



HANDICRAFTS of the MARSHALL ISLANDS

JUDY MULFORD

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Written, photographed, and
illustrated by
JUDY MULFORD

MAJURO
2006

With special thanks and appreciation to Dan Mulford, Rebecca Lorennij, Mandy Ritok, Eonbit Rakinmento, Catherine Overman, Melissa Brown Bidermann, Carol Curtis, and the Handicraft Artists of the Marshall Islands.

KOMMOL TATA

The publication of this catalogue has been made possible by the Marshallese Ministry of Resources & Development and the United Nations Development Program.

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Publication Design by MELISSA BROWN BIDERMAN

Ministry of Resources and Development
P.O. Box 1727
Majuro, Republic of the Marshall Islands, MH 96960

Printed in the United States of America by WILSON PRINTING

Front Cover: Assorted Marshallese Handicrafts
Back Cover: Mattang Navigational Stick Chart

MESSAGE from the MINISTER of
RESOURCES & DEVELOPMENT

Marshallese handicrafts are very unique and considered to be the finest and most beautiful in the Pacific, and are produced by some of the finest weavers in the Pacific. Handicrafts are an important part of the economy of the Marshall Islands. Marshallese made handicrafts could be found not only around the Pacific Islands but also internationally. Some can be found on desks and hanging on walls in private homes, and in government and corporate offices in the United States, Japan, New Zealand, Taiwan and several other countries.

This is the first Marshallese Handicraft Catalogue produced and funded jointly by the Ministry of Resources & Development and the United Nations Development Programs (UNDP). The main purpose of the catalog is to bring together information on Marshallese handicrafts and to promote their exportation internationally. It is also hoped that the catalog will also be used as a tool within and outside the classroom in educating our children and the general public to better appreciate the talents and weaving skills of our people.

I wish to thank the Government of the Marshall Islands and the UNDP for funding the production of this catalog. I also wish to thank Mrs. Judy Mulford, the Marshall Islands Handicraft Association and the Marshallese Handicraft Weavers for their assistance in developing this catalogue. I hope you enjoy the color pictures representing the many types of handicrafts produced in the Marshall Islands. Suggestions and comments regarding this catalogue are most welcomed.

Kommol tata,

John M. Silk
Minister of Resources and Development
Republic of the Marshall Islands



INTRODUCTION

The tropical Marshall Islands are located in the Western Pacific Ocean just north of the equator and about 2,400 miles southwest of Hawaii. 1,225 tiny islands form 29 atolls and five single low islands that are arranged in two chains 150 miles apart and 800 miles long. The northwestern, or “sunrise” atolls are called RATAK, and the southwestern, or “sunset”, atolls are called RALIK.

The Marshallese belong to a larger group of island people called Micronesians who inhabit the Gilbert, Caroline, Marianas, and Marshall Islands.

Micronesians entered the Pacific over 3,000 years ago from southeast Asia and gradually settled eastward to the Marshall Islands. The first foreign sightings of the Marshall Islands were by the Spanish explorers in the 1500's, but they did not colonize. The islands were named after English sea captain John Marshall of the HMS *Scarborough* who charted the area in 1788.

The first ethnographic observations of the islands were recorded in the early 1800's by Russian explorer Otto von Kotzebue. In 1857 American missionaries began arriving from Honolulu and by 1909 had established churches on the inhabited atolls.

During the 1850's Germans also began arriving and in 1885 the Marshalls were declared a German Protectorate. For 29 years coconut plantations and copra facilities flourished. But, in 1914, the Japanese took control, colonized, and fortified military bases in the area.

After World War II, in 1947, the Marshall Islands, under the auspices of the United Nations, became part of the Trust Territory of the United States. The Republic of the Marshall Islands was formed in 1979 and in 1986 a Compact of Free Association was signed with the United States.

HANDICRAFTS

The Marshallese women are considered the finest and most productive weavers in Micronesia. Their high quality contemporary handicrafts have evolved since World War II to accommodate economic pressures and demands and have become a pivotal part of the outer island economy.

Each individual and unique item is carefully crafted by women in the home using pandanus leaves (“MAAN”), split and bleached young coconut palm leaves (“KIMEJ”), the midrib of the coconut frond (“MĀLWE ”), hibiscus fibers (“JAB”), and shells.

Crafts today are made for the tourist, but they reflect the past. The plaited pandanus sleeping and sitting mats of today use the same materials and techniques that were used in the “NIEDED”, the traditional mat clothing (not worn today), and the “ALELE”, a plaited and folded pandanus bag that was used to store necklaces and tools.

