

## “NIMAMEA’A: THE FINE ARTS OF TONGAN EMBROIDERY AND CROCHET”

### Kolokesa Uafā Māhina-Tuai and Manuēsina ‘Ofa-ki-Hautolo Māhina

“Nimamea’a: The fine Arts of Tongan Embroidery and Crochet” was the first large-scale Pacific exhibition to be held at Objectspace, although the gallery had previously staged a number of Maori exhibitions.<sup>1</sup> Objectspace is a small independent public gallery located in Auckland, dedicated to provoking “new assessments about the making, functioning and value of works and practices”<sup>2</sup> within the fields of craft, applied arts and design. The gallery provided an important opportunity for exhibiting and discussing Tongan art. When considering Tongan art, it is important to understand and discuss it from a Tongan world view as opposed to a ‘Western Art’ world view. This approach not only does justice to Tongan art forms, but avoids misunderstanding and misinterpretation when foreign understandings are assumed. Objectspace provided a collaborative opportunity to present Tongan art from a Tongan perspective. The result was “Nimamea’a: The Fine Arts of Tongan Embroidery and Crochet,” an in-depth exhibition articulated from a Tongan perspective and world view.

This is only the second time that Tongan embroidery and crochet have been the sole focus of an exhibition in a New Zealand art gallery. The first was the show “Tongan Style” at Fresh Gallery Otago in May 2010, that in turn generated “Nimamea’a: The Fine Arts of Tongan Embroidery and Crochet.” This second exhibition enabled a more in-depth discussion of Tongan art and Tongan women’s fine arts groups. This exhibition was important in highlighting the extent to which embroidery and crochet have become part of Tonga’s fine arts repertoire. The exhibition also benefited from exposure to a broad urban audience.

#### TONGAN ARTS

Tongan art is divided into three categories: *tufunga* (material), *faiva* (performance) and *nimamea`a* (fine) arts.<sup>3</sup> *Tufunga* literally means ‘beating the surface’ / ‘marking the surface’ or ‘the beating out of form’ / ‘creating form’;<sup>4</sup> *faiva* literally means to ‘doing time in space’ or the ‘intensification’ of time and ‘reconstitution’ of space;<sup>5</sup> and *nimamea`a* literally means ‘fine hands’<sup>6</sup>, a reflection of the delicate and meticulous operation of the performer’s hands as a means of production. These categories are further subdivided into various practices. For example, *tufunga* includes, but is not

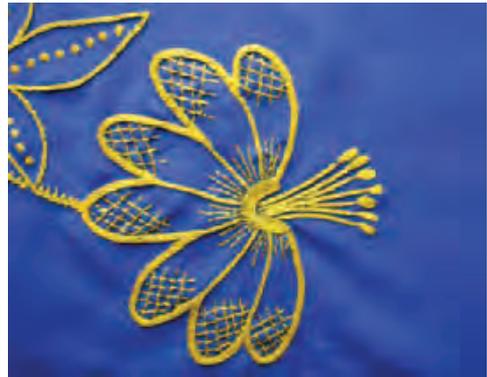


Figure 1. Teunga lotu, Church outfit, 2010 Made in Mt Roskill, Auckland, New Zealand by Noma ‘Ofa-Ki-Nu’usila Talakia’atu.



Figure 2. Kofuloto leisi, Crocheted slip, 2009 Made in Mt Roskill, Auckland, New Zealand by Manue-sina To - nata.



Figure 3. Tupenu matala'i'akau, Embroidered sheet, 1973/74  
Made in Tatakamotonga, Tongatapu, Tonga  
by Kolokesa Kuli-kefu.



