The island of Tahiti, which Captain Cook visited during his voyages to the South Pacific. Photograph by Ingram Publishing.

OPPOSITE: Tahitians wearing barkcloth clothing, drawn by Sydney Parkinson on Cook’s first voyage, 1769. From the State Library of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia. Barkcloth sample pages. PM object 87-3-1.
IN THE SUMMER OF 1919, GEORGE BYRON GORDON,
the Director of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology
and Anthropology, discovered a curious book in London. Small and
unassuming, its neatly bound covers contained eight pages of printed
catalogue followed by 43 specimens of 18th-century Polynesian barkcloth,
richly colored and textured. With funds from the George Leib Harrison
Foundation, the Penn Museum purchased the book in 1920.
A Different Shaw

Pages from *A Catalogue of the Different Specimens of Cloth Collected on the Three Voyages of Captain Cook in the possession of the Penn Museum, incorrectly assumed to be the volume described by H.U. Hall in 1921, showing the colors and patterns of barkcloths collected by Cook in the Hawaiian Islands. PM object 87-3-1.

Recently photographed by the Smithsonian Institution, this book can be seen at http://openn.library.upenn.edu/Data/0016/html/87-3-1.html
The Museum had just acquired *A Catalogue of the Different Specimens of Cloth Collected in the Three Voyages of Captain Cook*, a series published by Alexander Shaw in 1787. A recent census by Donald Kerr has located 66 of these books in public and private collections; their catalogue promises 39 specimens “properly arrainged [sic]” yet each is unique. There is not only a wide variance in specimen numbers, sizes, and types throughout the extant books, but also several derivatives: “snippet” books and samplers comprised of pieces of barkcloth—some no more than an inch square—excised from Shaw’s books by opportunist collectors. Additionally, a series of manuscript books with hand-lettered title pages contain barkcloth samples that appear to have been cut from the same cloth as Shaw’s, alongside feather, fiber, shell, and human hair samples also purported to have been collected on the voyages of British explorer Captain James Cook.

**The Potency of Things**

I started examining these books in 2010 for the Artefacts of Encounter Project at the University of Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (hereafter MAA) in the United Kingdom and became infatuated. I am fascinated by their confirmation of the potency of things. Shaw is thought to have amassed 110 barkcloths for his book project. The Cook voyage journals detail some being presented as huge bundles or in pieces up to 100 feet long. Yet it seems that even when reduced to a few inches square and pasted onto a page, each sample retained the power to instantiate actual meetings between Europeans and Polynesians, bringing the very substance of adventure into the parlors of British society.

Presumably sought after upon publication, several of Shaw’s books were owned by distinguished collectors and curators, and many now bear names recalling these associations. MAA is home to what is known colloquially as the “pre-Shaw Shaw,” a manuscript copy thought to have preceded Shaw’s publication run; the book at the Penn Museum has been known colloquially as the “Hall.”

Henry Usher Hall was Assistant Curator and Curator of the General Ethnology Section of the Museum from 1915 to 1935. To barkcloth book enthusiasts, he is a trail-blazer. Hall wrote arguably the earliest and most frequently cited
A scholarly paper about the Shaw books when he surveyed the copy newly acquired by Gordon for the Penn Museum for The Museum Journal in 1921, complete with detailed watercolors of its samples by Museum artist M. Louise Baker. In April 2013, I was hosted by the Keeper of the Oceanian Section, Adria Katz, to examine and photograph the book in its entirety.

Examining the Books

Two books were retrieved from special, climate-controlled storage for inspection. There was the “Hall” (so we thought) and another, a volume of barkcloth samples about which nothing was known. Its catalogue card suggested it too contained Cook voyage samples; perhaps it was a snippet book compiled using pieces cut from another book?

