

# **Historical Roots and Inspirations from the Lapita cultural complex in Contemporary Hawaiian Ceramics**

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Hawaii is one of the most remote places on Earth. Honolulu is further from another major population center than any other city in the world. Nearest is Los Angeles, United States, still 2500 miles (4023 Km) east, Tokyo, Japan is 3800 miles (6115 Km) west, Seoul, Korea is 4500 Miles (7242.05 Km) west, Zibo, China is 5032 miles (8098 Km) West, and Sydney Australia is 5000 miles (8046.72 Km) to the southwest. Hawaiian Culture places great importance on “place”; the connection of environment and history is evident at every turn in modern Hawaii. Perhaps this physical isolation magnifies the significance of these connections. Seclusion of this type can amplify and intensify an individual’s ability to focus, this is particularly true for artists; environmental links – historical, spiritual and conceptual – have the uncanny ability of becoming clear and connected under these circumstances.

This paper attempts to identify the roots of civilization in Hawaii and to connect it to “Ceramic History.” It is an attempt to contextualize “Contemporary Ceramics in Hawaii.” Understanding the past allows those exploring in the present to recognize connections, and to better make sense of them.

“Lapita” is the name given to the pre-historical culture who colonized the areas of the Pacific known as Polynesia, Micronesia, and Melanesia; Lapita is also the name of the pottery style commonly used to identify these cultures. Lapita pottery was first unearthed at an archeological site in New Caledonia called La Pita, and its primary identifying characteristic is repetitive stamped dentate decoration impressed in bands high on the body of the pots, sometimes extending to the rim or interior. Archeologist Roger C. Green has done significant work on Lapita and its roll in pre-history and has documented their pottery.

Lapita pots were made of earthenware clays indigenous to the islands where the objects were made. The firing was apparently done with an open pit style with the fuel in direct contact with the wares. The temperatures reached were never higher than about 800°C, and much of the ware was fired as low as 500–600°C. Sand was frequently mixed with the clays, likely to provide some openness to the clay body so that it could survive the fast direct firing; a second reason for the addition of sand would be to allow the construction of larger vessels. There is no evidence of wheel use in the making of these wares. Everything was of either slab or coil construction. Vessel walls were thinned after building using a paddle and anvil technique. The method and the marks left through this practice are reminiscent of the Onggi pots of Korea. Lapita paddles were sometimes carved with parallel grooves, these left rhythmic impressions on the exteriors of the larger jars. Smaller vessels had most of the forming marks burnished away. I find it interesting that there are traditions of both slab and coil building in both Lapita and Onggi.

Lapita pottery decoration is apparently made up of a highly organized and systematic “alphabet” of basic shapes; these are assembled in an orderly fashion that indicates an underlying “grammar”. This underlying structure or “style” is consistent throughout the Lapita Cultural Complex; it remains cohesive across enormous distances in the Pacific. Application of these patterns was accomplished through the use of both stamping and incising techniques; the depressions created

through this process were often filled with a lime paste made from crushed coral which was applied after firing. The white patterns then contrasted dramatically with the reddish brown clays.[i] The effect is much like the traditional inlay technique “sangam” used extensively in Korea.

“Lapita” is an “archeological construct” based on stylistic similarities in pottery.[ii] - it is a culture identified by its pottery specifically. The stylistic similarities referred to are primarily repetitive patterns stamped into the wet clay before firing. These bands are usually on the upper body and rim of the pots, and made spontaneously during the forming process. R.C. Green extends this definition by stating that “while the characteristic pottery provided the most obvious traits used to identify the cultural complex, a better understanding can be achieved if other aspects of the complex are summarized without reference to the pottery.” Linguistic similarities are another link between the Lapita cultures. Austronesian is a large group of languages with an Oceanic subgroup. The Oceanic language grouping is considered to be a central trait of “Lapita”. This “language” root extends what we consider to be “Lapita” to a large number of island cultures in the Pacific; Easter Island, New Zealand, the Caroline Islands, and the Hawaiian Islands are all considered to be part of the “Lapita Cultural Complex” when we consider language.[iii]

The patterns used in Lapita pottery are present also in textiles and body art, linking objects and communities many thousands of miles apart. Tattoos are widespread in Oceanic cultures, and the tools for applying tattoos have been excavated from certain Lapita sites. [iv] Additionally, the tools for making “Kapa” (fabric) have strong visual and tactile connections with the repetitive bands of pattern that are indicative of the pottery. Kapa is the Hawaiian name for the traditional fabric of the islands; it is made through the beating of mulberry. It also shares some essential traits such as toughness and pliability with the traditional paper of Korea, Hanji - also derived from the mulberry plant. Kapa beaters, have banded, repetitive patterns that are impressed into the mulberry fibers during beating to make cloth, and the ‘Ohe Kapala, are bamboo stamps used for decorating kapa. Many of these patterns reflect the distinctive patterns seen in Lapita pottery.

