

Diving Into the Beauty of Polynesian Culture

MOANA

BY KAREN TENEYCK, GRAPHIC DESIGNER

Set in ancient Polynesia (Tonga, Fiji and Samoa), the film follows a brave village chief's daughter, Moana of Motunui (Catherine Laga'aia), who is drawn to the sea from a young age. Her father forbids anyone from passing the barrier reef because of events that have happened in the past. When coconuts rot and fish disappear, Gramma Tala (Rena Owen) reveals that a terrible curse was unleashed when the demigod Maui (Dwayne Johnson) stole the heart of the mother island, Te Fiti. To save her home, Moana disobeys her father and sets sail to find Maui and restore the heart to its rightful owner. She ultimately fulfills her destiny to become a master wayfinder of the ocean. The film was directed by Thomas Kail with Production Design by John Myhre and set decoration by Jan Pascale.

A. MAP OF POLYNESIA SHOWING FIGI, TONGA AND SAMOA, WHERE MOANA TAKES PLACE.



The Importance of Language When Working in Other Cultures

I cannot overstate the number of times I have been asked to google translate something for the set. Although Google is learning and getting better, it often lacks the cultural sensitivity to translate the colloquial subtleties of other peoples. We can get into trouble very quickly.

Early in my career, I was asked by a designer who will remain nameless, to put some beautiful Chinese calligraphy on the set. Yes, it WAS beautiful, but no one knew what it said. Not even editing, clearance or publicity ever caught that it said "hemorrhoids," which was not appropriate for the scene. And it was big. It has since been digitally removed for streaming. Lesson learned. It's funny now but at the time, not so much.

So, when I worked with Production Designer Julie Ziah on *Goliath* (S4), we built a whole San Francisco Chinatown backlot on the stage. Naturally, there were tons of signs in Chinese (mostly Cantonese, not Mandarin). After my former experience, I told them I wouldn't do the show unless we had a professional translator to help us. They complied. When working with her, I realized it was important not only to have the words correct but to choose 'auspicious' names that made sense to the Chinese community. Long story short, on the first day of shooting, there were about thirty Asian American extras, essentially proof-readers, sitting offstage and I thought, "Thank God, we did this correctly. I wouldn't anyone to think that their culture was disrespected by the show." I know many of you understand this well, but I think it bears mentioning for people new to the industry.



Cultural Accuracy in *Moana*

And that brings us to my work on Disney's live-action version of *Moana*. I was hired by Jan Pascale to learn the language of Samoan iconography and design the village's one hundred and ten siapos—large gridded 'murals' painted on handmade mulberry barkcloth and hung in homes and town council fales. The fale is the architectural style of traditional buildings common in Samoa, Fiji and Tonga. It features large poles which support a grass roof. All elements of the structure feature beautiful artwork, including wood carving and decorative rope tying. Siapos, hung between these poles, tell the story of a particular family, what is important

to them and their status in the community. They remind me a little of the way traditional American quilts look—each full of love and respect for the village.

Finding Information— An Atmosphere of Learning

Of course Disney, having produced two other films about *Moana*, has taken the authenticity of Polynesian life very seriously and they provided an atmosphere of learning to those of us who were new to the culture.

Noessa Higa, head of research for the show, cultivated a team that helped shape the film's

B. VILLAGE EXTERIOR WITH FALE. SET PHOTO.

C. VILLAGE SQUARE FROM INSIDE A FALE. SET PHOTO.

D. RESEARCH IMAGE OF AN ISLAND WOMAN CREATES A SIAPO IN THE TRADITIONAL METHOD OF RUBBING NATURAL DYES OVER AN EMBOSSED PLATE TO CREATE THE PATTERN.

E. RESEARCH IMAGE. POLYNESIAN SIAPO AT THE ROSE BOWL FLEA MARKET.



world-building and brought together historical research, visual reference, cultural knowledge and the right experts to deepen the creative process. Her goal wasn't simply accuracy, it was to create a shared visual language that helped every department make creative decisions rooted in authenticity.

One of those people was Utah educator Haviar (Havi) Hafoka. He runs "Malialole," a Polynesian music and dance studio that preserves Pacific Islander culture through song, storytelling and dance. His family is from Samoa and Tonga. His guidance gave the artists a deeper understanding

of the cultural meaning, context and regional traditions behind the designs we were creating. It was indispensable and would have been impossible to do this without skilled help. During the design process, I was able to send preliminary designs to Havi and he would let me know if the design looked too African or contained any versions of the language which looked too modern. Only the oldest symbols were to be used.

