

# Pitcairn tapa and the 'Ahu Sistas

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

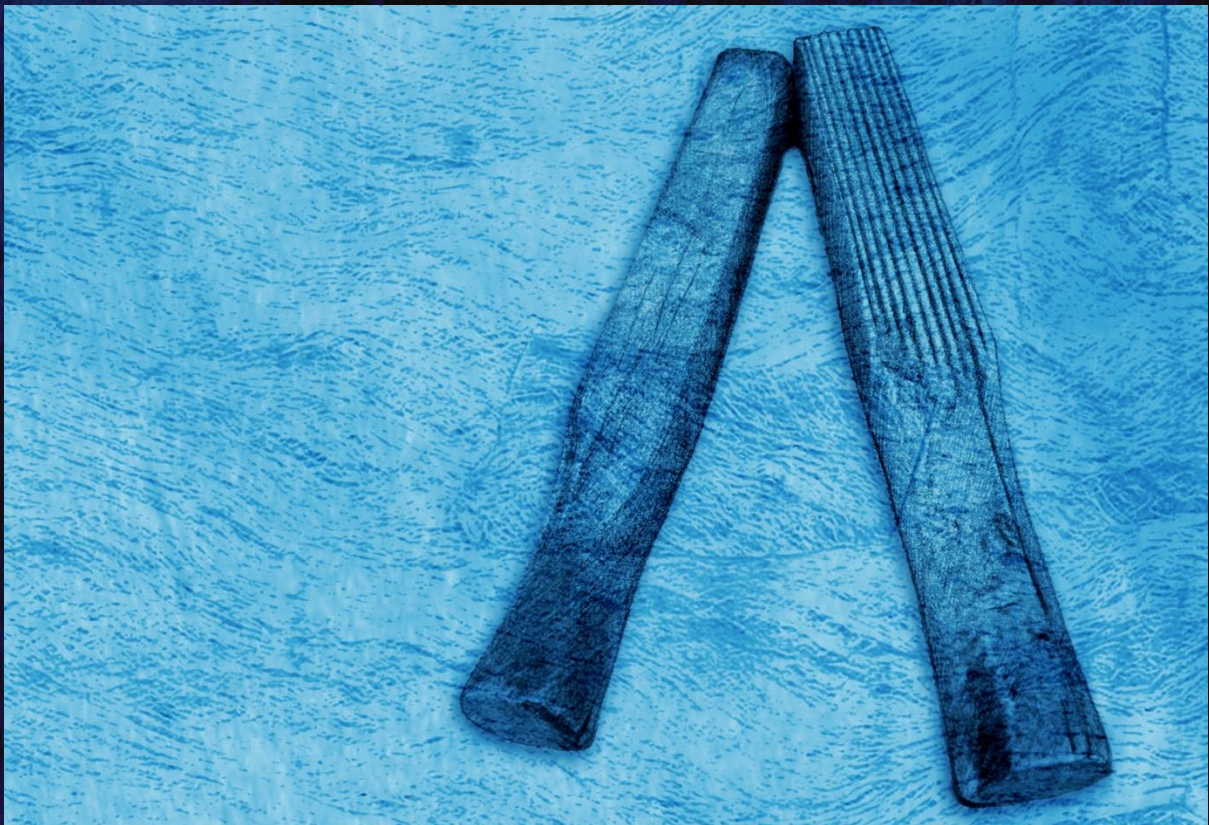


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## 'Ahu Sistas

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.