

TEACHER NOTES



Pandanus bag from Maubara, Timor-Leste, collection of Ruth Nuttall

Baskets of Melanesia

9 March - 23 June 2013

This exhibition showcases the craft of basket making throughout the Melanesian Islands. It explores the different materials used, the shapes and forms of the woven baskets and their traditional uses.

Education resource compiled by Linda Fordyce, Educator, Pataka Museum of Arts and Cultures, 2013.
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Background to the Exhibition

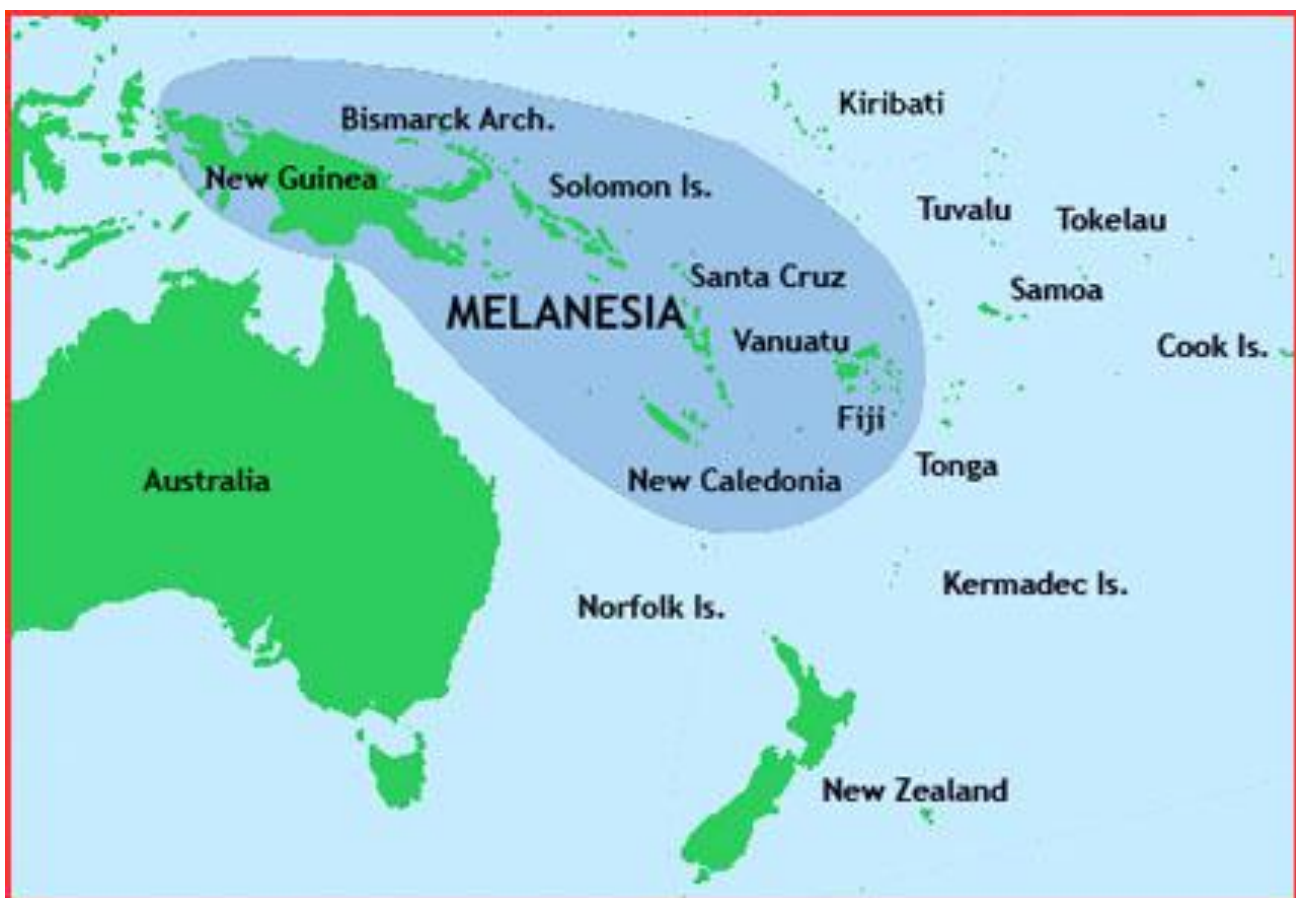
Although several of the Melanesian islands such as Vanuatu and New Caledonia are closer to New Zealand than many of the Polynesian islands, the cultures and crafts of Melanesia have not been given a high profile in this country.

