Re-evaluating student treatments of barkcloth artefacts from the Economic Botany Collection, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew

INTRODUCTION

There has been a long and productive relationship, for over 20 years, between the former Textile Conservation Centre (TCC) and its successor, the Centre for Textile Conservation and Technical Art History at the University of Glasgow (CTCTAH), and the Economic Botany Collection, Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew (EBC). The EBC has collected, exhibited and studied examples of the practical applications of plants from around the world since its foundation in 1847 and the collection is in high demand by national and international researchers (Nesbitt and Cornish 2016). Curators at the EBC have been extremely supportive of conservation education, working closely with conservation training programmes to give students experience of working on a range of objects from indigenous cultures, made from a variety of natural fibres, from around the world.

BARKCLOTH RESEARCH

A three-year research project focusing on Pacific barkcloth, or tapa, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AH/M00886X/1), has provided an excellent opportunity to re-examine several pieces of barkcloth treated by TCC students. The Situating Pacific Barkcloth Production in Time and Place project began in 2016 and brings together the CTCTAH, Kew and the National Museum of Natural History, part of the Smithsonian Institution, Washington DC. An interdisciplinary team of six researchers is carrying out in-depth research into barkcloth as a material, focusing on the collections at Kew, Washington and The Hunterian, University of Glasgow and investigating provenance, stylistic variety and historical context alongside analysis of fibres, dyes and other materials. Research conservator Misa Tamura is treating the barkcloth in both the Hunterian and EBC collections to make the pieces accessible for study and is also carrying out research into appropriate treatments for cloths made of different fibres and in varying states of degradation. As part of this project, several EBC objects previously treated by students were revisited to evaluate the success of these treatments and whether they were fit for purpose.

TREATMENT OF BARKCLOTH OBJECTS FROM THE EBC

The EBC holds about 80 pieces of barkcloth, 50 from Oceania, and the remainder from South and Southeast Asia and the tropical Americas.
Seventeen barkcloth objects or groups of objects from the collection were treated by students between 1995 and 2015, ranging from small pieces of tapa to complete garments. In the 1990s, treatments focused on repacking and were often undertaken by pairs of students. By the 2000s, treatments were undertaken as individual interventive projects and tended to be more complex, with more research into the objects’ history and cultural context, and more engagement with EBC curators.

In keeping with the collection’s role as a study resource for researchers, treatments often included surface cleaning to remove surface dirt and humidification to remove creases, where accrued during storage, and minimal stabilisation of damaged areas to prevent further damage occurring during study. A variety of adhesive treatments were used to mend tears (Table 2). An important aspect was the packing and storage of the objects, designed to make the important features accessible to researchers with minimal handling of the artefacts themselves. The objects have been accessed by researchers over the years, and it is now possible to evaluate their ease of use.

**EVALUATION OF TREATMENTS**

Eight objects or groups of objects are considered in detail here, chosen because they represent a diversity of costume and sheets of barkcloth, and because each highlights one or more of the issues raised above (Tables 1 and 2). One western-styled barkcloth coat made of fig (*Ficus* sp.) was collected from the Nicobar Islands (accession number 43508), another coat made from a breadfruit species (*Artocarpus* sp.) came from Borneo (42835) and the remaining pieces were from the Pacific. These included three *tiputa*, poncho-like garments, from Samoa (42861) and Tahiti (73328, 73329), a ‘skirt’ from Tahiti (42977) and several flat pieces of tapa from the Solomon Islands (42959) and Hawaii (one collection of small pieces, catalogued as 42883 and 42885). Most of the Pacific pieces are made of paper mulberry (*Broussonetia papyrifera*).

**Cleaning and humidification**

The objects were generally surface-cleaned with low-powered vacuum suction. In addition, the coat from Borneo had black soiling which was considerably lessened with damp swabs.

