Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

PACIFIC ISLANDS G39

The Pacific Ocean is a vast expanse of water that is home to between 20,000 and 30,000 islands. There are so many that we are still not sure of the exact number! The Pacific Islands is the name given to the group of thousands of small islands near Australia. These comprise of countries such as Samoa, Fiji and Tonga.





Many of these islands are famed for weaving mats and baskets out of tree leaves. They also have a reputation for great woodcarving. The items in this box are made from natural resources. Remember when these were made they did not have electric saws and machinery!

Club



This straight wooden club is called a *bowai*. It is very similar to a baseball bat. Just as the bat hits a ball with great accuracy and power, the *bowai* is equally effective at smashing a skull. They were popular weapons throughout the Pacific Islands. This one was probably not used for fighting. The design is so fine that it is likely to have been used for ceremonial occasions.



The clubs are among the most complex and demanding woodcarvings. There were more than sixty different types of club and each conformed to a system of rules. These rules affected the dimensions, the curvature of its lines and the decoration appropriate to its type. Making these designs required precision. The carver used small tools made of mako shark teeth, attached to a short handle. These gouged out the shallow and complex patterns.

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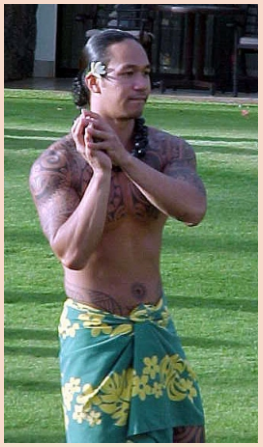
Clubs were a favourite weapon. Warfare was once common between villages and different islanders. In Fiji the men kept track of a weapon's kills by notching, drilling holes, or sticking victims' teeth on it. Another variation of the war club was a *totokia*. It was designed to peck a hole into the head of an enemy. You can see how it would have been used on the right.



The club's carving are deliberately similar to tattoo patterns. 'Tattoo' comes from the Tahitian word *tatau*, meaning to mark. The published account in 1769 of Captain Cook's voyage to the Pacific Islands is the first time the word is recorded. It is said that *tatau* is an onomatopoeic word. 'Tat' refers to tapping the tattooing instrument into the skin and the 'au' to the cry of pain!



European missionaries on the islands didn't like the practice of tattooing. They tried to stamp out the custom using a method known as holystoning. This involved the missionaries trying to remove tattoos by rubbing the skin with sandstone - like scrubbing a ship's deck. The ink lay deep in the skin so the body was scoured almost raw.



Pandanus mat

Fine mats have been woven for centuries from the leaves of the pandanus tree. The mat is a symbol of wealth and prosperity. It takes many hours of work to create a product of great quality. For many years the mats were used for money and barter. Today, they are given as gifts at special occasions like marriages, and to the families at funerals.



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Mats are produced for a variety of purposes, such as bedding, floor coverings, gifts, ceremonial exchanges and clothing. The patterns used can vary from small to large, and from quickly made to finely woven. The size, quality, and texture of the pandanus affect the mat's flexibility, strength and importance.



The technique used on this mat is called the plain weave. It is the most basic type but strong and hard-wearing. Two strips are woven perpendicularly to each other. The vertical strip is called the *warp* and the horizontal strips the *weft*.