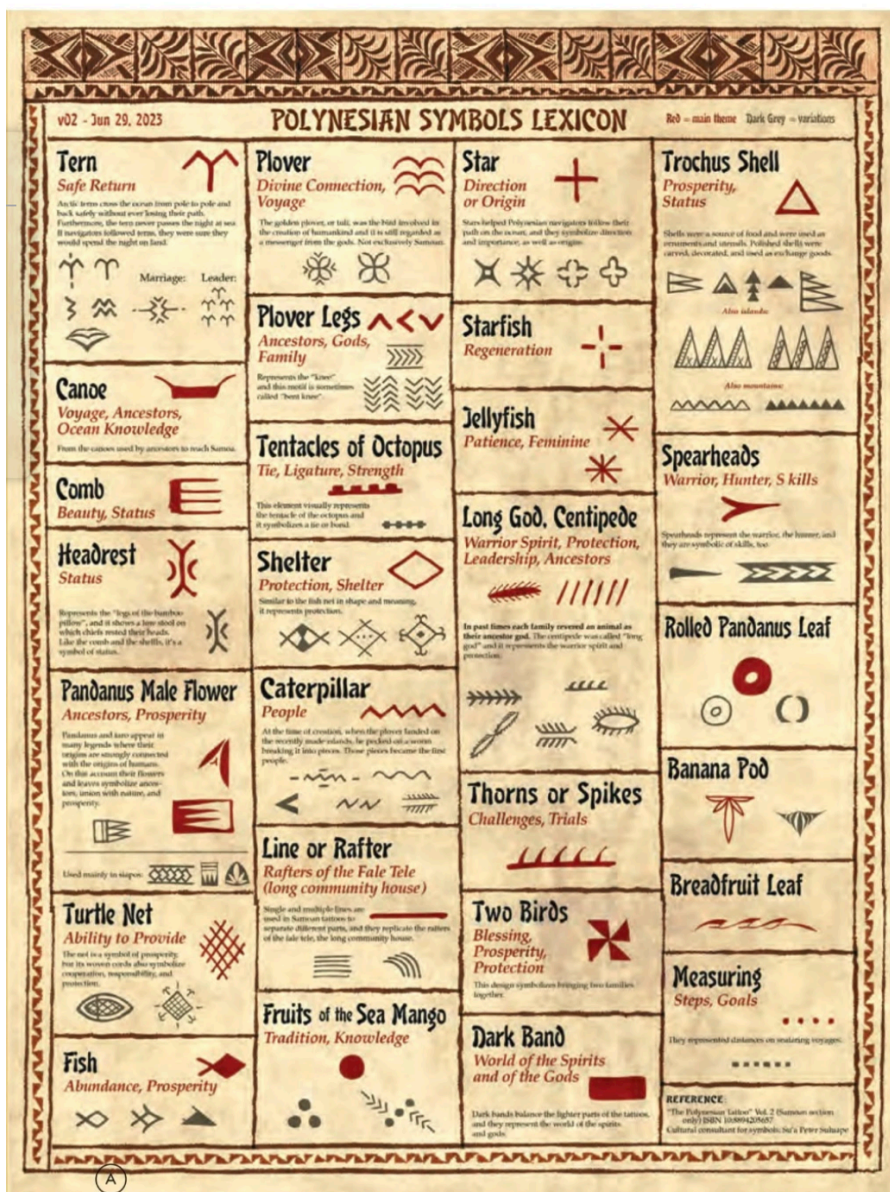
Designing the Siapos

Once we had met with Havi, I made a symbol wall chart and a small booklet for the design team to use as a quick cheat sheet to understand the language. We needed around one hundred and ten of these designs for the three hero fales and I never got tired to working on them. Jan's team ordered many different types of rope, grasscloth and actual siapos, creating a tropical atmosphere in the office which was so fun to be a part of.

To design the siapos, I made ten grids from the research for each of the two sizes we needed. The grids were lifted directly from existing siapos to make sure the proportions and overall design were correct. Then I copied many individual symbols and put them in groups depending on their meaning—all the plants went together and all the spears together, etc. Then I didn't look at the research again, lest I be accused by clearance of stealing someone's artwork. I started filling in the various grids to make them visually appealing but also accurate in meaning. Some icons were done directly on the computer, for others, I used colored inks to draw them with a brush first.