In 2007 **Pataka** featured an exhibition of Kanak art and artefacts from New Caledonia. This exhibition builds on that highly successful event and features baskets from Timor Leste, Irian Jaya, Papua New Guinea, the Solomon Islands, Fiji, Vanuatu and New Caledonia.

Baskets of Melanesia is the first exhibition of its type and size to be held in New Zealand

Introduction

Melanesia itself is part of a larger Culture Area called Oceania that includes Melanesia (Black Islands), Polynesia (Many Islands), Micronesia (Little Islands), and Australia in the Pacific Ocean. Melanesia lies south of the equator and extends from the western end of the Pacific Ocean to the Arafura Sea, and eastward to Fiji. The region comprises most of the islands immediately north and northeast of Australia including New Guinea, New Caledonia, Vanuatu, Timor-Leste, Solomon Islands and Fiji. The long chain of islands is highly volcanic and is also known as the "ring of fire".



These islands form one of the most culturally complex regions of the entire world, with 1,293 languages spoken across the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, New Caledonia and the island of New Guinea (politically divided into Indonesia's West Papua Province and the nation of Papua New Guinea). The proportion of 716 sq. kilometers per language is by far the most dense rate of languages in relation to land mass on earth. Most of the languages of Melanesia are members of the Austronesian or Papuan language families.

Melanesia is also a region of great antiquity. New Guinea has been settled for around 45,000 years, the Solomon Islands for 35,000 years, and Vanuatu and New Caledonia for about 4,000. Throughout Melanesia, people lived in small scale societies often without strong leadership systems. Instead, communities were bound by ties of family and by complex networks of trade and exchange. Trade routes could link distant communities, and trading canoe voyages covered extensive distances. The daily round of food gardening, hunting, and in coastal areas, of fishing, were enriched by many rituals, often involving the production of remarkable objects such as the famous *malangan* carvings of New Ireland, and body decorations. In general Melanesians do not worship gods, but acknowledge the spirits and other beings sharing the landscape with them, and their ancestors.*

* [Excerpt from www.britishmuseum.org/explore/cultures/oceania/melanesia]



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Melanesian Baskets - The Raw Materials

Coconut palm *Cocos nucifera*

The coconut palm, *Cocos nucifera*, is a member of the palm family. The term coconut is derived from 16th century Portuguese and Spanish *cocos*, meaning "grinning face", from the three small holes on the coconut shell that resemble human facial features.

Found throughout the tropic and subtropic area, the coconut is known for its great versatility, with medicines, oil, drums, charcoal and strainers being among the products made from its many different parts. The leaves or fronds measure up to 6 metres long and can be used as material to make a variety of woven products including thatch, mats, fans, baskets and cooking containers.

Being one of the most common materials available, coconut leaf baskets have developed universally across the Pacific with a similarity of form, technique and use. Most of the baskets made from coconut leaves retain a portion of the mid-rib that provides a natural reinforcing around the opening edge. Palm leaf baskets are often used immediately after being made, usually for carrying uncooked food.

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia (below)



The **coconut palm**

Cocos nucifera, is a member of the family *Arecaceae* (palm family). It is the only accepted species in the genus *Cocos*. The term **coconut** can refer to the entire **coconut palm**, the seed, or the fruit, which, botanically, is a drupe, not a nut.



cocos – "grinning face"

Coconut palm (*Cocos nucifera*)

Pandanus

Pandanus, often called pandanus palms, are not closely related to palm trees. They are large shrubs or small trees of cultural, health, and economic importance in the Pacific, second only to the coconut. About 600 species of pandanus exist, varying in size from small shrubs to medium-sized trees up to 20 metres tall.

