

What is Tapa?

by Diane Day, CPF

Tapa, or barkcloth, is a clothlike paper that has been made for thousands of years, primarily by people living in tropical areas of the world. There are some regional differences between the Asian/Pacific, the South American, and the African methods of making tapa, but the basic process is the same.

It can be made large or small, thick or thin, coarse or fine, plain or decorated. Tapa has been widely used as a printing and writing surface for clothing, bedding, wall-coverings, and molded into sculptural forms. It has been used in ceremonies and given as gifts. However, much of the tapa made today is for the tourist trade.

Tapa is made from the inner bark of various trees and plants, including mulberry, breadfruit, and fig. A section of both outer and inner bark is stripped from the wood core. The outer bark is then stripped off the inner bark. Depending on the geographic region, the following procedure may vary.

In some regions, the inner bark is dampened or soaked in clean water. Depending on the region and desired result, soaking time varies from hours to weeks. In some places, the bark is rolled in banana leaves and steamed over a fire to moisten it. And in other regions, the inner bark is placed in plain water and cooked.

After the inner bark is soaked, it is beaten over a wooden plank or log with a wooden beater. This process may expand the tapa up to five times its original width. Any holes are patched with pieces of previously made tapa that are sewn into place.

Thicker sheets can be made by beating wet sheets to form a permanent bond. Large sheets are made by beating overlapping strips. Finished sheets of tapa are then dried using various techniques. Drying time varies depending on the temperature and humidity. The size of a finished sheet can vary from several inches to several feet.

Tapa that is made to sleep on, or to be worn, is soft, flexible, and somewhat resistant to tearing. If it is to be written or painted on, it is made stiffer and smoother. The color of tapa can vary from white to reddish brown, depending on the plant and the processing. Traditionally, vegetable dyes were used to decorate tapas and the colors were generally limited to black, brown, yellow, green, and red.

Basic decorating techniques include freehand painting using black dye to make an outline with other colors added later. Another process is similar to brass rubbing in that the tapa is placed over a carved board and rubbed with colored dyes. Designs vary upon the region of the world, from representations of plants and animals to geometric motifs.

Very little tapa has survived through the centuries due to factors, such as insects, climate, and general wear and tear.

Tapa has always been considered expendable by the local people since new tapas can be easily made.

When mounting tapa, should you treat it like a paper or a textile? Maybe a little of both. It can be sewn onto a piece of fabric and then gently stretched around a board. If it is not coated with anything, it can be hinged to a mounting/backing board as a print would be. ■

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