I started working on siapos for the Council Fale. During meetings, council members sit in front of their family siapo. We started with the chief's. As the leader of this village, he is allowed to use red, the color of royalty. I used symbols for protection, providing food and leadership on his. These symbols were the tern (safe return from travels), fish (abundance and prosperity), centipede or long god (warrior spirit, protection, ancestors and leadership), spears (warrior and hunter spirit), pandanus flower (ancestors, prosperity), trochus shell (status and prosperity) and the headrest (status). It was also more intricate than the other designs. Think of it as his leadership 'platform' statement, if you will, about why he should be chief. The remaining twenty-seven

A. A LEXICON FOR THE POLYNESIAN LANGUAGE CREATED BY KAREN TENEYCK.

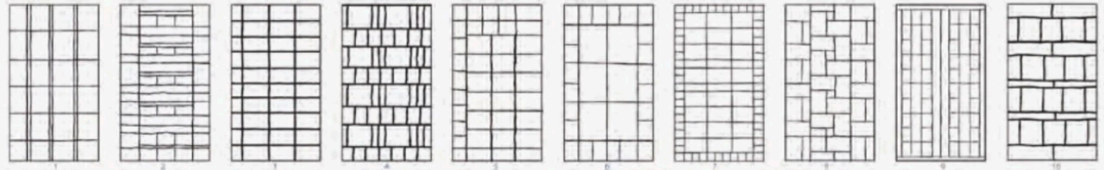


TAPA INSPIRATION

ORIGINAL WHOLE TAPA:



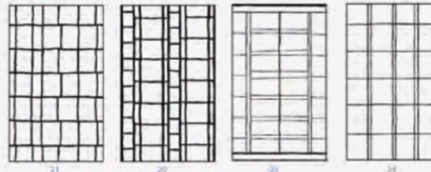
MORANA SYMBOLS:



4'-5 1/2" X 7'-9" (STRAIGHT LINE)

TYPICAL MEASUREMENT OF 'CUBES'

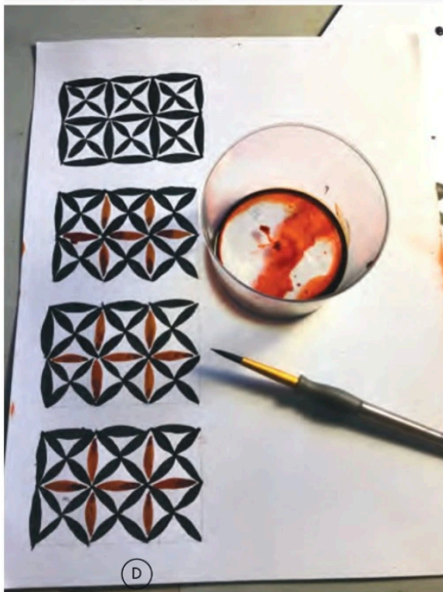
3" = 1-0"



4'-8" X 7'-9" (CORNERS)

Canon

Set 112
Scene Council Fale
Item Siapo Grid Clipper
Date 05/08/24
Karen TenEyck



B. SYMBOL CLEARANCE
DOCUMENT BY KAREN
TENEYCK.

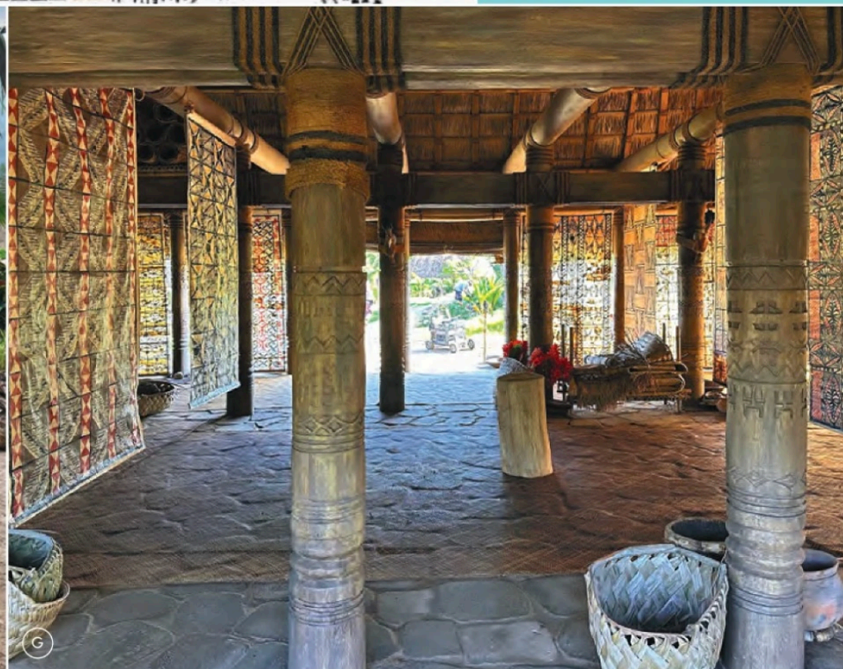
C. SIAPO GRID TEMPLATE BY
KAREN TENEYCK.