Unique to the Marshall Islands, and made by men, are the navigational stick charts (“METO”) and the life size and model canoes (“WA”).



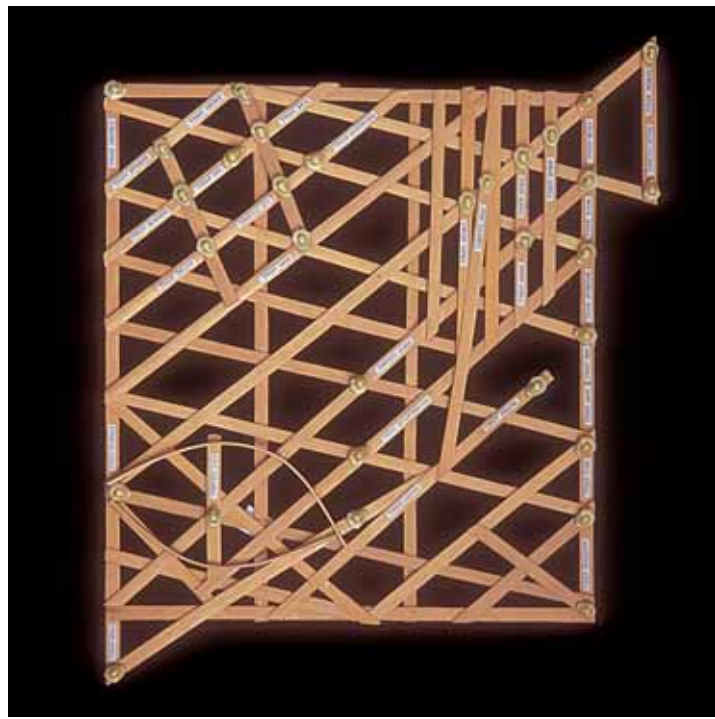
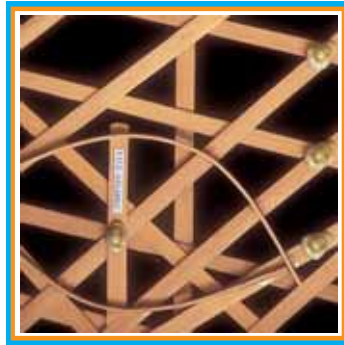
Detail of “NIEDED” – traditional women’s dress mat,
circa 1820

Alele Museum, Majuro, Marshall Islands

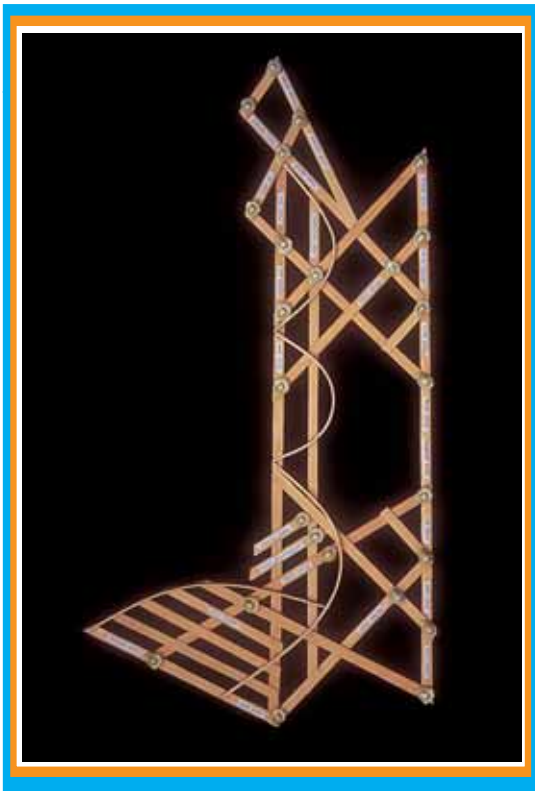


Old “alele” bag.
Plaited pandanus 14” x 11”
Alele Museum

NAVIGATIONAL STICK CHARTS
“METO”



1 . “REBBELIB”



Navigational “stick charts” are only found in the Marshall Islands. These unique charts were used as instructional aids to help teach guarded navigational skills to select students about wave and current patterns around the atolls. They were not taken to sea, but memorized and were meaningless without the knowledge in the heads of their master navigator instructors.