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Catalogue number</th>
<th>Object description</th>
<th>Place and date of collection</th>
<th>Year of treatment &amp; storage solution</th>
<th>Figure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>42835</td>
<td>Coat</td>
<td>Borneo, 1903</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42861</td>
<td>Painted <em>tiputa</em></td>
<td>Samoa, 1847</td>
<td>2008</td>
<td>Figures 2, 4, 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42883, 42885</td>
<td>Cut pieces</td>
<td>Hawaii, 1825</td>
<td>2007, retreated 2015</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42959</td>
<td>Piece of tapa</td>
<td>Solomon Islands, 1876</td>
<td>2009</td>
<td>Figure 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42977</td>
<td>Fibre skirt</td>
<td>Tahiti, 1874</td>
<td>2004</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43508</td>
<td>Barkcloth coat</td>
<td>Nicobar Islands, 1881</td>
<td>2006</td>
<td>Figure 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73328</td>
<td><em>Tiputa</em></td>
<td>Tahiti, 1874</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>Figures 6, 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73329</td>
<td><em>Tiputa</em></td>
<td>Tahiti, 1874</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
1990s, a chemical sponge was successfully employed in one of the more recent treatments, that of the Nicobar Islands coat, to successfully reduce sooty ‘museum dirt’, as could be seen in images taken before and after treatment. Humidification treatments were carried out by different means: local treatment with an ultrasonic humidifier was used on some cloths, while other treatments employed contact humidification using dampened blotting paper in conjunction with a semi-permeable membrane layer. A humidification chamber was employed to allow slow introduction of moisture to the more brittle examples such as a set of six small pieces of cloth (42885) and the Nicobar Islands coat which had been folded into a

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Catalogue number</th>
<th>Treatment: surface cleaning</th>
<th>Treatment: humidification</th>
<th>Treatment: support</th>
<th>Treatment: mount</th>
<th>Treatment re-evaluation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>42861 Painted tiputa</td>
<td>Dampered blotting paper wrapped in acid-free tissue paper inserted into folds.</td>
<td>Low-powered vacuum suction and soft brush. Chemical sponge on very soiled areas.</td>
<td>Patches of Reemay&lt;sup&gt;TM&lt;/sup&gt; adhered with 25 g wheat starch in 100 ml deionised water, then diluted.</td>
<td>Folded three times into box. Pads of downproof cotton filled with polyester wadding between layers.</td>
<td>Folds have not returned. Patches adhering well. Reemay is quite thick and doesn’t conform to the surface very well. Acrylic paint matches surface sheen of object on the front, but very obvious on the reverse and obscures detail on the back. Tiputa re-packed wrongly in box after exhibition loan.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42883, 42885 Cut pieces</td>
<td>Low-powered vacuum suction and soft brush.</td>
<td>Humidity chamber. Saturated solution of potassium chloride to achieve 72% RH.</td>
<td>First mount: Melinex machine-stitched to form pockets, inserted into acid-free card frames. Remounted: two pieces of acid-free card with Melinex windows, inserted into a Melinex wallet.</td>
<td>Folded in three box, silk-covered polyester wadding cushions between folds.</td>
<td>Patches stable. Colour matched to front to stand out on reverse. Patched areas slightly stiffer. Not obvious how to fold for storage without instructions. Tyvek tape on Corex failing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>42977 Fibre skirt</td>
<td>Low powered vacuum suction and soft brush.</td>
<td>Ultrasonic humidifier.</td>
<td>Stored in box on tray covered with polyester wadding covered with downproof cotton.</td>
<td>Stable. Front edge of box flaps down to slide out board with skirt – works well. Skirt may have slid slightly in box – downproof cotton mount quite slippery?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43508 Coat</td>
<td>Chemical sponge.</td>
<td>Humidity chamber.</td>
<td>Colour-toned Japanese tissue paper (Tengujo on inside of coat, thinner tissue on outer surface) adhered with 3.5% methylcellulose. Detached bark fibres mixed with methylcellulose to form pulp used to infill tears.</td>
<td>Padded supports for body and two arms.</td>
<td>Coat very secure and stable on the mount.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73328 Tiputa</td>
<td>Detached tassels (sugar cane leaf) reattached by threading onto silk yarn looped over rosettes. Patch of Japanese tissue paper toned with acrylic paint used to support damaged edge.</td>
<td>Corex over core of Ethafoam covered in polyester needlefelt and cotton calico. Upper half of tiputa lifted away from lower half by an aluminium rod.</td>
<td>Corex over core of Ethafoam covered in polyester needlefelt and cotton calico. Upper half of tiputa lifted away from lower half by an aluminium rod.</td>
<td>Tassel attachment seems to have worked well, though further losses to other tassels apparent. Patch still secure – makes this area slightly stiffer. Paper coloured on surface against the object only – visible on the reverse. The mount has been compromised – the supports for one of the poles have become dislodged. Difficult to make a large box rigid, and the pole is heavy.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>73329 Tiputa</td>
<td>Low-powered vacuum suction and tweezers.</td>
<td>Ultrasonic humidifier.</td>
<td>Net previously adhered to reverse face. New net on front secured by stitching through holes (away from decorated area).</td>
<td>Angled Corex platform in box, covered in polyester needlefelt, cotton stockinette and cotton poplin.</td>
<td>This mount has collapsed, causing some distortion of the garment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
small parcel since acquisition in 1881 (Figure 1). Contact humidification using dampened blotting paper wrapped in tissue paper was chosen to allow the unfolding of another object, a Samoan *tiputa* (42861; Figure 2); this combination was designed to be as thin and flexible as possible as these layers had to be inserted between folds in the garment. It was felt that overall humidification in a chamber would be damaging to the *tiputa*’s painted surface, which testing showed to be water soluble. In most cases weights were used to encourage the removal of creases. This range of humidification techniques was employed in response to the different properties and condition of the objects, but the key finding was that all the treatments, from both the 1990s and the 2000s, seem to have been successful and the barkcloth had responded well to humidification whichever method was chosen and still appeared flat and smooth. It is significant that these treatments were carried out in combination with preparing mounts for the objects; this maintained the new position of the barkcloth and has prevented the reappearance of creases over time.