Pandanus grows naturally throughout most of the Pacific however plants used for mats and baskets are usually cultivated near a village. Plants are easily propagated from seed, but are also planted by weavers from branch cuttings. The plant usually has many thick prop roots near the base, which provide lateral support as the tree becomes top-heavy with leaves, fruit, and branches. The pandanus can withstand salt spray, drought and strong winds. In some species of *Pandanus*, the fruits can look like a woody pineapple. They hang from the branches for more than 12 months.

Pandanus trees provide materials for housing, clothing and textiles including fine mats, dilly bags, decorations and for fishing and religious purposes. In general, pandanus leaves have a higher social value than those of the coconut palm, as they are used for mats of a higher grade.

Pandanus is used extensively for weaving. Pandanus leaves are strap-shaped and can measure between 30 centimetres to two metres long, and up to ten centimetres wide. Usually it is only the young leaves that are cut in order to allow the plant to naturally regenerate. The thorns on the leaf edges and the midribs are stripped away and the leaves dried in the sun. Leaves can also be boiled to soften them or soaked in mud and other substances for dyeing. Once prepared, the leaves are rolled in tight coils and stored awaiting use.

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia (below)



The **pandanus**

Pandanus is a member of the family Pandanaceae and a genus of monocots with about 600 known species. They are palm-like, dioecious (with male and female flowers) trees and shrubs native to the subtropics.

◀ woody fruit of *pandanus utilis*
▼ Dried leaves (left) and pandanus tree with prop roots (right).



Bas· ket

[bas-kit, bah-skit]

noun

a container made of twigs, rushes, split leaves, thin strips of wood, or other flexible material woven together.



Solomon Islands basket. Collection of Rhys Richards

Basket-making

Basket-making is one of the oldest, and widest spread crafts in human history. Its early appearance allowed humans to gather, share, and store food. It is difficult to determine just how old the craft is because the fibrous natural materials used decay naturally, quickly and constantly and ancient examples are rarely found in museum collections. The oldest preserved woven examples/fragments, from Upper Egypt and the Middle East date back thousands of years as do the oral myths and legends that feature baskets and the techniques of making them.

While it is an ancient craft, basketry is a tradition which continues to thrive today. Basket-making is an art form which often combines both utilitarian and aesthetic qualities. Baskets are made for a variety of purposes, including food gathering and storage, furnishings, garments and ceremonial uses. Baskets can also play a significant role in maintaining cultural traditions and tribal/group identities. For example, in New Ireland (Papua New Guinea); "coconut baskets are quintessential to differentiating village identities – simply by noticing a basket and the way it is carried, one can infer the village in which the basket's owner resides." [Kuchler p75]

In the past, basket making was the domain of women. "Before Europeans changed [Pacific Islanders' ways of living, almost every woman spent a good part of her day working with fibres, weaving and plaiting floor coverings, food wrappers, cooking containers, storage and carrying baskets, as well as special baskets for ceremonial events. Baskets came in different shapes and sizes depending on their original purpose, and there were distinct receptacles for a whole host of specific foodstuffs and other items. Common designs included baskets for collecting shellfish or crabs, storage for dried, cooked or freshly caught fish and other food and containers for clothes."¹ [Kuchler, S:Pacific Pattern – p52]

Today, both men and women practice basketry, although it remains a predominantly female art. Contemporary skilled weavers, like their mothers and grandmothers before them, often achieve positions of great respect in their communities and can earn a living from selling their baskets at markets, shops and galleries. In certain regions, with an established reputation for a distinctive style and skilled workers, basketry has entered the realm of fine art and baskets are exported around the world.

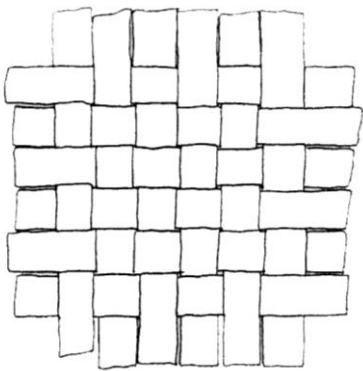
Common Weaving Techniques – plaiting, twining and coiling

Plaiting

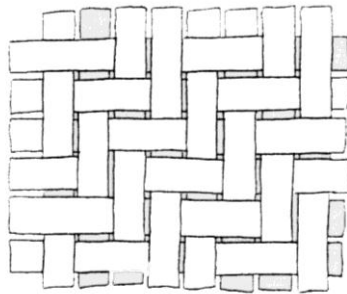
Plaiting, also known as checker weave, is a straightforward technique in which the **weft** crosses over and under one **warp** at a time. When a plaited object is flat, such as with a mat, it can be difficult to distinguish the weft from the warp.