Polynesians are thought to have voyaged from Marquesas Island around 900 AD to Hawaii. Voyages to Easter Island happened about the same time.[v] The settlement of the Pacific Islands in Pre-history is traced and plotted using archeological and linguistic evidence. The evidence indicates that Hawaii was the last of these islands to be settled. The remoteness of the islands alone would indicate that this is likely.[vi]

The following is quoted from “Hokule’a 1985” by the Polynesian Voyaging Society; it embodies the discovery of Hawaii, “it is said that the great navigator Hawai’iloa was the first to arrive in these islands. The voyagers went ashore and found that the land was fertile and pleasant, filled with awa, coconut trees, and so on. Hawai’iloa, the chief, gave the land his name. Here they dwelt a long time, and when their canoe was filled with vegetable, food, and fish, they returned to their native country, with the intention of returning to Hawaii nei, which they preferred to their own country.”

In 1976, a fledgling group calling themselves The Polynesian Voyaging Society set out to prove the prominent scholars view, that the discovery of Hawaii was accidental and unrepeatable, wrong. They took to seas for the first time in over six hundred years, sailing on a 62-foot replica of a double-hulled voyaging canoe named Hokule’a. They reached Tahiti, a distance of over 2000 miles (3219 Km,) in a little over a month, and returned to Hawaii without the aid of navigational instruments. Since then the Polynesian Voyaging Society has built two more wa’u Kaulua (double hulled canoes), and have logged tens of thousands of miles throughout Polynesia and beyond. [vii] These Replicas of large double-hulled vessels called Hokule’a have been constructed in Hawaii and sailed around the Pacific on long voyages without the aid of modern navigation tools, showing that travel of this sort was not only possible, but highly likely.

The view that Hawaii was discovered by chance, or that it was settled by lost voyagers in an unrepeatable fashion, has been replaced; it has become clear that the Lapita peoples developed

the ability to sail and navigate at will. Strong linguistic evidence of this exists in the proto-Austronesian words for sail, mast, outrigger, and boom. This evidence dates back 5000 years,[viii] and the wide-spread discovery of Lapita pottery, and ornamented textiles reinforce this conclusion. Archeological findings indicate that Lapita pottery moved across a vast region in the South Pacific about 1500BC. Evidence also indicates that the pottery was used where it was produced. This infers that potters were trained and moved throughout this region during this time; rather than the pottery being produced in one place and then exported. [ix]

Approximately 500 BC the quality of Lapita pottery declines. The pots become crude and they cease to be decorated. About 500 years later the production of pottery by the Lapita peoples appears to have vanished. There is speculation that this is because of a lack of adequate clay deposits; this is true of some small islands, but most of the larger islands have adequate clay to continue support of pottery production. The evidence points to a culture wide shift toward the use of wooden containers. The migrants to Marquesas appear to have arrived with very few ceramic vessels and perhaps no potters. To date, no evidence of prehistoric pottery production exists on any eastern Polynesian island.[x]

A calabash is a wood container; it is essentially a gourd. Heated stones were dropped into a calabash containing liquid, and this would steam or boil the food within. Much cooking was also done in an Imu, which is an underground oven; these ovens heated stones specially selected for their ability not to crack when heated. Grass was laid over the hot stones inside the Imu, and this became the bed for cooking. Some meat, like pig, were cooked by placing hot stones inside the animal;[xi] with these methods, ceramic cooking vessels were not needed.

Hawaii was evidently the last Polynesian Island to be colonized. The geographic progression of settlement eastward and through the Marquesas around 900 AD, coupled with the historical timeline for the rise and decline of Lapita pottery, explain the absence of any kind ceramic artifacts in the Hawaiian archipelago. Hawaii literally has no ancient ceramic tradition.

This leads us to the present.

Artists focusing on the ceramic medium are active in Hawaii today. This contemporary tradition of making is traceable to its beginnings in 1947 at the University of Hawaii at Manoa, which is located in Honolulu on the island of Oahu. Claude Horan started the Ceramics program at the University (UH) when he took a position as an Assistant Professor of Art that year.[xii] Horan received his graduate degree from San Jose State University in California, solidifying a connection for ceramics to the mainland US. Harue McVay joined the full time ceramics faculty at UH in 1951, followed by Frank Beaver and Suzanne Wolfe in 1971.

