and scholarly writing are shaped around bringing to life those who have been forgotten in historical narratives. When I walk through the world, I am simultaneously walking through the past and the present thinking of those who have walked before me and their footsteps. Through my work with museums, I see objects as portals to the past. For example, in the here and now, I can hold a whalebone e'e originally collected from Pitcairn, today held in the stores of the British Museum, which was once used by my Tahitian ancestresses

hundreds of years ago. It's mind blowing. I often think of Meralda who has two e'e (spelt eei in the Pitcairn language) which have been handed down through her family. I think about her holding the same beater that her ancestor held on the same land. In this way, art and history is alive and vibrant on Pitcairn.

How would you describe your way of knowing, seeing and doing in the world?

Meralda:

Sometimes I see that the work behind making tapa is not valued by some people. It takes weeks to make a good piece of tapa. For the ones who do appreciate its value, it has been so rewarding to know that they enjoy and appreciate the pieces I make as well as knowing that the tradition goes back centuries. I have been honored to have my pieces in museums especially Te Papa where, as an 'Ahu Sista, I was honored to be a part of their symposium in 2011. I also have pieces in collections in Switzerland, Norfolk Island and Israel.

Sue:

My way of knowing/seeing the world stems from my family, my upbringing on Norfolk Island, my research and connections with people. We lived a simple life with all the practicality and politics involved in living in a small isolated Oceanic community bound together by our natural environment, shared history and bloodlines. In my view, the philosophy of "Inasmuch" on encapsulates a lot of our intangible culture and is something I try to uphold. It's about caring and showing kindness and hospitality to people. I observed that in my grandmother's house and our in home.

Also having spent a lot of my life as an immigrant in other countries, I've experienced the world as an outsider, bringing up my children without the support of my own culture, or my own people's support. That is something that I share with Jean and Pauline, with my mother, my grandmother, as well as those women that went on the Bounty and wound up on Pitcairn. Maybe that makes us see the world in a certain way and perhaps the distance from home allows for a different kind of reflection.

Pauline:

I am a relational being. This means that I am always trying to foster kindness, because what I do affects the next person. My most treasured role in the world is being a mother. Like Sue, I have lived a long time away from Norfolk Island: I have raised my children in three countries: Huahine, Norfolk Island and Australia. This affects our identity and sense of belonging. However, I always carry my 'Ahu Sistas with me, and I love sharing my research with them

and the wider Pitcairn and Norfolk community. This has always been the way of our people, and I hope my research and writing benefit us all.

How does tapa tie in with your practice?

Meralda:

Tapa has become a big part of my life. I have also taught the young ones here about what I have learnt from making it hands on. The feeling of using Mauatua's eei as I pound pieces of aute together, feeling the mana come forth to embrace me as though I am being guided by her to make it shine out for all to see. I try to make tapa every year and will continue using aute and breadfruit to keep this tradition going for as long as I can. My hope is that one day, one of our young ones will pick up that eei and pound too, making tapa a part of their life so they can share and be embraced by it all.

Jean:

I developed a personal interest in tapa in the 80s, which I included in my teaching as I regularly had Pacific students. We used the museum's collection and research library to help broaden our outlook. Their extensive collection provided different techniques to practice mark making, and a way to use meaningful patterns in our textile work. I was excited to find Pitcairn had produced tapa. It was a tangible link to my foremothers. This link to their cultural knowledge spoke directly to me. I was able to investigate their process and use this inspiration to develop my own art practice. Over the ensuing years, my collaboration with the 'Ahu Sistas by exhibiting, running workshops and working together has enriched not only my work but my life. Thank you all for these special times.

Sue:

Jean's discovery of historic Pitcairn tapa led to Pauline's research and her unearthing pieces in museums around the world. I have been able to see and touch some Pitcairn tapa at the Bishop Museum and the Alexander Turnbull Library which I found extraordinarily moving. The creation of the 'Ahu Sistas, growing and cultivating aute in my garden and making tapa has been important in my life and my art practice. The cultivation of aute in my garden in Whakatāne over the last ten years has been a lot about trial and error, like Meralda on Pitcairn too. I'm enjoying incorporating tapa with other mediums and processes and collaborating with my 'Ahu Sistas. I love to talk with Meralda about what does and doesn't work with our aute cultivation and processing. Meralda has a wealth of practical knowledge and makes beautiful dyes which she has shared with me to use in my artwork. Jean and I are both printmakers and textile artists and have created several collaborations around our

foremothers and tapa making which have been exhibited in Tahiti, Norfolk Island and New Zealand. Pauline and I talk on different ideas coming out of our heritage practice and her research. We are currently working on a multidisciplinary project around Pitcairn tapa. I love working with each of my 'Ahu Sistas and the different ways that we connect through tapa.

Growing aute and making tapa in Whakatāne has helped me feel a connection not only with Meralda on Pitcairn and the island of my ancestors, but also with this whenua. When I look after my aute plants and make tapa, I find it healing. Recently, a group of Niuean, Cook Island Māori, Tongan and Samoan women has formed around my aute patch in Whakatāne. We have informal gatherings, and I love watching the different generations of Pacific women having their first go at making tapa and experiencing the magic. We share food, then other things, creating a safe place, because we're just Pacific women, brought together through sharing and making tapa, much like Pacific women have for hundreds of years.

Pauline:

For my PhD, I created what I called the 'Ahu Methodology, which follows the steps that our foremothers used to make tapa, so my research and writing methodology was framed around this ancient practice used by my ancestresses. As Cresantia Koya tells us, tapa is an epistemological site which shows us "Pacific ways of knowing, being, doing and belonging." In this way, I like to think I am accessing something of those women's worldviews as I work.

The journey with the 'Ahu Sistas has been incredibly empowering: through activism, research, and creating tapa together and far apart—from Norfolk Island to Aotearoa-New Zealand, to Tahiti and Huahine, to Pitcairn—our practices unite us. Tapa practice also ties us to those of the past, the present and the future. But for Jean, Sue and Pauline, it is Meralda on Pitcairn who is leading the way, touching the land, the plants and the whalebone tapa beaters, who is creating art on the place where our tupuna once created their art. Perhaps this is the most inspiring part of our journey, knowing that the practice has recommenced on Pitcairn, where our people began.