Figure 1. A western-styled barkcloth coat collected from the Nicobar Islands, made from fig (*Ficus* sp.), and accessioned by Kew in 1881 (accession number 43508). Left: the coat had been folded since acquisition. Right: the coat was unfolded during humidification in a chamber

Figure 2. Left: Tapacloth from the Solomon Islands, made of unidentified plant fibre, 1876 (42959). Right: acrylic painted patches of Reemay non-woven fabric used to support weak areas

**Structural support**

Five projects included structural support. One of the projects carried out in the mid-1990s employed a backing support using nylon net, whereas projects from the 2000s reflected treatment trends, favouring the use of either non-woven polyester, such as Reemay, or Japanese paper with cellulose ether or starch paste adhesive. In one instance, detached fibre from the object was used to create infill pulp in areas of loss combined with paper backing patches. Most of the adhesive support
treatments appeared stable; with the exception of one or two individual patches, there was no evidence of failing repairs or damage caused by these conservation additions. That is an encouraging result, particularly since the treatments were carried out either 10 or 20 years ago and have been subjected to handling. The length of time since treatment did not seem to make a difference to the stability of the repairs. On the painted Samoan *tiputa*, however, Reemay patches did not completely conform to the flexible movement of the barkcloth, pulling the cloth slightly when it was handled, particularly when a thicker support had been used. However, the difference in flexibility and the direction of stretch between the repaired and unrepaired areas appeared insignificant to the stability of the object.

Although not always stated in documentation, in all instances acrylic paints appeared to have been used to tint the backing materials. Some problems were noted with this technique: the paint created an opaque appearance which could obscure detail on the reverse and it had often stiffened the substrate significantly (Figure 3). In some instances, patches had been colour-matched only on the front-facing side. This seemed a good technique which made the patches easy to recognise on the reverse.