Adria and I started with the “Hall.” The binding was fragile and required support, yet the samples within were fresh and brightly colored. Propped carefully on sausages of soft fabric and held open gently with Perspex panels, its marbled boards revealed Shaw’s printed catalogue followed by pieces of barkcloth commensurate with samples in other Shaw volumes throughout the world. Hall had been meticulous in comparing the catalogue’s descriptions with the book’s contents, finding—like many researchers since—that very few in fact matched the details assigned to their catalogue numbers. Still, whether fine and gauzy or thick and stiff, the preservation of these plant fiber cloths, their pigments, their fine or coarse grooves, watermarks, and glazes belied their being bound together more than 200 years earlier. Adria and I traveled through page after page of barkcloth samples, purported by the printed catalogue variously to be “used to spread below the chiefs while at dinner under the trees[,]...wore by the common people in the rainy season[,]...beat with a grooved piece of wood, and used as a mat[,]...wore by the chiefs going to war...” and so on—a virtual tour of Polynesia.

We shared a thrill when a small triangle of newspaper was found tucked between two pages: a marker placed by Hall himself? I photographed it in situ, before Adria removed it carefully and placed it in one of the ubiquitous plastic bags used for such ephemera: things so long associated with an artifact that they must be preserved alongside it. When every page of the “Hall” had been turned, all of its specimens measured, photographed, and described in detail, the binding inspected, and the front and back covers and endpapers carefully documented, the book was returned to its box and we prepared to examine the snippet book.

A label was adhered to the snippet book’s marble board cover: “Book of native Cloth from barks of different trees,” handwritten in a left-leaning black-inked scrawl, quite different from the Shaw books’ title pages. Yet the boards opened to reveal the same water-marked paper stock as the book we had just examined, though oriented differently with some lines running horizontally instead of vertically.

The first specimen was a full-page piece of Tongan barkcloth (18 cm by 22 cm) that I recognized as a “Shaw” sample. Other large samples followed that were definitely not snippets, though some had had snips taken from them. This was not a book made from a Shaw book; though lacking Shaw’s catalogue, it was as close to a Shaw volume as any I have seen. Among the Cook voyage samples from Tonga, Tahiti, and Hawai’i, we discovered small anomalies: a fine yellow cloth from Tahiti had a small yellow feather stuck to it; one paper page bore a puncture mark and traced circle that suggested the prior use of a compass; and a corner of another page recorded a dirty fingerprint. While the first of the books at Penn was definitely one of Shaw’s published volumes, the other seemed to have been pieced together by an opportunistic individual—perhaps a binder’s apprentice—while the publications proper were being made. Whereas MAA has the “pre-Shaw Shaw,” Penn seemed to have both a “Shaw” and a “non-Shaw Shaw.” However,
The “non-Shaw Shaw”

The second book examined by the author, which does not include Shaw’s catalogue, seems to have been pieced together when the Shaw volumes were being assembled. PM object 87-3-2.

Recently photographed by the Smithsonian Institution, this book can be seen at http://openn.library.upenn.edu/Data/0016/html/87-3-2.html
it soon became apparent that it no longer had a “Hall.” When I returned to Auckland, New Zealand, I compared my photographs and notes with Hall’s 1921 paper, in an original edition of The Museum Journal from The University of Auckland’s library. I was intrigued by its detailed watercolor illustrations. I tried to imagine a time before widespread use of color photography and recalled that botanical artists—so accustomed to drawing for scientific accuracy—produced particularly detailed and reliable representations of artifacts collected on the first voyages of scientific exploration into the Pacific.

I was confused, therefore, when I could not find samples to match these meticulous drawings among the photos I had taken. At first I suspected a little artistic license: these were details, perhaps, of larger pieces. But as I attempted a page-by-page comparison between my photos and Hall’s written descriptions of the samples, I found that, though cut from the same cloth, they did not match. The final clue was delivered by Hall’s opinion, clearly stated, that the book he had analyzed had been rebound. Indeed, a photograph in Hall’s Journal article clearly shows gold detailing on the outer borders of the book’s inside covers. In contrast, the “Hall” book I had examined at Penn was bound in marbled boards; its inner covers were plain. In my opinion, formed from looking at many of these volumes, the book now at Penn was in its original binding. The book that Hall examined, the then-recent arrival at the Museum Library, is almost certainly not the book that now bears its catalogue number. What then has happened to the “Hall” that Hall examined in 1921? And where did its replacement and its companion come from, and when?