When the weft passes over or under more than one warp at a time, it results in a decorative pattern known as twilling. Plaiting can also be done as a diagonal, or bias, weave.

Many twined baskets start with a plaited bottom. The weft and warp of the plaited bottom can be split into smaller pieces and become the warp of the basket sides.



Plaiting checker weave



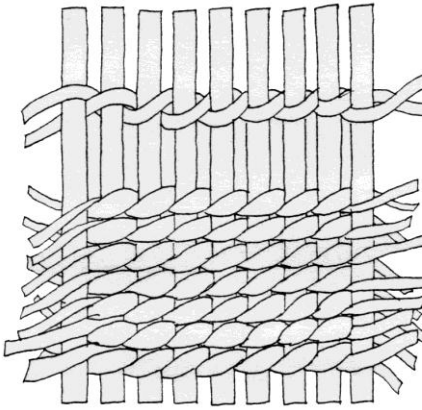
Plaiting twill pattern

Twining

Twining is a technique in which two wefts cross over each other between warps. There are numerous variations of twining, including variances in the number of wefts, the number of warps crossed by the wefts and the angle of the warps. Each of these variations changes the surface appearance of the object.

Color designs on twined basketry can be achieved with false embroidery or overlay. Both these techniques add a third, colored weft to the usual two wefts. False embroidery is only incorporated into the outside wefts, making the design visible only on the outer surface of the object. False embroidery slants in an opposite direction to the rest of the twining and is added to the surface of basketry while it is being made.

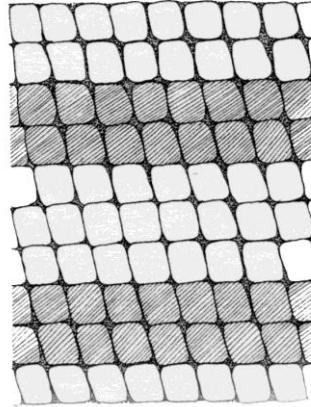
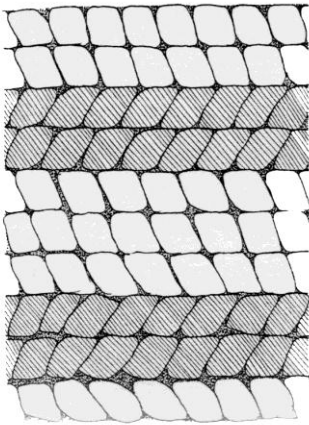
Overlay differs from false embroidery in that overlay's extra weft is woven into both the outside and inside wefts of the object. Depending on the overlay twining technique used, the design may or may not be visible on the inside surface. Unlike false embroidery, overlay slants in the same direction as the rest of the twining.



◀ Plain twinning -2 strands

▼ left – false embroidery, slants in opposite direction

▼ right – overlay, slants in same direction



Coiling

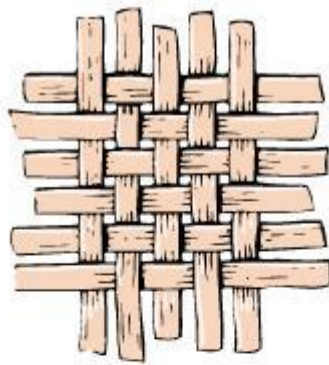
A coiled basket is made by using flexible strands that can be wrapped in a circular pattern and shaped as you go. Each successive coil is stitched to the previous one.