Hawaii, with its geographic location in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, is a natural place for Eastern and Western philosophies to meld. The Ceramics area of University of Hawaii at Manoa has embraced this idea of cross-cultural interaction since its inception; a workshop by Shoji Hamada and Bernard Leach in 1953 is indicative of this. The 2 most internationally prominent individuals who studied in the program are Toshiko Takaezu and Henry Takemoto; both of Asian descent, built prominent careers in the United States.

The most recent incarnation of events at the University of Hawaii intended to spur cultural exchange are the "East - West Ceramics Collaborations". These international workshops, conceived and organized by Suzanne Wolfe, beginning in 1995, have taken place 5 times. In addition to the "East - West Ceramics Collaborations" there have been 3 additional summer workshops including large groups of students from Asian countries. The seeds for these events are within the cross-cultural environment that is Hawaii.[xiii] The 5th East West Ceramics Collaboration took place in the summer of 2011. The works made during the workshop were showcased in a prominent exhibition coinciding with the Asian Pacific Economic Conference (APEC) in the fall of 2011 in Honolulu.

Hawaii also has an active craft organization - Hawaii Craftsmen. Hawaii Craftsmen acts as a bridge between the academic world and the professional craft community. The most prominent ceramic event that they sponsor is Raku Ho'olaule'a. This event has been held every year since its

inception in 1976. The spirit of this event is also one of cultural interchange between East and West. Hundreds of ceramic artists gather and camp on the beach in Hawaii and fire works using the raku process. The spirit of these events emphasizes the natural environment of Hawaii, community, cooperation, and teamwork.

Lineage of the Hawaiian people and culture connects directly to the pre-historical Lapita Cultural Construct. Much of what we know about these people and that time is derived from the shards of pottery that they left behind. The history of the Hawaiian Archipelago during ancient times is deduced in large part from this pottery and the inferences that the shards make from an archeological perspective. I find it interesting that the history of the place is in large part derived from a tradition of pottery that never actually existed in the islands. In fact, the pottery tradition was extinct before people ever set foot in Hawaii.

The Hawaiian tradition of making with clay is truly rooted in recent times. Ceramic Artists in Hawaii have the advantage of exposure to both the East and the West, physically finding themselves in the area directly between, and culturally blended. This place acts as a bridge. Information and people of all types move constantly through Hawaii, on their way across the Pacific from every direction. They also have the advantage of connection to a tradition of prehistoric pottery which defines the culture of the geographic region spanning much of the southwestern Pacific; this pottery tradition defines much of what we know about ancient Polynesia. This connection to the past is loose enough that contemporary Hawaiian artists using clay are not bound by it, however, they are free to reference it. Geographically they are in the center between the cultures of the East and the West; they are also completely isolated by vast distances from these same cultures. Perhaps Hawaii has the ideal environment for artists to make work with connection to culture and history; perhaps Hawaii is the ideal place for artists to make work with complete freedom from cultural and historical constraints.

[i] The Lapita Peoples, Ancestors of the Oceanic World. Patrick Vinton Kirch Blackwell Publishers 1997 Pg. 118-161

[ii] The Lapita Peoples, Ancestors of the Oceanic World. Patrick Vinton Kirch Blackwell Publishers 1997 pg. 13-14

[iii] The Lapita Peoples, Ancestors of the Oceanic World. Patrick Vinton Kirch Blackwell Publishers 1997 pg. 17

[iv] The Lapita Peoples, Ancestors of the Oceanic World. Patrick Vinton Kirch Blackwell Publishers 1997 Pg 131-32

[v][v] Lost Maritime Cultures, China and the Pacific. Edited by Tianlong Jiao. Bishop Museum Press 2007 pg 36-37

[vi] The Pacific Islands, Third Edition. Douglas L. Oliver. University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu 1989 pg. 176-177

[vii] Bishop Museum, Main Exhibition in Hawaii Hall. Honolulu Hawaii 2010

[viii] We, the Navigators, the Ancient Art of Landfinding in the Pacific, Second Edition. David Lewis, Sir Derek Oulton, Editor. University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu. 1994 Pg. 7

[ix] Prehistory in the Pacific Islands. John Terrell. Cambridge University Press 1986 Pg. 77

[x] Polynesia in Early Historic Times. Douglas Oliver. Bess Press, Honolulu, Hawaii 2002 Pg. 13, 57

[xi][xi] Ancient Hawaiian Civilization, A Series of Lectures Delivered at the Kamehameha Schools by, Handy, Emory, Bryan, Buck, Wise, and Grant. Mutual Publishing 1999 pg. 92-93

[xii] Ceramics in Hawaii. Shige Yamada. 1977 pg.11, 20

[xiii] International Asia - Pacific Contemporary Ceramics Invitational Exhibition Catalog, essay- Ceramics in Hawaii. By Suzanne Wolfe. Taipei County Yingko Ceramics Museum. 2002 pg. 137-145