The Mystery of the Missing Book
Anyone who has worked within the walls of a museum or library understands the challenge of connecting objects to records. Labels come off, inventories cannot be found or may have never existed, or the objects have followed such complicated trajectories that there are scant or no records with which to work. But it is most unusual to come to see something that had been so well-documented at the time of its acquisition and find not only that it is not there, but that it has somehow morphed into two other variations on a theme; two variations without specific information.

My email to communicate this conundrum to Penn was initially met with disbelief, which quickly turned to fascination. Could there be yet another barkcloth book...
sitting forgotten in a box at Penn? Could this mix-up be the product of an unintentional switch, perhaps made during an on- or off-site comparison of the “Hall” with other Shaw volumes? Hall’s papers, kept in the Museum Archives, record his writing to other institutions to inquire whether they too had a Shaw book. Incredible as it may now seem, in the past, curators often took things out of museums in order to further their research. Did an incident replace one volume with another (two) in the Museum Archive?

Through my return visits to Penn, email exchanges, and Museum Archivist Alessandro Pezzati’s trawling through records, we are trying to unravel how one book could be acquired and apparently disappear, while two others could appear with no record of their acquisition. We know that the two books came to the Museum from the Museum Library in 1987. The small scrap or bookmark of newspaper tantalizes but promises only an indication of when it was placed in the book. The search continues.

When acquired in 1920, the book’s importance warranted a scholarly paper. Thanks to Hall’s meticulous documentation, it will be possible to identify Penn’s original book if it surfaces within Penn’s Archives, Library, or Museum collections. Certainly, it does not seem to appear in Kerr’s census, nor my own records, and is unlikely to be held in a civic institution. Perhaps it sits in a bookcase somewhere awaiting rediscovery.

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FOR FURTHER READING

Barkcloth books played an important role in shaping relationships with European explorers.

Barkcloth continues to be made in Polynesia and collections such as those amassed by Cook and other voyagers are libraries of patterns and repositories of old techniques for those who continue this art.
The Historic Voyages of Captain Cook

British explorer Captain James Cook (1728–1779) made three epic voyages to the Pacific. The first (1768–1771) and second (1771–1775) were searches for the hypothetical great southern continent Terra Australis. The third (1776–1779) was a quest for America’s Northwest Passage. All three voyages included visits to Polynesian islands from which barkcloths in the Shaw sample books were collected.

The first voyage began with a mission to Tahiti to observe the transit of Venus across the sun, potentially a means of determining longitude. In the course of the second voyage, Cook interrupted his southern explorations to sail north to Tahiti to resupply, and, on the return south, he stopped at the Friendly Islands (Tonga). On the third voyage, Cook revisited Tahiti, and then, on the way to the northwest coast of America, he encountered the Hawaiian Islands.

When Shaw published his books of tapa samples in 1787, the South Seas were all the rage in London. Journals from all three of Cook’s voyages had been published, and Omai—a Tahitian brought to England from the second voyage and returned home on the third—had made a great splash, lionized by society and received by King George III. In 1785–1786, an enormously popular theatrical production called Omai: Or, A Trip Round the World, with sets and costumes inspired by Cook’s voyages, was performed 70 times.

—Adria Katz, Fassitt/Fuller Keeper, Oceanian Section, Penn Museum

The routes of Captain Cook’s voyages. The first voyage is shown in red, second voyage in green, and third voyage in blue. The route of Cook’s crew following his death in the Hawaiian Islands is shown as a dashed blue line.
LEFT: Kealakekua Bay, Hawai‘i where Captain Cook died on his third voyage to the Pacific. Photograph by R.A. Simon.

ABOVE: Hawaiian sea turtle shell bracelet. PM object 97-120-359.

RIGHT: Hawaiian barkcloth fragment, decorated with pattern stamps. PM object 29-58-13B.

ABOVE: Wooden barkcloth beater. PM object 97-120-449.

RIGHT: Greenstone pendant, hei tiki, probably collected in New Zealand by master’s mate Burr of the Resolution in 1773. PM object P2317.

ABOVE: Barkcloth poncho with red leaves from Tahiti. PM object 2003-32-341.