Figure 4. Tupenu moe tangaipilo matala'i'akau, Embroidered  
sheet and pillowcase set, 1993/94 Made in Auckland, New  
Zealand, by Tu'utanga Hunuhunu Ma-hina.

restricted to, *tufunga tāvalivali* (painting), *tufunga lalava* (kafa sennit-lashing), *tufunga langafale* (house-building) and *tufunga tātatau* (tattooing). *Faiva* includes, but is not restricted to, *faiva ta'anga* (poetry), *faiva hiva* (music) and *faiva haka* (dance). *Nimamea'a* includes, but is not restricted to, *nimamea'a lālanga* (mat-weaving), *nimamea'a koka'anga* (barkcloth-making) and *nimamea'a tuikakala* (flower designing). The three categories of art are connected to the 'gender' divisions of functions between men and women in Tonga where *tufunga* and *faiva* are predominantly male-dominated activities and *nimamea'a* are predominantly the domain of women. However, there are areas where these gender divisions can overlap,<sup>7</sup> such as women artists who are involved in *faiva* performance arts as well as in *nimamea'a* or fine arts.

The three categories of art are also classified in relation to the body.<sup>8</sup> *Tufunga* and *nimamea'a* arts are 'tefito-he-tu`a-sino' or 'non-body-centred,' meaning that their production is situated outside the body, and the body is simply utilised as an instrument.<sup>9</sup> *Faiva* on the other hand are 'tefito-he-sino' or 'body-centred' – performance arts are created by the body and centred on the body, and the body is the medium used in the process of production.<sup>10</sup> These three domains of art, with the refined knowledge and skills associated with them, were hereditary professions and practiced as specialised forms of social activity.<sup>11</sup> All three categories vary in terms of their *fūo* (form), *uho* (content) and *vaka* or *hala*<sup>12</sup> (medium), and have multiple functions.<sup>13</sup> In the classical Tongan arts, conceptions of 'quality' and 'utility' are combined to produce both beautiful and useful works, and quality is always given priority over utility.<sup>14</sup> Quality comprises what is internal or intrinsic to art and is connected to the process of production; quality includes *tatau* (symmetry), *potupotutatau* (harmony) and *malie* or *faka'ofa'ofa* (beauty). Utility on the other hand is comprised of what is external or extrinsic to the arts, and is connected to the outcome and, in turn, the use or function of art.

Tongan art is highly sophisticated in terms of its plural, holistic, circular and inclusive nature. Over time and space, the three basic categories have remained the same despite the incorporation of new materials, art practices and advances in technology. This is because the conceptual essence and framework relevant to each of the three categories has remained largely intact. This framework defies terms such as 'customary,' 'heritage,' 'contemporary' and 'modern' used to classify Tongan art today. The use of such terms imposes foreign concepts that are in opposition to the traditional conceptual framework of Tongan art and results in the compartmentalising of art



Figure 5. Kofuloto leisi, Crochet top, 1990's, Made in Mt Roskill, Auckland, New Zealand by Lingsiva 'Aloua.

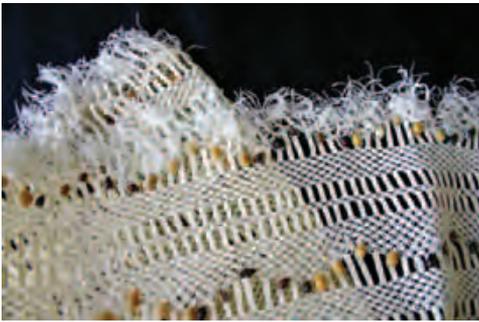


Figure 6. Ta'ovala, Waist mat, 2001 Made in Auckland, New Zealand by Lupe Mahe. (Ta'ovala made from raffia ribbon using hand knotted technique of no'ono'o or sia, from the island of Nuia).

forms, which can lead in turn to misunderstanding and misinterpretation. Such misconstructions sever the natural cyclical flow inherent in the Tongan concept and practice of art, which is plural, holistic, circular and inclusive in approach, as opposed to the individualistic and exclusive Western concept of art.

### NIMAMEA'A: TONGAN FINE ARTS

Embroidery and crochet are examples of two introduced art practices that have been incorporated into the Tongan fine arts category of *nimamea'a*; embroidery is known as *nimamea'a langaleisi* and crochet as *nimamea'a tuimatala'i'akau*. Tongan women have adopted and, over time, adapted these two practices in unique ways, so that they now feature prominently in various Tongan cultural contexts.