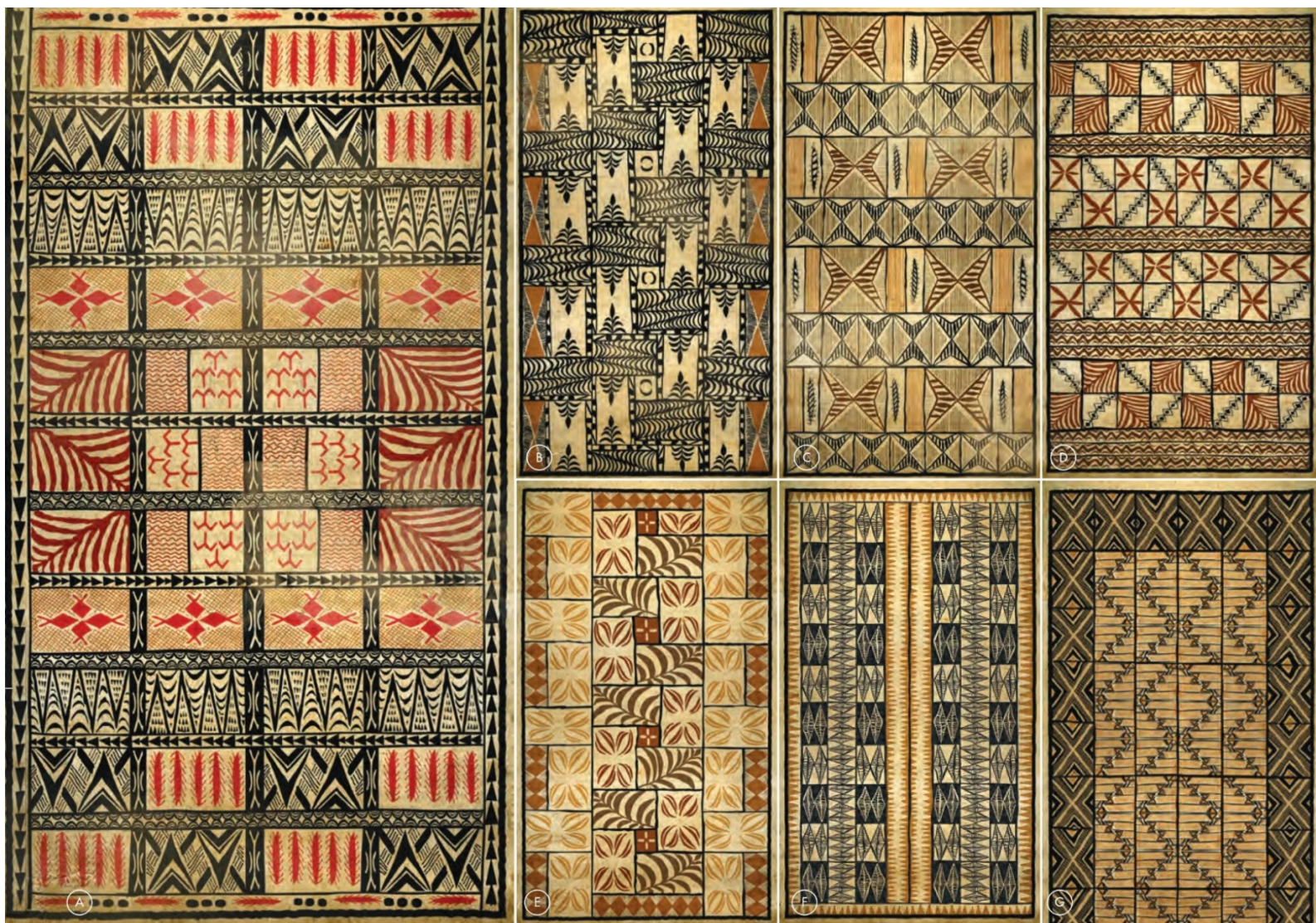
D. SYMBOL PAINTING IN
BRUSH AND INK BY KAREN
TENEYCK.

