Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

NORTH AFRICA: COSTUME AND ORNAMENT G20

The objects in this box come from North Africa (see map below). The countries usually included in this region are Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Sudan and Western Sahara. North Africa is a large region with a diverse landscape. The Atlas Mountains, which are rich in natural resources, including rock salt and iron and the grassy lowlands provide excellent grazing for livestock. Olives, figs, cotton, dates, citrus fruits and cereals grow in abundance along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea. And of course there is the Sahara - the world's largest desert.





The Sahara in Algeria



An oasis in the Atlas Mountains

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Brush, fan and bag made from date palm leaves



The date palm is found growing in many places in the world, including Mexico, California, Spain, Italy and North Africa. The palm has been planted so widely that nobody is exactly sure where its original native home is. One possibility is that it originated in the desert oases of North Africa. The photograph on the right shows an oasis in the Libyan Desert.



The date palm is grown for its sweet fruit, which grow in clusters from the top of the trunk (see picture on the right). But the leaves are also used to make everyday items, like the brush, fan and bag in the box.

The brush has been made in a very simple way, by binding together some date palm leaves. It comes from Tunis, the capital city of Tunisia. The fan, also from Tunis, has been made from leaves that have been woven together to form a 'V' shaped pattern.

The bag is made from split date palm leaves.





Date palms

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Plate



This plate is recorded as coming from the Barbary States - the countries now known as Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya. Europeans used the name 'Barbary States' between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries. Unfortunately, we don't know which of these countries the plate comes from.



Traditionally made as functional items, today they are often displayed as ornaments rather than used for everyday needs. The pictures on the right show a variety of colours, shapes and patterns.



If you visit a Moroccan souk (market) you will certainly find rows and rows of plates and dishes painted in bright colours and covered in interesting patterns - like the example in the box. The souks are made up of hundreds of narrow maze-like alleyways crammed with jewellery, leather goods, pottery, clothes, fruit, spices... It is easy to get lost! When buying items you are expected to barter the price down with the seller, who will most likely offer you a glass of mint tea whilst you agree on a price!

Embroidered cap



A prayer cap, also known as a taqiyah or a kufi, is worn by Muslim men. The prophet Muhammad and his followers always covered their heads and so Muslim men do the same today to follow his ways. Some men only wear the cap whilst praying, others wear it all the time. Caps are most often white, but can be a variety of different colours.



The cap in this box is decorated with coloured thread and follows a similar design to traditional North Africa patterns (see pictures on the right). The cap comes from Libya.



97 per cent of the Libyan population is Muslim.

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Woven wool belt





This woollen belt comes from Morocco. One of the most amazing places for tourists to visit is the dyer's souk or the wool souk, which are normally found in the Old Towns of ancient Moroccan cities such as Fez or Marrakech. Here, freshly dyed wool hangs out to dry along the narrow alleyways and beautiful scarves, carpets and clothing are made and sold (see picture on the right).



Sheep are grazed on the foothills of the Atlas Mountains and have been for several centuries. The picture on the right shows a flock of sheep being guided down from a hill. Both the wool and the meat is sold on, in fact Morocco's economy relies on the agriculture and livestock market. These industries employ 45 per cent of the population.

Bead and leather bangle



The beaded bangle is also from Morocco. In the souks of Morocco you will find plenty of brightly coloured jewellery, often made by Berbers, the indigenous people of North Africa. There are some other examples of Berber jewellery below.





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Costume doll



In hot weather it is advisable to cover the skin with loose-fitting materials to protect yourself from the sun. Some people wear shorts and vests when they go on holiday and then wonder why they suffer from sunburn, heat stroke and dehydration. The best thing to do is to look at the clothing of people who come from that area.

The traditional clothing for men and women in North Africa is the djellaba. This can vary slightly between countries and in some places western style clothing is worn by younger people.

The costumed figure in the box is wearing several layers of clothing and has a hat made from date palm leaves, which also offers protection from the sun. A baby is safely carried on the back with long strip of material. This way, the mother is free to use both hands.

Woman's tunic



The green tunic in the box is also loose fitting. It was worn by a Moroccan woman, perhaps with baggy trousers and an extra layer over the top to cover the arms. Items like this have become fashionable across the world.

Cork sample



Several types of wood are grown along the Mediterranean coastline, one of which is cork.



The cork tree, or Cork Oak as it is properly called, can grow up to 20 metres tall. The bark is used to make many things, most famously cork bottle stoppers. The bark of the cork oak has unique characteristics - it is soft, buoyant, rot resistant, fire resistant and lightweight, amongst other things!

The Cork Oak is most commonly found in Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria, although other countries such as Portugal and Spain have some as well.

Camel bell

The Arabian, or dromedary camel, is common across North Africa and the Middle East. It is a domesticated animal and is used for carrying people and cargo, often for long distances. They have several advantages over horses. They can kneel down to be loaded up and can go without water for up to 17 days. When they do drink, they can take an incredible 136 litres at a time! They are able to close their nostrils and have two layers of eyelashes to cope with desert conditions.

The dromedary only has one hump, whereas the bactrian camel has two. An easy way to remember the difference is the dromedary starts with a 'D' (one hump) and bactrian starts with a 'B' (two humps).

The camels wear these wooden bells around their necks so that they can be found easily when left to roam around. It makes more of a clunking sound than a ringing sound!



