



# 1.4 Introduction to Pacific Collections: Materials used in the Pacific Region



## Materials used in the Pacific region

The following is an overview of a selection of materials found in Pacific artefacts:

### Coconut

Coconut is used across the Pacific although is comparatively less prevalent in artefacts from Papua New Guinea, West Papua, and New Zealand.

Coconut fibre has a distinctive orange or copper colour. It is often found in the form of cordage used as a binding or a suspension cord and may be two sections twisted or three or more sections braided together.



Coconut fibre binding on ceremonial adze, Cook Islands, *National Museums Scotland* (A.1956.1028)

Fibres from different parts of the coconut are used as a raw material. It is not uncommon to see the term 'coir' used in museum documentation to describe coconut fibre. Specifically, coir is the raw material found between the hard internal shell and the outer coat of a coconut.



Section of coconut husk from Kiribati, *National Museums Scotland* (A.1917.51)



Detail of braided coconut fibre twine, Fiji, *Perth Museum & Art Gallery* (1977.1376)

Coconut shell has a distinctive in appearance. It is rich brown in colour flecked with lighter brown and is often worked to have a smooth finish. Shells can be split in two to make cups for domestic use as well as more formal occasions such as kava drinking ceremonies. Cups may be plain or carved depending on the provenance and use, but the material is still recognisable.



Coconut shell cup, Fiji, *National Museums Scotland* (A.1900.481)

Coconut shell is also used for spoons which again range from completely plain to highly decorative examples. Coconuts can be fashioned into a water carrier either with the eyes of the coconut cut out to make holes or a small top segment removed.

The shell of a coconut is seen split into sections to make arm ornaments (as in Vanuatu) and cut into shapes to decorate larger items (such as on a Tahitian mourner's costume). Young or immature coconuts are much smaller and are used in a variety of ways such as for carved figures in the Gulf of Papua New Guinea and for practical purposes as a stopper on the end of a quiver from Tahiti.



Carved coconut shell arm ornaments, south Vanuatu, 19th century, *National Museums Scotland* (A.1895.413.42)



Quiver and arrows with stopper of an immature coconut, Tahiti, Society Islands, 18<sup>th</sup> or early 19<sup>th</sup> century, *Perth Museum & Art Gallery* (1978.173)

### Sennit

This term refers to a type of cordage formed by plaiting strands of dried fibre or grass. The raw material does not necessarily have to be coconut.

### Barkcloth

Barkcloth is a soft felt-like material made from the beaten bark of a tree, usually paper mulberry. At one time it was made across the Pacific however the increased availability of cotton cloth impacted on production in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The term *tapa* is often used interchangeably with the word barkcloth but there are many local names specific to different cultural areas. Barkcloth continues to be made in some areas today and is used in work by contemporary Pacific artists and fashion designers.



Barkcloth from Tahiti, Society Islands, 18<sup>th</sup> century, *National Museums Scotland (A.UC.442)*



Barkcloth (*kapa*) from the Hawaiian Islands, *National Museums Scotland (A.UC.391)*



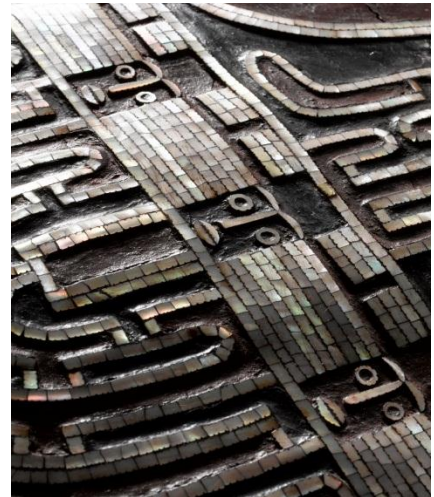
Barkcloth (*masi*), Fiji, late 19<sup>th</sup> century, *Perth Museum & Art Gallery, (1978.2376)*

## Pearl shell

Pearl shell is used for decorative inlay as well as in dress and adornment. For the latter they can be cut or used whole as in breast ornaments. White lip oyster shell is used for elaborate inlay in the western Solomon Islands, in canoe models and bowls from Manihiki in the Cook Islands, and in artefacts from Palau in Micronesia. Gold lip oyster shell has a soft gold colour and is often seen worked into a crescent shape in Papua New Guinea and West Papua where it is used as a shell valuable in local exchange systems. This is called *kina* in Papua New Guinea, which has been the name for modern currency in the country since 1975. Gold lip shell is also used for breast ornaments in the Torres Strait Islands and the Solomon Islands. Black lip oyster shell has a dark edge and is more commonly found in artefacts from the Society Islands and surrounding areas.