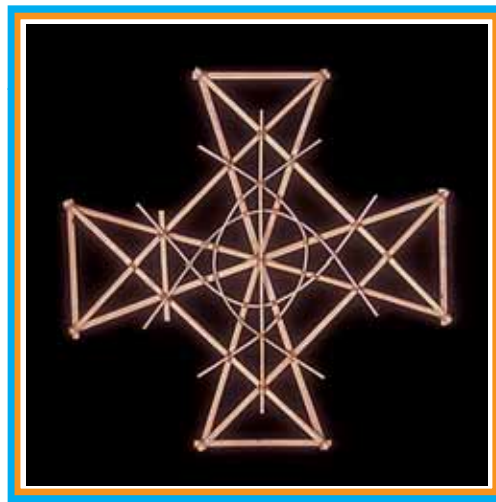
The charts were made by men from thin strips of coconut frond midribs or pandanus root. They were then bound together with coconut sennit in geometric patterns depicting sea currents around the low lying atolls. Small money cowrie shells or coral pebbles indicate special islands and the curved sticks show wave patterns.

2. “MEDO” (“Meddo”)

There are three kinds of stick charts. The first, the “REBBELIB” (#1), is a general wave navigational chart and can cover all of the Marshall Islands or those of one chain.

The second type of stick chart, the “MEDO” (#2), covers only a few islands and is useful for specific voyages.

The third type, the “MATTANG” or “WAPPEPE” (#3), is a small, square shaped teaching chart that identifies wave patterns formed around a single island.



3. “MATTANG” (“Wappepe”)

The unique design and history of the stick charts make them sought after collector’s items.

CANOES
“WA”



4. CANOE (large)

Canoes were essential to the life of the early Marshallese because they were intimately dependent on the sea for survival. The small, flat coral atolls, surrounded by vast areas of ocean, had limited land and few resources. By necessity, the islanders needed to be linked to the other islands and the outrigger canoes became their sole means of transportation. Over thousands of years the Marshallese perfected the technology and design of their outrigger canoes and today they are considered some of the finest in the Pacific.

The men carved the outrigger canoes from the breadfruit tree (“MA”) and tied the wooden pieces together with coconut sennit (“KKWAL”). The traditional triangular sails (“WŌJLĀ”) were woven by the women out of pandanus leaves (“MAAN”). Cloth is used today.

There are three types of outrigger canoes. The first, the “KŌRKŌR”, is an outrigger paddle canoe 10 – 15 feet long that was used for sailing or fishing within the lagoon. It holds up to three people and are still in use today.

The second type, the “TIPNOL”, is a sailing canoe 18 – 30 feet long that was used for open ocean and lagoon fishing. It holds up to 10 people and is also still used today.

The third type, the “WALAP”, was a large 100 foot long sailing canoe that was used for sailing long distances. It could hold up to 50 people and is thought to be the type of boat that originally brought the Marshallese to the islands.

Outrigger canoe building skills continue to be taught and small models are crafted for sale to the tourist.



5. CANOES - a, b (medium & small)

MATS
"JAKI"



6. SLEEPING MAT



7. SLEEPING MAT

Mats are a traditional part of Marshallese life. They are used as floor mats, for sitting, sleeping, rain protection, and decoration.

Today mats are plaited (woven) out of pandanus leaves (“MĀAN”) by women using the same techniques used in the old outrigger canoe sails and the women’s traditional mat clothing, the “NIEDED” (page 6).

The mats range from coarsely woven floor mats to intricately woven sleeping mats. The common “TĪLAO”, a sitting mat, is not woven but constructed of whole pandanus leaves that are sewn together.

The “JEPKO”, a floor mat, is coarsely woven using $\frac{1}{2}$ ” to $\frac{3}{4}$ ” pandanus leaves. It is used under the sleeping mats and can cover an entire room.

The “JANINI”, a sleeping mat, is double woven using $\frac{1}{4}$ ” prepared pandanus leaves and hibiscus fibers, “JAB”, for decoration. It has a fold down the center where the two halves are joined. When traveling on boats one can sleep between the two halves for warmth and protection from the elements. At home, in the morning, the mats are rolled up and stored.



8. SLEEPING MAT



Detail of mat from Aelonlaplap (made before World War II) Alele Museum, Majuro. 72” L x 39” W. Pandanus with hibiscus stitching.



Woman weaving mat on Ailuk

WALL DECORATIONS
“OBON”



9. WALL DECORATION



10.



11.



12.



13.



14.

