



# TATAU

## MARKS OF POLYNESIA

An Exhibition on Samoan Tattoo Practice  
*Exhibition Travel Document*



JAPANESE AMERICAN NATIONAL MUSEUM

## An Important Indigenous Tradition

Samoa's *tatau*, along with Japan's *irezumi*, is one of the world's most distinct living tattoo traditions. *Tatau* is an indigenous art form with a history that dates back 2,000 years. It has played a pivotal role in the preservation and propagation of Samoan culture, having survived multiple attempts at eradication. In Samoa, *tufuga tā tatau* (master tattoo artists) are granted high status in society, and acquiring *tatau* is considered a powerful affirmation of national identity, particularly for young men, for whom it is an important rite of passage.

## Exploring the World of Tatau

Through photographs taken in the studio and on location in Samoa, *Tatau* showcases the work of traditional *tatau* masters alongside that of younger practitioners and artists who are adopting *tatau*'s motifs and styles for new media and art forms. Viewers are able to appreciate the sheer beauty of Samoan tattoos while learning about what they signify in Samoan culture, and how they help Samoans and other Polynesians living abroad stay close to their identity and their heritage.



## The Artists

Among the artists featured in Tatau are Su'a Sulu'ape Alaiva'a Petelo, Su'a Sulu'ape Peter, Su'a Sulu'ape Paul Jr., Su'a Sulu'ape Aisea Toetu'u, Sulu'ape Steve Looney, Tuigamala Andy Tauafi, Mike Fatutoa, and Sulu'ape Si'i Liufau. An important focus of the exhibition is the influential Sulu'ape family and their disciples; the legendary Petelo Sulu'ape and his deceased brother Paulo are credited with spurring the resurgence of Samoan tattoos worldwide. Additional photographs taken in New Zealand, Hawai'i, California, and Nevada demonstrate the spread of the art form outside of Samoa and some of its newer interpretations.

## The Organizers

Tatau is organized by the Japanese American National Museum (JANM) and curated by Takahiro "Ryudaibori" Kitamura, the master tattoo artist and author who previously curated the successful exhibition *Perseverance: Japanese Tattoo Tradition in a Modern World* for JANM in 2014. Kitamura is collaborating with John Agcaoili, photographer; Sulu'ape Steve Looney and Danielle Steffany-Looney of Pacific Soul Tattoo in Hawai'i; Sean Mallon, author and Senior Curator of Pacific Cultures at the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa; and Sulu'ape Si'i Liufau of A-Town Tattoo.



# Exhibition Physical Description

## Photographs (unframed sizes— add 6” for frame/mat)

87 photos (21” x 15”)

70 photo (15” x 21”)

7 photos (38” x 54”)

2 photos (42” x 54”)

2 photos (30” x 22”)

2 photos (24” x 30”)

1 photo (54” x 38”)

1 photo (54” x 42”)

1 photo (30” x 27.5”)

1 photo (30” x 24”)

1 photo (14” x 13”)

Total photos: 175

## Paintings/diagrams (unframed sizes)

5 paintings

5 template boards (8” x 8”)

## Artifacts

-hand carved canoe model

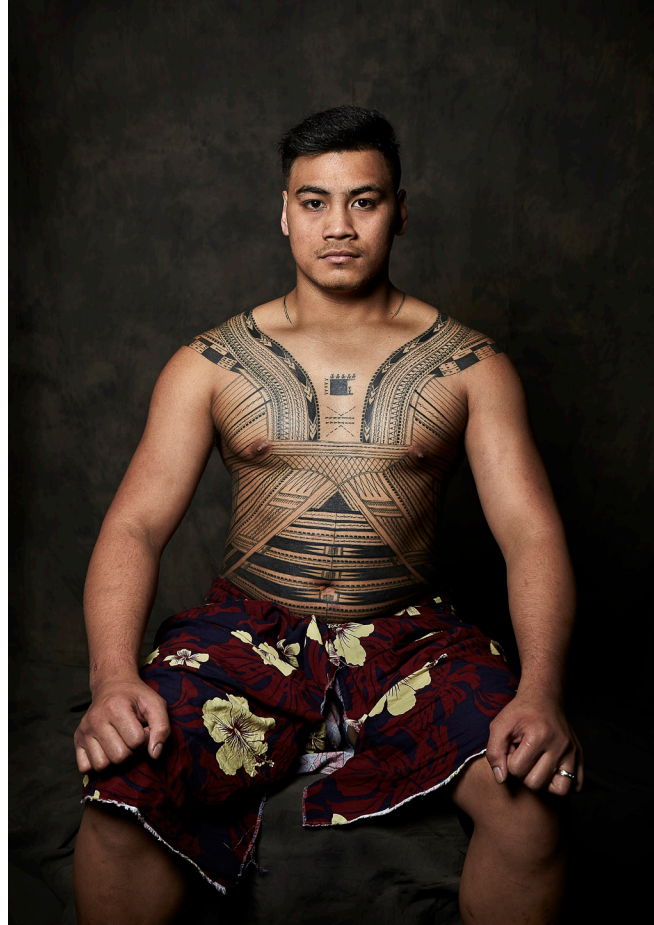
-*taupou* headdress

-*tanoa* (wooden “ava bowl, 7.5” x 18”)

-*to’oto’o* (orator’s staff, 66” long)

-*fue* (orator’s whisk, 40” long)

-traditional tattoo tools (2 sets)



## Videos

-10-20 interview videos with the exhibition curator and artists, offering insights into the exhibition (DVD format)

-1 documentary film shot during the production of the JANM exhibition by cinematographers John Agcaoili, Alexander Bauzon, and Jon Ugto. The film takes viewers to Samoa, the birthplace of *tatau*. Focusing on the legendary Sulu'ape family, the film documents the *tatau* process, Samoan cultural ceremonies, and the rarely seen Sulu'ape family tomb. This footage is paired with candid interviews with the Samoan Head of State, the Samoan Prime Minister, and fautasi skipper Zita Martel. The cultural importance of *tatau* is further explored through interviews with artists and clients alike, providing an in-depth analysis of the contemporary Polynesian tattoo scene. Directed by John Agcaoili. (DVD format)

## Text panels

2 primary text panels

10 secondary text panels

## Audio Files

Featuring voices of the curator and artists are available for use in conjunction with the exhibition as an audio tour.





## Exhibition Publication

The companion book *Tatau: Marks of Polynesia*, (268 pages, 220 photos, softcover, 8 1/2" x 11",) is published by the Japanese American National Museum.

*Tatau: Marks of Polynesia* Written contributions by Sean Mallen and working tattoo artists. Foreword by former United States Congressman Eni F.H. Faleomavaega. Photography by John Agcaoili. The accompanying exhibition catalog to *Tatau: Marks of Polynesia*, showcases the art and legacy of the over 2,000 year old Samoan tattoo tradition. Focusing on the preeminent Sulu'ape family of tattoo masters, the catalog presents *tatau* as a culture, one that includes resistance to colonization and affirmation of identity— as well as a fine art. Contemporary Polynesian tattoo work photographed in Hawai'i, Nevada, California and New Zealand has been included to show the global impact of this art form. Paper: 268 pp. #230023 / \$24.95

## **Information About the Japanese American National Museum**

The mission of the Japanese American National Museum is to promote the understanding and appreciation of America's ethnic and cultural diversity by sharing the Japanese American experience.

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