European missionaries' wives were responsible for introducing embroidery and crochet to local Tongan women. These skills were later incorporated into the educational syllabus of Catholic and Methodist schools for girls, which is where some of the artists in this exhibition were first taught the skills of embroidery and crochet. Once they learned these skills they continued to practice them after leaving school, carrying them into their adult life, and have since passed on their knowledge and skills to others.

Although it is accepted that the art of embroidery and crochet were originally Western forms of practice brought to Tonga by missionaries' wives, it can be argued that they enhanced and expanded existing Tongan art concepts and practices.<sup>15</sup> For example, embroidery or *nimamea'a tuimatala'i'akau*<sup>16</sup> is a new expression of *nimamea'a tuikakala*,<sup>17</sup> or flower designing. *Nimamea'a tuikakala* involves working with natural materials such as sweet-scent flowers, fruits, barks and leaves to create beautiful floral designs for necklaces, waist ornaments or dance costumes. *Nimamea'a tuimatala'i'akau* is a form of *tuikakala* that involves working with new materials such as a needle and different coloured thread on a white canvas. *Nimamea'a langaleisi*<sup>18</sup> or crochet on the other hand is an expansion of *nimamea'a lalanga* or weaving,<sup>19</sup> which involves weaving of natural materials with the hand as opposed to needle and thread.<sup>20</sup>

Whether the argument is that *langaleisi* and *tuimatala'i'akau* are a development of the already existing art practices of *lalanga* and *tuikakala*, or whether they are regarded as introduced art practices, does not affect the character of Tongan art, as the circular and inclusive nature of Tongan arts accommodates both possibilities. Tongan women fine artists have embraced the two art forms of *nimamea'a langaleisi* and *nimamea'a tuimatala'i'akau* and have made them their own. For example, these artists masterfully adorn plain (and usually white) bed sheets and pillowcases with beautiful and intricate embroidered designs, in some cases featuring fine crochet detailing. These designs are often floral but there are exceptions – as in the birds, faces, proverb texts and stars featured in this exhibition.



Figure 7. Kiekie (Waist ornament), 2010 by Falesiu Siu, made from wool carpet yarn.

Embroidered and crochet bed sheets and pillowcases are not only fine works of art in themselves, but are also part of Tongan women's material wealth. As items of wealth they play an important cultural and artistic role in ceremonies involving gift-giving and receiving, such as birthdays and weddings. Other than featuring in such contexts, they are normally reserved for special uses such as decorating the interior of a church for a commemorative Sunday, decorating one's home or a specific venue for the funeral of a loved one, or for use within one's own home on very special occasions.

*Nimamea'a langaleisi* and *nimamea'a tuimatala'i'akau* also feature in Tongan women's clothing and undergarments. A group of women from the village of Tefisi, Vava'u in Tonga have developed, with a sense of creativity and originality, a particular style of garment known as 'Tefisi style'.<sup>21</sup> This style incorporates either a combination of crochet and embroidery or just crochet, blended with a freestyle construction method using particular types of material; the garment is then further individualised, with each woman adding her unique flair. A typical 'Tefisi style' garment is comprised of a dress and wraparound made of sheer fabric such as lace or chiffon. Worn underneath is a slip or undergarment that can be seen through the sheer fabric. This undergarment would either be crocheted around the edges with embroidery, or feature embroidery on its own; alternatively, the top half can be completely crocheted. The overall look is a layered style. The 'Tefisi style' is well known within the Tongan community in Auckland and is associated with women from this village. However, other Tongan women have also been influenced by this particular style. These outfits are worn to church and on special occasions such as weddings and birthdays.

*Nimamea'a langalesisi* is also used by women for the creation of *ta'ovala* (waist mats) and *kiekie* (waist ornaments). The formal wearing of *ta'ovala*, by both men and women, and *kiekie*, by women only, are part of Tongan national dress and are usually worn as markers of respect. They are worn to church and on special occasions such as weddings, birthdays and christenings. *Ta'ovala* and *kiekie* were once only made with natural fibres, but now they are made with both natural and synthetic materials. With access to readily available and cheap materials, there are no creative boundaries to the making of *ta'ovala* and *kiekie* today. These artists also love to create beautiful works using recycled materials such as synthetic sacks; they also reuse other people's rubbish, thus validating the popular saying that "One man's trash is another man's treasure." Women garment-makers take an innovative approach, not only with their materials but also with their choice of designs and patterns. The *ta'ovala* and *kiekie* featured in this exhibition are made out of discarded outdoor carpet yarn and recycled synthetic sugar sacks.