Many varied designs and techniques are used in these contemporary wall decorations. They range in size from 10" – 22" in diameter. The techniques were probably introduced during the Japanese times, but have developed over the years as have the baskets and fans, to become unique, individual art pieces.

Pieces of stiff, flat coconut frond midrib are wrapped with pandanus leaves. The lacy woven designs, "teneriffe" ("BEBEN"), are made with hibiscus and coconut fibers. (See page 39 – 46 for material preparation and weaving techniques)



15.



16.



17.



18.



18 a. detail

Cowrie shells, varying in size and color, are commonly used to embellish the wall decorations. Recently floral decorations made from pandanus and hibiscus fibers have been introduced for added interest.



19.



20.



21.



22.

Only a few of the many shapes and sizes of wall decorations are shown here.

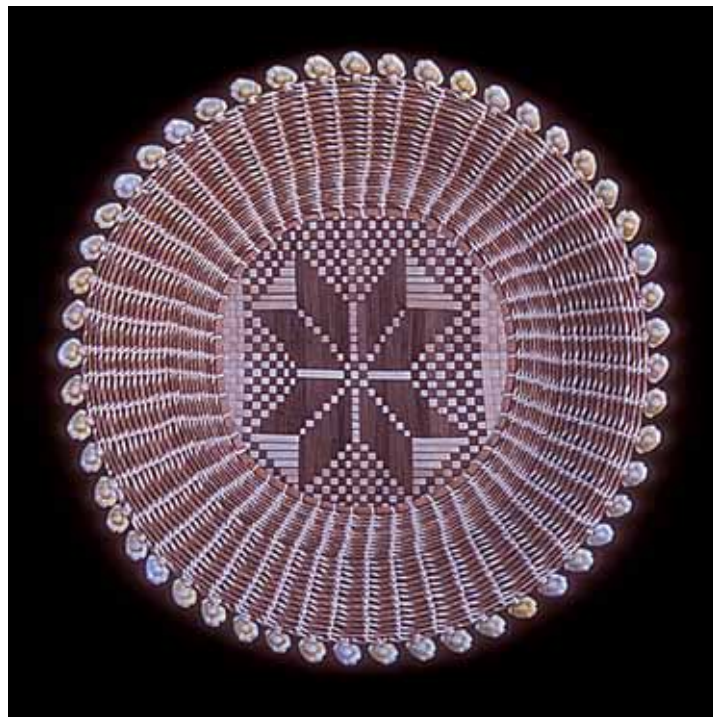
The old style “OBON” pattern (#21) is created by the carefully planned out wrapping of strips of pandanus leaves over the core coconut midrib material.

The simple hot plates and coasters range in size from 3 ¾” to 12” or more in diameter and are trimmed with money cowrie shells (“LIKAJJIR”).

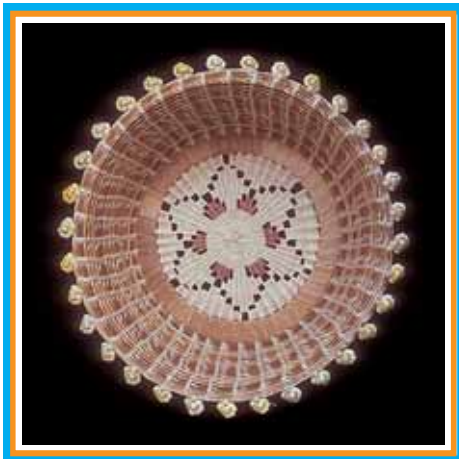


23. COASTERS - a, b (large & small)

OPEN BASKETS
“IEP”



24. ROUND BASKET with plaited pandanus center



25.



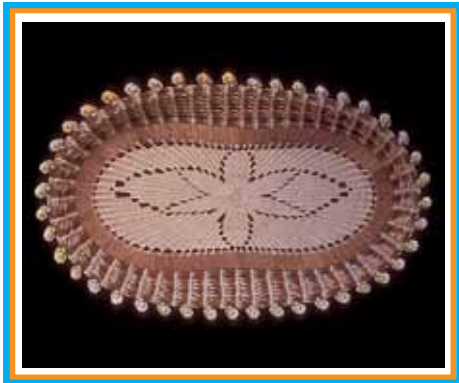
26.



27.



28.



29.



30.

Baskets are made with the same materials and techniques as the wall decorations. They are all trimmed with shells.

COVERED BASKETS
“IEP”



31. COVERED BASKET with large cowrie shell



32.



33.



34.



35.



36.



37.