Detail of pearl shell neck ornament on cord of braided coconut fibre and human hair, Perth Museum & Art Gallery (1977.1712)



Detail of pearl shell inlay on shield, Solomon Islands, National Museums Scotland (A.1948.425)



Canoe model with pearl shell inlay, Manihiki, Cook Islands, National Museums Scotland (A.1902.73)



Gold lip shell with attachment of spondylus shell discs (pink coloured shell commonly seen on Melanesian artefacts), Papua New Guinea, 19<sup>th</sup> century, *National Museums Scotland* (A.1882.91.77)



Black lip shell breast ornament, Society Islands, 18<sup>th</sup> or early 19<sup>th</sup> century, *Perth Museum & art Gallery* (1977.1417)

### Haliotis shell

Also termed abalone, the inside of this shell has a distinct blue-tinged iridescent appearance. It is used in a number of Māori artefacts as inlay for eyes in wood carving, *hei tiki* figures, and other examples of *taonga* (Māori treasures). Haliotis is also used in composite Māori fish hooks, particularly as lining for a curved piece of wood which forms the body of the hook. The reflective nature of the shell means it acts as an effective lure. The Māori term for this haliotis shell is *paua*.



Fish hook with haliotis (abalone; *paua*) shell, New Zealand, collected mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, *National Museums Scotland*, (V.2007.300)



*Hei tiki* pendant of greenstone with eyes inlaid with haliotis shell (abalone; *paua*), New Zealand, 19<sup>th</sup> century, *University of Aberdeen Museums* (ABDUA: 4034)

## Turtle shell

Turtles have significance in many parts of the Pacific. Historically, turtle meat was reserved for high ranking individuals and turtle shell was, and some places still is, a valuable material associated with wealth and status. It is recognisable by its mottled brown colour and hard shiny appearance. Turtle shell can be manipulated into shapes by first softening it using heat to make it more malleable. It is not uncommon to see this material incised with patterns.



Arm ornament of turtle shell,  
Admiralty Islands, 19th century,  
*National Museums Scotland*  
(A.1898.439)



Dance mask of turtle shell with cassowary feathers and hair,  
Saibai, Torres Strait Islands, 19<sup>th</sup> century, *National Museums*  
*Scotland* (A.1885.83)

## Wood

Providing a definitive identification for the type of wood used in Pacific artefacts can be challenging. Clubs, spears and other wooden artefacts from Polynesia are often given as being manufactured from *Casuarina* wood (specifically *Casuarina equisetifolia*). This wood is also called ironwood and known as *toa* throughout Polynesia.



Clubs of *Casuarina* wood, Fiji,  
19<sup>th</sup> century, *Perth Museum &*  
*Art Gallery*

### Pandanus leaves

Different varieties of pandanus, also termed screw pine, grow across the Pacific. The plant is palm-like but not closely related. Pandanus leaves are commonly used in making baskets, skirts, mats and fans as well as being used for housing and medicine. The wide leaves will often be split for use in fine weaving.



Basket of woven pandanus leaf, Efate, Vanuatu, *National Museums Scotland* (A.1889.550)

### Hibiscus

Hibiscus fibre is one of the main grasses used in Oceanic material. It is often shredded to make skirts. Different parts of the plant are used. For example, hibiscus bast, which comes from the outer bark of the plant, is used in banana fibre textiles from the Caroline Islands to create dark brown patterns.



Women's skirt, Fiji, 19<sup>th</sup> century, *National Museums Scotland* (A.1881.23.3B)



Detail of skirt made with dyed hibiscus bast, Samoa, *National Museums Scotland* (A.1897.188.3)



### Banana fibre

Shredded banana fibre has a distinctive golden sheen. Shredded banana fibre is used in making skirts although they are not as prevalent in museum collections as those made of hibiscus. Banana fibres are woven on a loom both in the Santa Cruz Islands to make bags and mats and across the Caroline Islands chain in Micronesia to make fine textiles.



Detail of mat woven from banana fibre, Caroline Islands, *National Museums Scotland (A.1899.320)*

### Whale teeth

Sperm whale teeth are used as a raw material, mainly in body adornments, in a number of places in the Pacific. The material is often referred to as whale ivory and its appearance is similar red ochre colour.



Ceremonial sperm whale tooth (*tabua*), Fiji, *National Museums Scotland (A.1896.58)*



Neck ornament of split whale teeth, Fiji, *University of Aberdeen Museums (ABDUA: 4583)*



Carved whale tooth pendant on cord with attached glass trade beads - beads originated outside of the Pacific and were a valuable obtained through exchange, Fiji, *National Museums Scotland (A.1924.779)*

### Boar tusk

The tusks of pigs continue to be valued in the Pacific today and are particularly associated with Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and Fiji. Pigs have significance in ritual and ceremonial activities and the animals are prized possessions. Tusks that have curled to form a complete ring or more are more valuable due to the time and nurturing necessary for growth.



Arm ornament of boar tusk,  
Hawaiian Islands, *National  
Museums Scotland (A.1956.1020)*

### Trade Cloth & trade Beads

Contact with Asia, Europe and elsewhere brought new materials to the Pacific islands. Both cloth and glass beads were seen as a valuable commodity for which islanders would exchange food and other goods. Red coloured cloth was particularly prized due to the association the colour had with status across the Pacific. Often cloth and beads have been added to artefacts and are indicative of the previous owner's wealth and power.

Fly whisk (*kahili*) with red trade  
cloth tied around handle,  
Hawaiian Islands, 19<sup>th</sup> century,  
*National Museums Scotland  
(A.1948.278)*