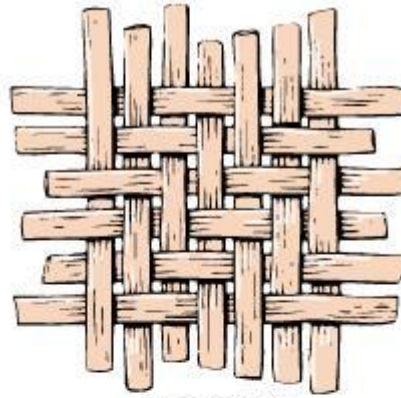
eHow.com /arts & crafts/ weaving



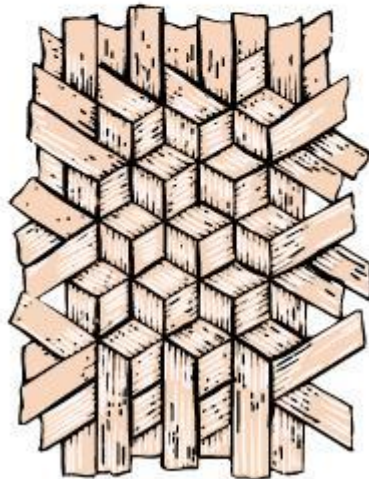
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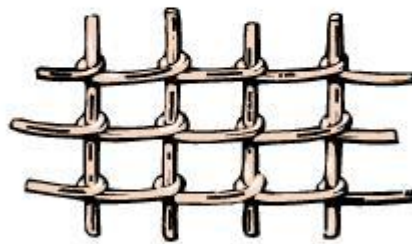
check



twilled twos



hexagonal



wrapped



twined

Common types of baskets

The simplest baskets, created across the Pacific, are used for food platters and made with coconut palm fronds - woven whilst green and still easy to work with. The mid rib of the frond, which is hard but supple, has a single strand along its length that helps strengthen it. Very often the strand is retained and used to strengthen the basket. At other times it is removed and kept aside to make another common household item, the household broom. For basket weaving purposes, the frond, minus its strand, are folded and the spindly leaves that attach each side are swiftly plaited together. Almost every islander can put one of these baskets together in less than ten minutes. Up to one hundred of these simple baskets are made to carry the vast quantities of food that are synonymous with the Pacific feast. Once the feasting is over, these lovely baskets are discarded in piles as quickly as they were made.





Simple platter and carrying baskets made out of coconut leaves on display in the Museum of New Caledonia,

Baskets used for the storage of food.

Baskets were often suspended from the ceiling and used to store food. The basket (below left) from Tiga Island in New Caledonia was made out of coconut leaves and suspended from the ceiling to store tomatoes and other fruit.



Wasait basket, Museum of New Caledonia

The basket (below right) from the Shepherd Island group in Vanuatu was a chief's basket to fill up with magic and hang over the fire in the kitchen. It has been made out of pandanus for a finer weave and for special ceremonial reasons.

A basket (below) for storing and carrying chickens in Timor has a much looser weave and is made of harder rattan.



Museum of Vanuatu, Port Vila



Auckland Museum

Baskets used for food gathering and carrying goods.

Baskets may be carried on the shoulder, the head or in the hand, as well as hung on the end of a stick that is balanced over the shoulder. Larger ones are usually worn on the shoulder or on the head for support or strapped on to the back. Medium-sized ones – are suspended over the back attached with long straps that wrap across the forehead, while small ones are carried in the hand.



Three baskets from Timor- Leste
(Collection of Carol Nelson)

◀ Child's carrying basket with a headband from Dili, Timor Leste.

▶ Tall rattan basket tied on to the back and used for collecting coffee beans.

▼ Man's betel nut bag made out of riverbed reed with clan figures used as design motifs



Baskets can be so finely woven that they can be used to carry water! The pandanus basket (below) from Futuna Island in Vanuatu is a finely woven water-carrying bag. When the basket gets damp, the fibres swell and allow water to be carried from the stream/beach to the village.



Collection of Bob Maysmor



Collection of Steve Myhre

◀ A chief's carry basket made out of coconut leaves from the Trobriand Islands, Milne Bay Province, Papua New Guinea. The size of the basket reflects the age and hierarchy of its owner.

▶ An everyday carry bag made out of a coconut leaf and used for taro and vegetables in the Loyalty Islands, New Caledonia.



Private Collection

Containers used to gather shellfish and other seafood used very open weaves, allowing for easy rinsing and water drainage. Loosely woven basketry was used to strain oil from certain kinds of fish.



Collection of Tiki Mcfarlane

◀ A Fijian basket used to transport fish

▶ A 'working' basket used to trap fish from Bougainville.



