



Safeguarding Pioneers

Tiapapata Art Centre, Promoting a Samoan Legacy

Galumalemana Steven Percival (Director, Tiapapata Art Centre)



A new studio at the Tiapapata Art Centre © Galumalemana Steven Percival

“The Tiapapata Art Centre recognises the importance of Samoa’s intangible cultural heritage as expressed in its traditional arts and crafts.”

In June 2012, Samoa celebrated its fiftieth year of independence. It was the first Pacific island country to gain independence, and the Polynesians living in this small group of islands have been bequeathed with a rich and distinguished cultural heritage.

Samoa is a country of great natural beauty, and its people flourished in a kinship relationship with the contingent world around them, living in harmony with the natural resources—the minerals, plant and animal life, and the vast surrounding ocean that provided for their well-being. Living isolated from much of the world and relying on a steadily increasing body of localised ecological knowledge, Samoans developed a wide range of artisanal skills over the millennia, enabling them to create all that is needed to live comfortably and safely, complete with a system of governance placing communal well-being at its core. The knowledge and skills of the *tufuga* (expert artisan) can be seen in a style of architecture perfectly suited to the climate and environment, in double-hulled ocean voyaging canoes capable of sailing star-guided thousands of miles, in functional and highly aesthetic wooden bowls used in rituals and ceremonies, in finely woven pandanus mats used as a form of cultural currency, and on what may be the oldest canvas for human artistic expression, adornments etched on the human body, which

are known in Samoan as *tatau* and have been adopted into English by early foreigners visiting the islands as ‘tattoo’.

It is in this context that the Tiapapata Art Centre exists and is registered with the government of Samoa as a charitable trust, a non-profit organisation promoting traditional and contemporary arts and crafts. Its patron is His Highness Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese, Head of State of Samoa. With its vision of establishing a model art school fostering creative excellence in Samoa and the Pacific, the Tiapapata Art Centre’s mission is to provide an accessible and dynamic learning and creative environment that facilitates the achievement of educational, professional, and personal goals of students, artists in residence, and teaching staff in an atmosphere that fosters excellence in creativity, diversity, and innovation.

Founded by Galumalemana Steven and Wendy Percival, the Tiapapata Art Centre delivers art education courses in ceramics, painting, drawing, printmaking, fabric printing, carving, mosaic art, rustic furniture making, photography, and traditional crafts such as *siapo* (bark cloth art) and *tānoa* (ceremonial wooden bowls). Regular art classes are conducted with children and adults as well as with disabled and elderly persons.

The Tiapapata Art Centre recognises the importance of Samoa’s intangible cultural

heritage as expressed in its traditional arts and crafts, and the centre is actively involved in promoting an understanding of this heritage through photography and films. Galumalemana, with the support of the Tiapapata Art Centre, has produced a number of films exploring Samoa’s creative economy. *O le Aganuu Manogi a Sāmoa* explores making and using fragrant coconut oil; *O le Aso ma le Filiga, o le Aso ma le Mata’igātīla* looks into using natural fibres in Samoa; *Tānoa* features the making of the traditional wooden bowls used to serve ceremonial drinks called ‘ava; and *Tatau* depicts the art of Samoan tattooing.

In early June 2012, Galumalemana led a group of six heritage artists to New Zealand, where, with support from Creative New Zealand, they demonstrated fine mat weaving, *tānoa* carving, ‘afa or coconut sennit making, and tattooing. His films were shown in support of the live demonstrations and provided viewers with the natural context in which the heritage arts are made in Samoa. While much of Samoa’s intangible cultural heritage has been lost, there is still much that can be preserved and film is a powerful medium that can capture this knowledge in a way no other medium can. Another important dimension to the films is the recording of the vernacular associated with heritage arts.

Current projects at the Tiapapata Art Centre designed to enhance the sharing of Samoa’s intangible cultural heritage include the construction of a traditional Samoan house (*fale*) where demonstrations and workshops in traditional crafts will be held, and the construction of an outrigger fishing canoe (*paopao*). Both projects will be photographed and recorded on film with full commentaries in the Samoan language describing the process and components of these important outcomes of Samoa’s rich intangible cultural heritage.



Centre’s recent film on natural fibres in Samoa © Tiapapata Art Centre