Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

TONGA - COSTUME G136



Tonga is made up of a group of islands in the South Pacific. There is a total of 169 islands but only 36 of them are inhabited. Water is an important part of life to the Tongans. This is not surprising with all the water surrounding them.

People in Tonga make kava from pressed kava roots. The roots are stewed in milk or water to let it brew - a bit like tea leaves. It is mainly drunk by the men on social occasions. They sit around in large groups, singing songs and often watching sport.





Basket



Tonga has a reputation for fine handicraft, particularly baskets. This small model shows the techniques and materials used to create bigger baskets, like the one below.

These baskets are made by weaving together strips of palm leaves. Entwining the palm leaves with each other makes the basket very strong and capable of holding fruit, clothes and all sorts of things! The darker strips have been dyed. Some baskets have large complicated patterns made with the dyed strips.





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Shell necklace



Look at the contrasting colours and shapes of the shells. One is smooth and would have been shiny white. The other is quite sharp and darker.

A person who studies mollusc shells, like those on the necklace, is called a conchologist. Tonga is one of the best places to find shells. The clear water, colourful reefs and golden beaches provide an excellent spot for enthusiasts.



A shell is the exoskeleton of a mollusc. It offers protection from predators. Some are designed so that they can burrow into the sand, others so that the creature can stay anchored to its position on the seabed.

Have you ever made your own necklace? What designs did you use?

Bodice

This bodice would have been worn over the chest by a young woman. It has a similar shell design to the skirt in the box.



This is a decorative piece and might have been worn at a special occasion - such as a dance. The material is very coarse. It can be uncomfortable when rubbed against the skin. How do you think they would stop this? Although Tonga is a hot country the people dress modestly when they walk in town. Often they wear long t-shirts, even during their traditional dances.



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Skirt

In Tonga this is called a kiekie and is worn over a longer skirt. Shells of different shades have been tied together for decoration. Imagine how long it would have taken to make!



The kiekie is made from different materials. They often use pandanus leaves which are thicker than the grass used on this one. Some are even made with the tape from old VHS videos!

Tonga's national dance is called lakalaka. It is practiced by communities throughout the islands and features prominently at important celebrations such as the coronation of the monarch.



The performances last approximately thirty minutes and involves up to several hundred people. Participants line up with men on the right and women on the left. The men dance in rapid, energetic movements, while the women execute graceful dance steps with elegant hand gestures. Both groups clap and sing as they move with a chorus singing in the background.

The punake is the poet, composer, choreographer and director of the performance. Punakes are expected to continually develop the Lakalaka, by exploring themes related to Tongan history, legends and values. However, over the past few decades, the number of performances has diminished and young composers tend to recycle the works rather than create new compositions.