Covered baskets, also known as “work” or “sewing” baskets, range in size from 2 ½” H x 3” diameter to 15” H x 15” diameter.

HANDBAGS
“IEP”



38. KILI BAG (“IEP in KILI”)

The popular white, finely woven “Kili” bag was originally made on Kili Island by Bikini Islanders who relocated to Kili during the 1950’s.

The purses are plaited over wooden molds (“MONAKJANS”) using pandanus leaves for the inside of the bags and finely split coconut fibers for the outside. Hibiscus fibers are sometimes woven in on the outside as a design element. The Kili bag comes in several sizes and has an attached lid (#39 – 41). Recently new top designs (#42) and flower motifs (#41) have been introduced.



39. Kili Bags a, b & c
(large, medium & small)



40.
a, b



41.



42.



43.

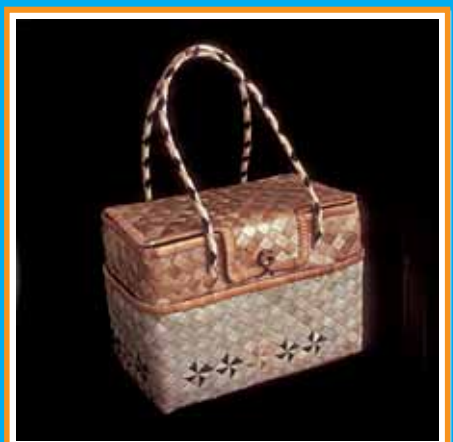


In addition to the Kili bag, there are many different styles of handbags and small purses. Most are woven on the inside and outside with dark and light pandanus leaves. They are embellished with hibiscus fibers, dyed pandanus and varied surface weaving techniques.



Woman weaving a Kili bag

44.



45.



46.



47.
a, b



48.



49.



49 a. detail



50.



51.

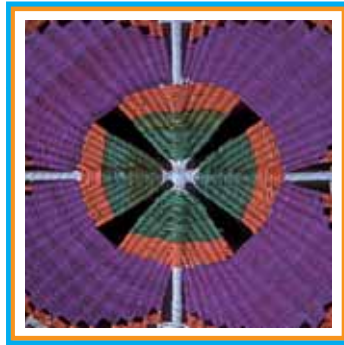


52.



53. Small Zippered Purses - a, b

FANS
"DEEL"



54. LIKIEP FAN

The Marhallese have always used fans for cooling themselves, fanning fires, and decoration. They vary in size, design and materials used.

The elegant Likiep Atoll fans shown here are made with coconut mid rib strips that are wrapped and woven with coconut fibers. The intricate and beautifully woven designs are called “teneriffe” (“BENBEN”) and offer a numerous array of patterns.



Old Fans - Alele Museum



55.