E. SIAPO SYMBOLS.
INK SKETCH BY KAREN
TENEYCK.

F. VILLAGE COUNCIL
EXTERIOR. SET PHOTO.

G. VILLAGE COUNCIL
INTERIOR. SET PHOTO.





A. THE CHIEF'S PERSONAL SIAPO FOR THE COUNCIL FALE. THE DESIGN IS FILLED WITH SYMBOLS THAT ARE IMPORTANT TO HIS FAMILY. DESIGN BY KAREN TENEYCK.

B-G. COUNCIL FALE SIAPOS. THE SIAPOS FOR THE COUNCIL FALE WERE CREATED USING A WIDE VARIETY OF POLYNESIAN SYMBOLS. EACH ONE SHOWS A PARTICULAR FAMILY REPRESENTED AT THE MEETINGS. GRAPHIC LAYOUT BY KAREN TENEYCK.

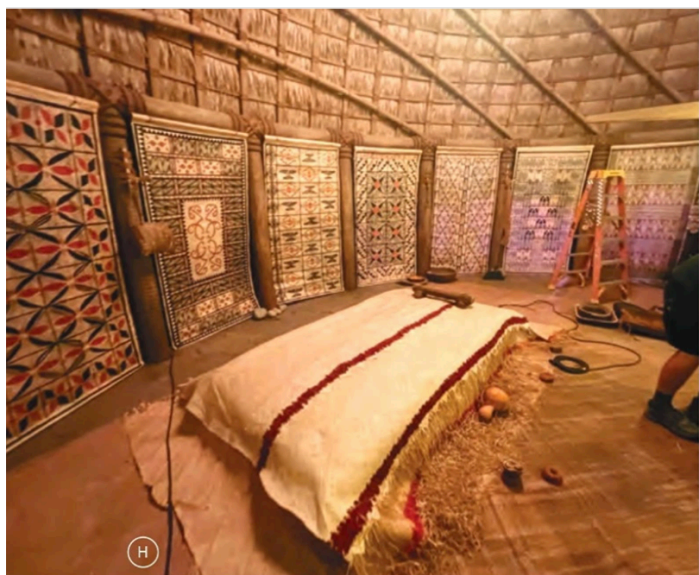
siapos for this scene featured a variety of different symbols based on one's family traditions and status in the community.

In the film, we also see the chief's family fale where I did another set of twenty-eight siapos which featured more masculine symbols like spears (warrior and hunter skills), long lines (representing the rafters of a fale), turtle net (ability to provide), fruits of the sea mango (tradition and knowledge) and developed the shark symbol seen in the center for his personal 'logo.' There is more black on them and a darker feel overall.

In contrast, Tala is Moana's grandmother, and I wanted her siapos to feature beautiful flowers and some of them to be reminiscent of American quilts, so they felt softer and more loving. Gramma Tala has an adventurous spirit, and

she is responsible for giving Moana the courage to go beyond the reef and save her village. It was important to show that in the designs. I used the symbols for the plover (divine connection, voyage), canoe (voyage, ocean knowledge), banana pod (sustenance) and the pandanus male flower (ancestors, prosperity). Her 'spirit animal' is the manta ray, which represents wisdom, protection and freedom. Tala, as former chief, is 'royalty,' so we could use the color red in her eighteen designs. Tala dies in this scene, so I also wanted the siapos to act subliminally as funeral flowers as she is sent off into the netherworld and becomes a spiritual guide to Moana throughout her adventures.

In order to prove to clearance that I had not stolen someone else's overall artwork, I needed to show that although the Māori language is incredibly artistic, it is INDEED a language and small parts are



common and not subject to copyright. I had to explain to them how the language worked and make a sheet for every version of every symbol I used. I have provided an example here—actual research was combined with symbol meaning and the different ways it is expressed.