**Storage**

Most of the projects reviewed included a major component in producing custom-made storage solutions. Large objects at Kew are folded and stored in large acid-free boxes; rolled storage is not favoured because it restricts easy access by researchers. Many of the storage boxes for these objects were custom-made by the students, designed to facilitate visual access whilst mitigating risk by direct handling. In some instances, one side of the box flapped down so that the object on its mount board could be slid out of the box; this neat solution allowed the object to be removed from the box without handling it. Larger objects were stored folded in a particular configuration to allow researchers to view specific details without needing to unpack them, although some of the pieces had been taken out of their boxes and replaced. Some had been repacked incorrectly in their boxes, in one instance following a loan for a museum exhibition where a courier was not present (Figures 4 and 5).

Preparing mounts for small, flat pieces of barkcloth is challenging, particularly when both sides need to be visible. The storage mounts of a group of small Hawaiian tapa pieces (42883/42885) were re-designed and replaced in 2015 to make them more easily accessible. Each piece is held in a folder made from two pieces of acid-free card with Melinex windows, inserted into a Melinex wallet that secures it tightly. This allows full, front-and-back visual access to the object while it is encased safely in the folder, but it can now be easily removed. Improved accessibility of objects as a result of conservation treatment encourages their use. In the case of a skirt made from tapa cloth fibre (42977), it is now considered a priority that the skirt lies flat in its box so that is fully visually accessible, whereas formerly it was folded over a padded cushion in a smaller box dictated by previous storage allowances.
The re-evaluation of a Tahitian *tiputa* (73328) illustrated both the potential of a multipurpose storage and display mount and its limitations. At the time of treatment, the object’s support mount was also required to cater for display as there were plans for the *tiputa* to be loaned to an exhibition. A large box was devised to store the object in padded folds while incorporating a metal pole from which the object could hang on display. This storage design achieved the safe storage of the object on its display mount. Unfortunately, however, in the intervening years, the Ethafoam blocks supporting the metal pole have been dislodged as the object was occasionally moved, and the support structure has collapsed onto the object, with the pole causing some damage to the barkcloth and the decoration. Whilst the storage devised met the treatment objective successfully, this instance highlights the fact that a display mount, often made for a one-off, specific display design, may not always be compatible with storage. The *tiputa* and another similar piece (73329) are now in very fragile condition and their large size and unwieldy boxes have posed challenges of storage and access over the years which have resulted in some further damage. However, images of the second *tiputa* taken before treatment in 1995 illustrate its extremely poor and fragmentary condition at the time (Figure 6), and it would undoubtedly have suffered much more extensive damage over the intervening years without the stabilising support it received then (Figure 7).
Documentation

Conservation documentation was another focus of the review as conservation records of the Situating Pacific Barkcloth project will be available online to share the findings and outcomes of treatment with conservators and other interested parties worldwide. Conservation reports generally provide much information, particularly those of the more major individual conservation projects from the 2000s, reflecting the time the students had taken to study and research their objects.

The treatment reports were a good general record of treatment carried out but sometimes lacking in detail, which prevented a re-evaluation of the techniques used. There were references to, for example, ‘colour-toned Tengujo paper’, which did not give details of the type of colourant used. Other reports mentioned colouring support papers with acrylic paints, but without specific supplier information. Concentrations of e.g. methylcellulose adhesives were commonly given, with less specific detail for starch pastes; sometimes even the type of starch used was not recorded. The majority of the reports did not mention the preparation methods for wheat starch paste despite the fact that factors such as how the wheat starch is heated, the number of times it is sieved and kneaded, and the ratios of wheat starch and deionised water change its working properties and processes (Sanderson 2007, Maitland 2010). Similarly, the adhesive application methods were rarely discussed. The supplier and detailed product information of Japanese paper, whose density, raw materials and additives can vary greatly, were also seldom mentioned.

This type of detail is of course helpful for future conservators working on the same or similar objects to help understand the impacts of past treatments. Specifically, these details were often insufficient to allow successful approaches to be re-employed, on the current project or elsewhere, without further time-consuming experimentation. Detailed information on the materials was sometimes provided (e.g. that Ethafoam is a closed-cell polyethylene foam), but trade names such as Correx were also sometimes used without material and technical details. The re-examination reinforced the message that it is important to encourage students to include the chemical composition of materials in conservation reports, since the information may be required at a later date (Stone 1996).