## TONGAN WOMEN'S FINE ARTS GROUPS

The Tongan proverb "'Oku tōkanga 'a tangata pea 'oku manga ka e falehanga 'a fafine pea 'oku hanga" can be translated as "Men possess the gardens measured by the feet, but women possess the house measured by the hands."<sup>22</sup> This proverb alludes to the customary division of labour between men and women. Men's labour is associated with working the land, while women's work around the home includes weaving and other forms of fine arts. *Manga* and *hanga* are Tongan forms of measurement whereby men measure their work with *manga*, using their feet, while women measure their fine arts with *hanga*, using their hands. This proverb alludes to the key role that women play with respect to work around the home, but also with *nimamea'a*, our fine arts.

The role that women play in maintaining and preserving the fine arts is very significant, but not always recognised outside of a Tongan context. Some art practices within the category of *nimamea'a* are more recognisable than others, such as *nimamea'a koka'anga*, the fine art of *ngatu*-making or Tongan barkcloth-making. Tongan women are prolific makers of barkcloth, and Tongan *ngatu* are easily distinguishable from others made throughout the Moana Pacific. However, other art practices such as *nimamea'a langaleisi* and *tuimatala'i'akau* are not as easily recognisable as Tongan, as the arts of embroidery and crochet are widely practiced throughout the Pacific. That is why exhibitions such as "Nimamea'a: the Fine Arts of Tongan Embroidery and Crochet" are important in not only making a statement that embroidery and crochet are part of Tonga's art thinking and practice or collective heritage, and in particular as part of the classification of *nimamea'a* or fine arts, but also to illustrate that they are items of wealth that feature in various Tongan cultural contexts.

The continued practice, maintenance and preservation of Tongan fine arts are in the hands of women artists who work on their own or in groups such as a *kautaha koka'anga* – a collective that comes together to make *ngatu* or barkcloth. In New Zealand there are various women's groups, formed as part of the village, community or church, which includes art in their activities. The women featured in this exhibition are all individual artists in their own right, but they are also members of women's fine arts groups which get together regularly for fellowship as well as to create works of art.

## CONCLUSION

This exhibition focuses on the fine arts of *nimamea'a tuimatala'i'akau* or embroidering and *nimamea'a langaleisi* or crocheting. Their specific and general aesthetic, practical qualities and values can be appreciated more critically in the broader context of the framework of Tongan art and its categories of *faiva*, *tufunga*, and *nimamea'a*. It is only through an understanding of this framework for Tongan arts (in particular *nimamea'a*), and how new art practices are incorporated within each category, that one can truly appreciate the fine arts of Tongan embroidery and crochet. "Nimamea'a: the Fine Arts of Tongan Embroidery and Crochet" draws attention to the love, passion, dedication, ingenuity and innovation displayed by Tongan women fine artists. They are the pioneers, custodians and teachers of Tonga's *nimamea'a* or fine arts traditions, and are the living treasures within whom these traditions continue to be practiced, maintained and preserved for posterity.

### Curators

**Kolokesa Uafā Māhina-Tuai** is a freelance curator, writer and project manager. She was formerly curator of Pacific cultures at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (Te Papa) where she co-curated its current permanent Pacific exhibition, "Tangata o le Moana: The Story of Pacific People in New Zealand." Kolokesa is also the project manager for Kulā 'Uli Publishing (NZ), where she is co-illustrator of its new children's book series. Her research interests include the tangible and intangible heritage of the Pacific, with a specific focus on Tonga, and the history of Pacific peoples in New Zealand.