Collection of Carol Nelson



Collection of Carol Nelson

◀ A sacred basket from Nalbol, South Efate in Vanuatu. This finely crafted basket was made out of pandanus for a woman at the time of her marriage when it was filled with food for her to take to her new husband.

▶ Baskets used to carry and store salt.

Collection of Rosemary Christian



Designs and Decorations

Not all basketry is adorned. Clam baskets and baskets used for cooking, for example, are usually undecorated. Many other types of basketry, however, have designs or motifs. Designs can be added afterwards with false embroidery or overlay. Designs may also be painted on the exterior surface of an object after it is completed. Additionally, variations in the weave can create patterns and raised textures which form designs. The designs often give clues as to who or where the basket was made. Certain motifs are associated with particular tribes or islands; some islands have their own characteristic designs over which they hold a traditional “copyright”.

Geometric patterns are most commonly used throughout the Pacific because of the very nature of weaving itself and its grid-like structure but Pacific women have been very adept at creating a multitude of designs by using different plaiting techniques. Ceremonial baskets generally showcased the more intricate geometric or openwork patterns that belonged to specific tribes/clans or island groups. The many different types of pandanus grown throughout the islands with their varying colours, sizes and leaf shapes also, when dry, produced distinctive colours and textures when woven into baskets.

Some societies were also known for their use of colour, for example the distinctive red and purple natural pigments used in Vanuatu, and variations in colour produced from the local berries, roots, bark or minerals. More recently the introduction and use of modern commercial dyes, however, has transformed the palette and creativity of the fibre arts along with the use of new ‘synthetic’ materials including packaging tape, raffia and plastic bread bags. Commercial pigments provide more vivid colors than those made from natural sources.



Collection of Te Papa Tongarewa

◀ Pandanus basket belonging to the Enga tribe from the Laiagan district of Papua New Guinea.

▶ Fine weaving with commercial dyes from Pentecost Island, Vanuatu



Collection of Bob Maysmor



Collection of Rhys Richards

◀ Fibre from the trunk of a banana tree has been woven into a basket on a backstrap loom by Patrick Meloma from Reef Island, Santa Cruz, Solomon Islands.

The Melanesian bilum (not officially a basket and not included in the exhibition)

Bilums are not defined as baskets, however they are used in the same way and the bilum bag is perhaps the most recognisable and common 'carry bag' in Papua New Guinea. Bilums are colourful string bags used to carry a wide range of items, from shopping goods in large bilums to personal items in purse-sized varieties. They are enormously strong and expandable. Local men usually prefer to use long handle styles so they can be worn over the shoulder, freeing their arms for more important issues, like carrying important bush knives or to grab onto things while hiking mountains. Women often prefer the short handled versions that they can sling across their foreheads to carry greater loads, such as babies and/or large quantities of foodstuff like yams or potatoes.



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The string bag is made by a process known as looping or knotless netting, similar to crocheting. The bag is time consuming to make since the entire length of the string is fed through every loop. Traditionally, the string used was handmade from plant materials. The original fibre was made out of the inner bark of the wild tulip tree which had to be soaked in a stream for up to eight months. Then the bark was dried and the strands separated before the women rubbed them on their thighs to twist them into twine. The twine was

usually dyed in mud, bark, roots, grasses or special crushed seashells to produce traditional earthy colours. Now, however, many people who can afford to do so make their bilums from brightly coloured store-bought yarn and string.

Bilums found in the Maprik and Wosera area of East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea come in different patterns, each pattern resembling a certain tribe or clan. More complex and specific patterns are made for bilums used during ceremonial events including yam festivals, tambuan dances and bride price payments. The Wosera people are the only tribe that maintains their traditional bilum patterns and treasures the complexity of their inherited patterns. Only a few ladies in a village possess the skill and knowledge of producing these patterns.

