



MARY J. PRITCHARD
ARTIST

"If I lose something of individuality, I gain more in something of brotherhood; and if I sometimes deny myself something I want, I delight in the feeling of doing something, of sharing something we can all understand and find joy in," confesses Samoa's foremost artist and siapo-maker of the 20th century, Mary J. Pritchard.

Mary Jewett Pritchard was born on September 17, 1905, to Felesita Fuga of a well-known family in the village of Pago Pago and her husband, Joseph Jewett of New York, who arrived in Samoa in the late 1800s and never left. Mary's father passed away when she was just 18 years of age and soon she was the only breadwinner for her widowed mother and entire family.

In 1925, she married Ron Pritchard of the village of Leone, and while her husband managed a store that belonged to his brother-in-law, B.F. Kneubuhl, Mary started a business of her own, shipping siapo, floor mats and hula skirts to dealers in Honolulu, where these objects were then very much in demand.

Siapo is a bark cloth made from the bast of the paper mulberry tree. A small piece of bast is beaten until it becomes larger. Then it is decorated by applying designs and colors. Every element in the making of this cloth comes from nature, even the dyes for the colors and the designs as well. Europeans, even as early as in the days of Captain Cook when he sailed the Pacific Ocean, have been intrigued by this bark cloth of Polynesia, since their cloth was primarily the product of woven fibers.

While the making of siapo was a normal part of everyday life in Samoa as Mary was growing up, it was not until she married that she became more interested in the art. Perhaps even her business of exporting siapo contributed to the kindling of her curiosity, and she took advantage of every opportunity she had to learn the intricate art of siapo-making from past masters, notably two women, Tui'uli Leoso and Kolone Faiivae Leoso of the village of Leone. She worked diligently and acquired the skills of the art with exceptional perception.

American Samoa's first elected Samoan Governor, Peter Tali Coleman, has this to say of the artist: "Mary's living experience and extensive expertise in siapo-making gained under personal tutelage of past masters of this native art are examples of how Samoans gain knowledge and build character. Her drive and dedication in revitalizing siapo-making among our Samoan young people is born of her fierce pride in her Samoan heritage."

While many Samoan women were siapo-makers, only Mary Pritchard and a handful of them continued after World War II to make some freehand pieces of siapo for personal reasons. The art began to fade away with the pressures and pace of post-war Westernization.

Concerned over how it would be perpetuated, Mary began her crusade to focus attention on the uniqueness of the art of Samoan siapo-making and the value of its tradition. What she considered the turning point of her pilgrimage came in 1971 when she was chosen for inclusion in the Public Broadcasting Services (PBS) television series "Artists in America." Her film was received with much enthusiasm, and from then on demands on her for personal appearances, demonstrations and teaching increased. Mary worked long and hard and her enthusiasm and dedication to her cause never once were in question, and in spite of the many man-made obstacles and stumbling blocks she encountered, she remained in good spirits, highly motivated, her focus unobstructed.

Mary Jewett Pritchard has, for most of her adult life, almost single-handedly perpetuated for Samoa the practice of making siapo, the bark cloth of Polynesia. For over 50 years she has labored with unfaltering dedication, making siapo and teaching the art of making it to youngsters and adults alike. Her timely commitment to the perpetuation of this unique traditional art form of Samoa has contributed immensely to keeping the practice alive today. It could have been lost as it has been in many Polynesian islands; today, only in Samoa, Tonga and Fiji is the art of making siapo pursued as a continuous tradition.

Mary Pritchard was retained by the Museum of American Samoa, the Jean P. Haydon Museum, to continue on a full-time basis all those activities that have now led to the complete revival and national consciousness of the value and uniqueness of this traditional art form of Samoa. Her name has become synonymous with Samoan siapo-making.

Today at age 80 she continues with vigor to highlight the art of siapo-making wherever she is. Mary belongs to and has been honored numerous times by a number of distinguished women's organizations, including the Pan Pacific Southeast Asia Women's Association (PPSEAWA). She has traveled widely in the Pacific, the Orient, and in North America, and everywhere she has been she is the symbol of an artist of a unique type, a category unto herself and a living tradition of Polynesia who "has shown that in an otherwise ordered and (highly) structured society siapo (making) not only was a necessary part of traditional life, but a major creative and artistic outlet for Samoan women" (Adrienne L. Kaeppler).

This intricate and fascinating traditional art form of Samoa, the making of siapo that so delights her students and friends and appeals strongly to others of all ages and nationalities, is laid out in detail in the book Siapo: Bark Cloth Art of Samoa, authored by the artist, copyrighted 1984, American Samoa Council on Culture, Arts and Humanities.