**Manuēsina 'Ofa-ki-Hautolo Māhina** hails from Tefisi, Vava'u and Tatakamotonga, Mu'a, Tonga. She has a background in Pacific fashion, specifically Tongan fashion and style. At a young age Manuēsina was introduced to the 'wonders' of the sewing machine, as well as being exposed to the unique and innovative fashion of Tongan women

in New Zealand which has continued to fuel her interest and passion in the area. Manuēsina has been a member of various Tongan women's arts groups over the years and is currently a member of the Kulupu Falehanga 'i Teleiloa group where she continues to be inspired by their creativity and innovation in keeping the Tongan fine arts alive and thriving in New Zealand.

## Makers

**Lingsiva 'Aloua:** Lingsiva was born in Tefisi, Vava'u, Tonga in 1945. She migrated to New Zealand in 1986 and currently lives in Mt Roskill. Her skills and knowledge of sewing, crochet and embroidery was learnt from her eldest sister Manue-sina To - nata. Lingsiva is still actively practicing sewing, embroidery and crochet and has passed these skills on to her daughter-in-law.

**Kolokesa Kuli-kefu:** Kolokesa was born in Tongatapu, Tonga on December 24 1948. She migrated to New Zealand in 1977 and now lives in Mangere. She first encountered embroidery, knitting and crocheting as a young student at Queen Sa-lote College in Tonga. She is currently a member of a Mangere based Tongan women's arts group called Kulupu Falehanga 'i Teleiloa.

**Lupe Mahe:** Lupe was born in Tongatapu on July 5th 1966. She migrated to New Zealand in 1986 and currently lives in Pakuranga. She learnt basic skills of the fine arts of nimamea'a in her second year at high school at Queen Sa-lote College in Tonga. She is a member of the Otago based Tongan women's arts group, 'Toakase Women's Group'.

**Tu'utanga Hunuhunu Ma-hina:** Tu'utanga is 58 years old and was born on July 15 1953 in Tongatapu, Tonga. She migrated to New Zealand in 1978 and now lives in Mount Eden. She learned sewing as a student at Queen Sa - lote College in Tonga. She is currently a member of a Mangere based Tongan women's arts group called Kulupu Falehanga 'i Teleiloa.

**Falesiu Siu:** Falesiu was born in Tongatapu, Tonga on February 21st 1972. Her skills and knowledge in the fine arts of nimamea'a started off with learning from her mother 'Alisi Taipaleti and her late maternal grandmother Lafimoa Lafitani. She is a member of the Otago based Tongan women's arts group, 'Toakase Women's Group'.

**Noma 'Ofa-Ki-Nu'usila Talakia'atu:** Noma was born in Tefisi, Vava'u, Tonga on February 21st 1956. She migrated to New Zealand in 1986 and currently lives in Mt Roskill. She learnt basic sewing skills while in high school and her skills and knowledge of crochet and embroidery was passed on from her mother, Manue-sina Tonata.

**Manue-sina Tonata:** Manue-sina was born in Tefisi, Vava'u, Tonga in 1928. She migrated to New Zealand in 1989 and currently lives in Mt Roskill. She was urged by her mother to attend an all-girl Catholic School and it was there that she learned sewing, embroidery and crochet. Manu sina has passed on some of this knowledge and practice to her two younger sisters and also her eldest daughter. She still continues to practice embroidery and crochet.

1 The exhibition "Nimamea'a: The Fine Arts of Tongan Embroidery and Crochet" was presented at Objectspace from 19 November to 22 December 2011. The exhibition catalogue can be purchased directly from Objectspace or downloaded from <http://www.objectspace.org.nz/publications/viewPublication.php?documentCode=3117>. The authors wish to thank Objectspace for permission to reprint the catalogue essay.

2 See <http://www.objectspace.org.nz/about/index.php>.

3 See 'O Māhina, "Faiva Fakaoli: The Tongan Performance Art of Humor," *Pacific Studies*, 31:1 (2008), 31-54; 'O Māhina, "From Vale (Ignorance) to 'Ilo (Knowledge) to Poto (Skill), the Tongan Theory of Ako (Education): Theorising Old Problems Anew," *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 4:1 (2008), 67-96; 'O Māhina, "Tā, Vā and Moana: Temporality, Spatiality and Indigeneity," *Pacific Studies*, 33:2/3 (2010); 'O Māhina, *I 6/1 | Tonga he Fepaki / Tonga in Crisis* (Auckland, Aotearoa/ New Zealand: Lo'au Research Society (LRS) Publishing, 2010); 'O Māhina and SF Potauaine, "Tatau: A Ta-Va [Time-Space] Transformation," in 'O Māhina, J Dudding and KU Māhina-Tu'ai, *Tatau: Fenapasi 'o e Fepaki/Tatau: Symmetry, Harmony and Beauty: The Art of Semisi Fetokai Potauaine* (Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand: LRS Publishing [in conjunction with Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge University, UK], 2010).