Some of the storage problems noted above may have been exacerbated by a lack of detailed instructions on how the pieces should be accessed. While it is easy to create over-complicated instructions for storage and access, a brief step-by-step explanation of how to pack the object, illustrated with diagrams or images, would have been an extremely useful addition to the documentation, provided it was added to the storage box and not just to the object file.

Collaboration

Effective collaboration underpins effective conservation. Dialogue between student conservators and Kew curators is an essential part of the conservation process and is now far more interactive than in the 1990s. Every aspect of the care and access of the object – the curatorial context,
storage requirements, and present and future handling needs – must be discussed and negotiated. The requirement to make the objects accessible to researchers rather than primarily for display adds a dimension to the decision-making skills which students must develop to inform treatment options. Intensive discussion with Kew curators takes place at two points: when the student first encounters an object, and again after the treatment proposal has been prepared, in addition to occasional email contact as questions arise. Discussion of the treatment proposal is crucial and was not standard practice early on. A third step that would be desirable, but is logistically difficult, would be for curators and conservators to meet after the projects are completed.

The collaboration between the two institutions has been extremely successful. Textile conservation students have gained a great deal from expanding the range of objects on which they work; they more commonly treat examples of western dress or embroidered textiles which are more representative of UK museum textile collections. The EBC benefits from achieving conservation treatments of some of its collection and from the students’ detailed research into the cultural and historical context of objects. Students usually work more slowly than professional conservators, but this additional time can compensate for their lack of practical experience. Several students have gone on to do volunteer work in the EBC. The Situating Pacific Barkcloth project is itself a direct result of the Kew-Glasgow collaboration.

CONCLUSION

The systematic re-evaluation of treatments is an underestimated and very valuable tool in developing best practice in conservation. Although conservators based in museums may, in theory, have access to objects to review past treatments, the limitation of resources and increasing workloads for individual conservators mean that the opportunity rarely occurs, while it is even less likely that freelance conservators can revisit their past projects. Although the group of barkcloth artefacts discussed here is relatively small, the range of treatments carried out on them creates a microcosm of treatment types whose effects can usefully be compared. This information will be used to inform the selection of treatment and documentation choices for other barkcloth artefacts at Kew’s EBC and in the Hunterian collection, as part of the research project.

It is clear from images of the objects that conservation treatment has been overwhelmingly successful. Nearly all of the objects are still in good condition and have been successfully accessed by researchers.

Key lessons from this re-evaluation exercise are threefold. Firstly, student projects need to be carefully selected. All conservation teachers of course understand the need to give their students access to historic objects with real problems, and that it can be difficult to find sufficient objects which provide interesting challenges for students to gain both practical and problem-solving experience in a range of contexts, but which can be completed within the time available. Projects should have a clear brief and not be too ambitious. Good communication between the curator, student and course tutor is key.
Secondly, it has been observed previously that creating a well-planned storage mount for a fragile object can be as important for its long-term safety as carrying out interventive treatments (Stone 1996) and this was certainly borne out by this review. Last but not least, this exercise was another vital prompt that documentation needs to contain enough detail to permit a treatment to be replicated, and was a reminder of just how effective a simple diagram can be in communicating information.

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MATERIALS LIST

Ethafotm™ polyethylene foam
8215 Forest Point Boulevard
Charlotte, NC 28273, USA

Melinex® polyester films
DuPont Teijin Films Luxembourg S.A.
Luxembourg
europe.dupontteijinfilms.com/

Reemay® random spunbond polyester
Conservation by Design Limited
Bedford, UK
www.conservation-by-design.com

Smoke Sponges vulcanised natural rubber
Preservation Equipment Ltd.
Norfolk, UK
www.preservationequipment.com/

Starch, wheat
Fisher Scientific UK Limited
Loughborough, UK
www.fishersci.co.uk

REFERENCES