Working Out the Printing

In actuality, producing siapos requires women to harvest, soak, scrape and pound the fibers into large sheets, which are then painted or rubbed over carved wooden boards using natural dyes to create intricate geometric patterns and

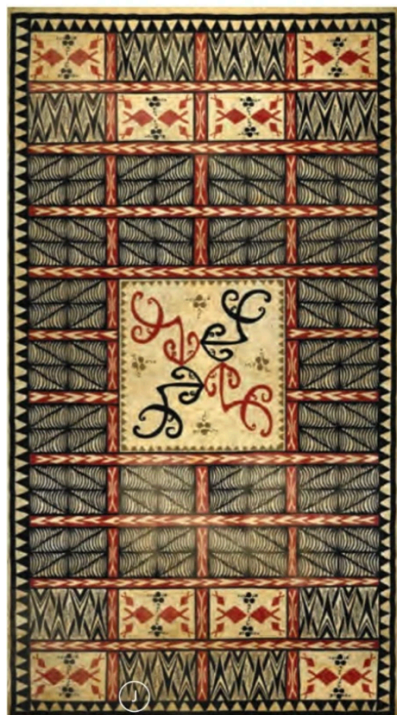
cultural symbols. It is a highly labor-intensive art form. Of course, to make the film schedule, we had to cheat that a bit.

We were so lucky to have veteran film Graphic Designer, Martin Charles, and his new sign studio Sagaboy Productions to work with us on manufacturing these very specific, handmade, translucent works of art. He naturally understands why the details are important. With mulberry paper sourced from Fiji, we did many trial-and-error tests to make sure that they looked absolutely handmade, and light was

H. & I. CHIEF'S FALE. SET PHOTO.

J. CHIEF'S FALE. HERO SIAPO FEATURING A SHARK MOTIF IN THE CENTER. GRAPHIC LAYOUT BY KAREN TENEYCK.

K-M. CHIEF'S FALE SIAPOS FEATURING SYMBOLS OF STRENGTH AND HUNTING. GRAPHIC LAYOUT BY KAREN TENEYCK.





A-D. TALA'S FALE. SET PHOTOS.

E. TALA'S FALE. HERO SAIPO. GRAPHIC LAYOUT BY KAREN TENEYCK.

F. & G. TALA'S FALE SAIPÓS. GRAPHIC LAYOUT BY KAREN TENEYCK.

H. VILLAGE EXTERIOR. FILM STILL.

able to pass through them and highlight their beauty in the scene. Although I did everything I could to make them look not computer-generated, printing on any uncoated paper leaves the image somewhat dull and flat. I felt the only way to show the beauty of the cloth with its patchwork quality, in addition to the design, was to have the Scenic Artists paint over some of the dark lines and symbols to give it the proper sense of depth on set when lit from behind.

The Graphic Design Team

It's not often that I get to work with other lead graphics people. For *Moana*, Kelly Rae Hemenway and Alexandra Miklos were also on the team. Kelly Rae did all the symbols on the fale poles, many props, including Maui's hook, the Heart of Ti Fiti stone and the entrance to the Ta Fiti cave, among others. Alex's amazing illustration skills were put to use designing the monster siapos for the classroom, the boat sails, Māori tattoos and designs for the sides of the boats. It was really interesting to see how different our processes were, discuss graphic issues and preferred equipment with these fabulous ladies.

Reading List

Here on some resources for readers who want to take a deeper dive into the art and graphics of Polynesia:

Pacific Tapa by Roger Neich, Mick Pendergrast and Krzysztof Pfeiffer (photography)

Polynesian and Oceanian Designs (Dover Pictorial Archive) by Gregory Mirow

The Polynesian Tattoo Handbook by Roberto Gemori

Mahalo!

I am so proud of the work that we all did on this film. Although every audience member won't necessarily understand each symbol, the Maori people will know that we took the time to do this right, talk to the right people and have all our work vetted by professionals. Someone from Samoa on rottentomatoes.com said it was so great to see their culture authentically portrayed onscreen. Everyone worked so hard on all the handmade elements, it was great to have the approval of a member of the Polynesian community enjoy our work. Learning about new things and cultures is one of the great joys of making a movie. We had it on this one in abundance. Mahalo! **ADG**

John Myhre,
Production Designer
Alan Hook,
Supervising Art Director
Lorin Flemming,
Michael Gowen,
Sally Ledger,
Jay Pelissier,
Dara Zhao,
Art Directors
Carolyn Smith,
Joshua Wells,
Assistant Art Directors
Vincent Bates,
Chris Corlner,
Bria Kinter,
Marco Rubeo,
Julie Vash,
Set Designers
Danelle Davenport,
Michael Anthony Jackson,
John Fox,
Carlos Lutterbach,
Gregory Piontek,
Amy Lynn Umezu,
Maryam Sefati,
Illustrators
Kelly Rae Hemenway,
Alexandra Miklos,
Karen TenEyck,
Graphic Designers
Jan Pascale,
Set Decorator