Bilum-making spread quite quickly down to the coast and then up to the Highlands as a source of regular income for women. In the Highland region they have extended the bilum concept to make dresses and skirts. Bilumware is now a very

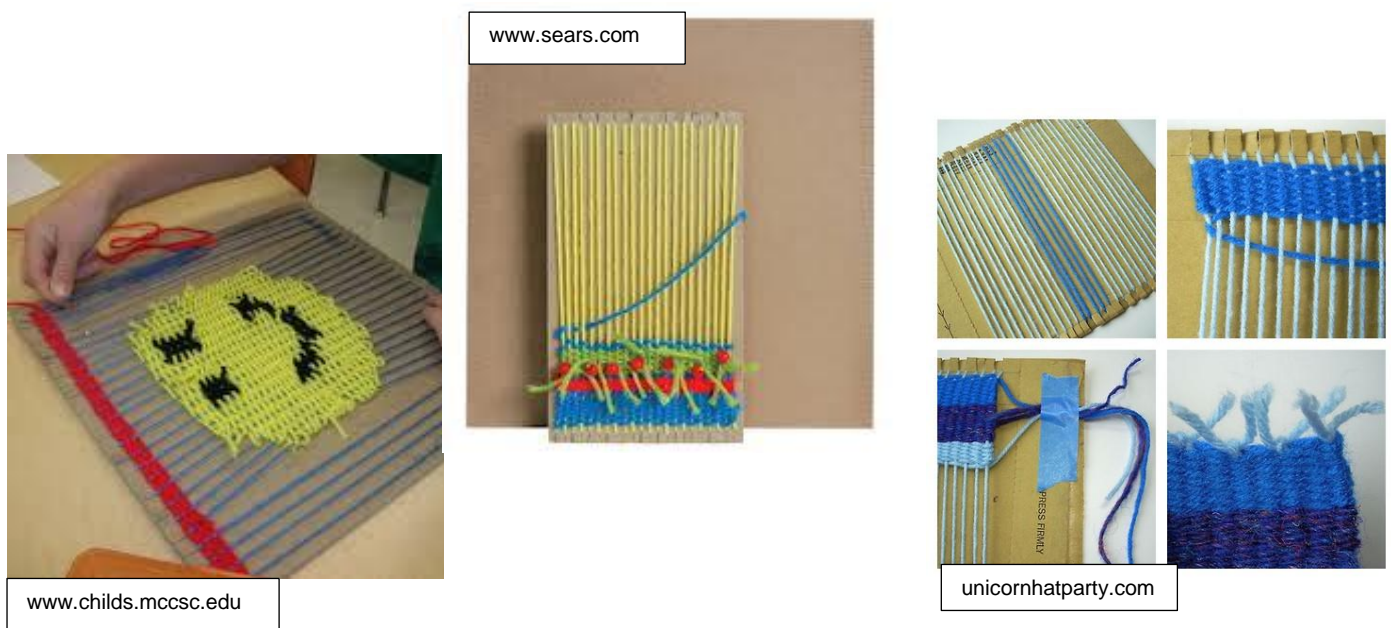
marketable craft industry in Papua New Guinea.



A man's bag from the Highlands of Irian Jaya – made out of dried orchid leaves and twisted fibre – similar to what is used for bilums. [Collection of Ruth Nuttall].

Pre and Post visit Activities

- > **FIND** a map of Melanesia and identify the main islands of each country.
- > **WEAVE** with some paper or even harekeke and **TRY** some of the different weaving techniques.
- > **CREATE** a fact file and image gallery on the countries that make up Melanesia.
- > **FIND OUT** how the Pacific is divided up and why?
- > **EXPLORE** the different functions and forms of baskets. What kinds of things can be carried in a basket?
- > **DISCOVER** what baskets are made from in Melanesia and how they colour/dye the material.
- > **MAKE** a notched-edged cardboard loom and set it up with a woollen warp.
Weave different types of yarn/ribbon across as wefts. Can you weave a pattern into it?



- > **COMPARE** the baskets of Melanesia with Maori kete. What are the similarities and differences?
- > **COMPOSE** a glossary of the weaving terms you come across eg warp, weft, twining, coiling etc.
- > **INVITE** people from Melanesia, [the Fijian community for example] to talk to your class about their homeland.
- > **INVESTIGATE** some of the myths and legends surrounding the introduction of weaving to the Pacific Islands.
- > **WEAVE** with recycled materials like plastic supermarket and bread bags, billboard vinyl, packaging and video tapes.
- > **DESIGN** your own carry/library/book bags with motifs which help to identify your school or class.
- > **RESEARCH** the role and impact the Second World War had on places like Vanuatu.

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