- 4 Māhina, "Faiva Fakaoli," Māhina, "From Vale (Ignorance) to 'Ilo (Knowledge)" and 'O Māhina, TO Ka'ili and 'A Ka'ili, Ko e Ngaahi 'Ata mei he Hisitolia mo e Kalatua `o Tonga: Ke Tufunga`i ha lea Tonga Fakaako (Auckland: Centre for Pacific Studies, the University of Auckland, 2006).
- 5 SF Potauaine, "Tectonic of the Fale: Four Dimensional, Three Divisional," Unpub. Master of Architecture thesis (University of Auckland, 2010), 13.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid., 16.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Māhina, Ka'ili and Ka'ili, Ko e Ngaahi `Ata mei he Hisitolia mo e Kalatua `o Tonga; M'Ō Māhina, "Teuteu, The Dress Body: Women's 'Fashion' in Tongan Church in Auckland," Unpub. diss. (University of Auckland, 2006).
- 10 Potauaine, "Tectonic of the Fale," 16.
- 11 Ibid., 17.
- 12 The term *hala* means medium or form, as in "Tāvolo hala he sikotā" (the devil appears in the medium of a sikotā bird). T Ka'ili, personal communication, 13 Jan 2011.
- 13 Māhina, "Faiva Fakaoli," 37.
- 14 Ibid. and Māhina, "From Vale (Ignorance) to 'Ilo (Knowledge)."
- 15 'O Māhina, personal communication with Kolokesa Māhina-Tuai, April 2010.
- 16 The Tongan word for flowers is *matala'i'akau*, which literally means 'eye of the trees,' whereas the generic term *kakala* refers to *matala'i'akau* or flowers interlaced into complex, elaborate, and beautiful *kupesi* or geometric designs.
- 17 The Tongan word *tui* means 'to pierce,' and relates to the fine arts of *tuimatala'i'akau* and *tuikakala*.
- 18 The word 'leisi,' as in the nimamea'a langalesi, is a Tonganisation of the English word 'lace.'
- 19 The Tongan word *langa* or *lalanga*, as used in nimamea'a langalesi or crocheting and nimamea'a *lalanga* or mat-weaving, means 'to weave.'
- 20 In fine arts such as *tuimatala'i'akau* or embroidering and *tuikakala* or flower-designing, the *mata'ihui* [eye of the needle], or its opposite, *ava'ihui* [hole of the needle] is used as an artistic device for the intersection of cotton threads in the production of flower designs or intersecting flower pedals, fruit-strips, bark-strips, and leaves in the production of *kupesi* or geometric designs. The same applies to the fine art of langalesi or crocheting, where the 'eye of the needle' or 'hole of the needle' is used for the intersection of cotton threads.
- 21 See Māhina, "Teuteu, The Dress Body." Garment-makers Manuēsina Tonata, Lingsiva 'Aloua and Noma 'Ofa-ki-Nu'usila Talakia'atu all hail from the village of Tefisi, Vava'u Tonga.
- 22 'O Māhina, personal communication with Kolokesa Māhina-Tuai, September 2011.

NIMAMEA'A The fine arts of Tongan embroidery and crochet 19 NOV — 22 DEC 2011 at Objectspace

Full catalogue is available from Object Space. *Nimamea'a: The fine arts of Tongan embroidery and crochet*. The exhibition catalogue features writing by curators Kolokesa Uafā Māhina-Tuai and Manuēsina, 'Ofa-ki-Hautolo Māhina. All text has been translated into Tongan by Hufanga Dr. Okusitino Māhina.

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Embroidered WORKS\_Captions