56. a, b, & c

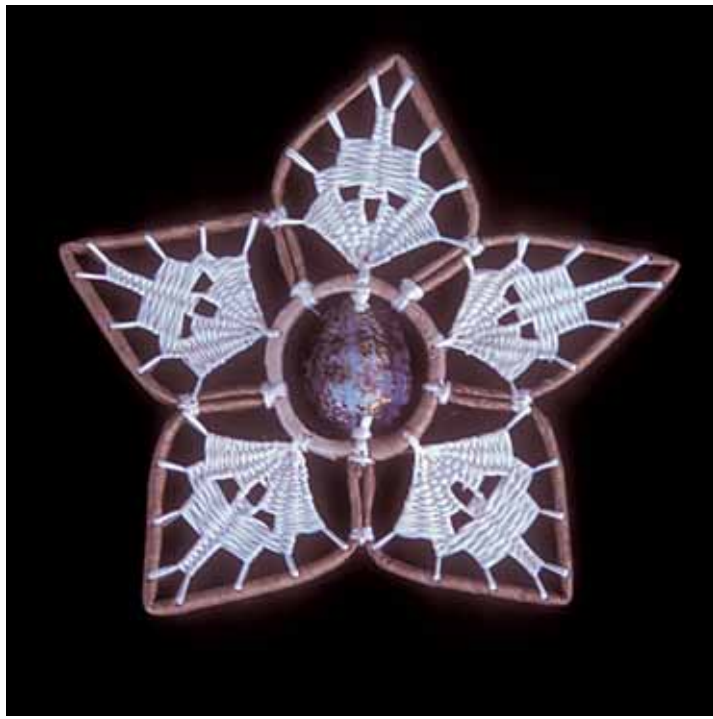


57. a, b, & c

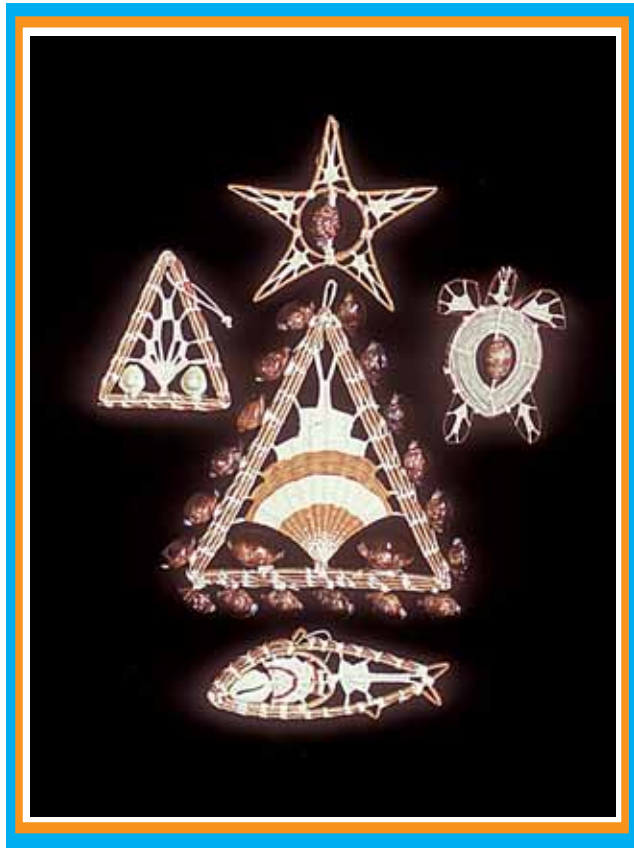


58. a, b, & c

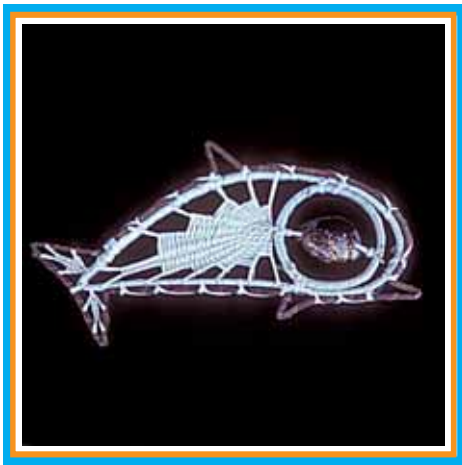
ORNAMENTS



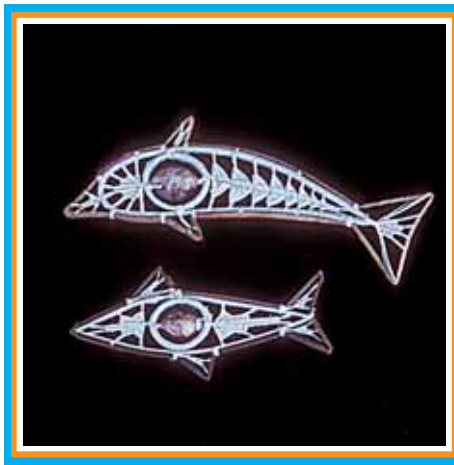
59. STAR ORNAMENT



60. a - large tree, b - small tree, c - star, d - turtle, e - fish



61. a



61. b - top & c - bottom

HATS
“AT”



62. HAT



Hats are not part of traditional Marshallese culture but are a recent handicraft item. Thin strips of dark and light pandanus leaves and coconut fibers are finely



63. a & b

woven over a mold from the crown downward. Men's hats are usually taller than women's hats and the brims are usually narrower.



64. a & b



64. b - detail



65. a & b



66.

HEADBANDS
“WUT”



67. HEADBAND

Headband sizes are approximately 7" in diameter



68. - a, b, & c



69. a & b



70. a & b



71.



72. Shells - a & b



73. Shells - a & b

FLOWERS
“UT”



74. BASKET OF FLOWERS (“IEP in UT”)



These versatile, contemporary flowers are used in headbands, bouquets, on baskets, in floral arrangements, and for ear ornaments (#75 & #78). Natural and dyed coconut fibers and pandanus are used.



75. "Wotje" ear rose

76. Flower arrangement on a stand



77. Flower arrangement on wooden stand

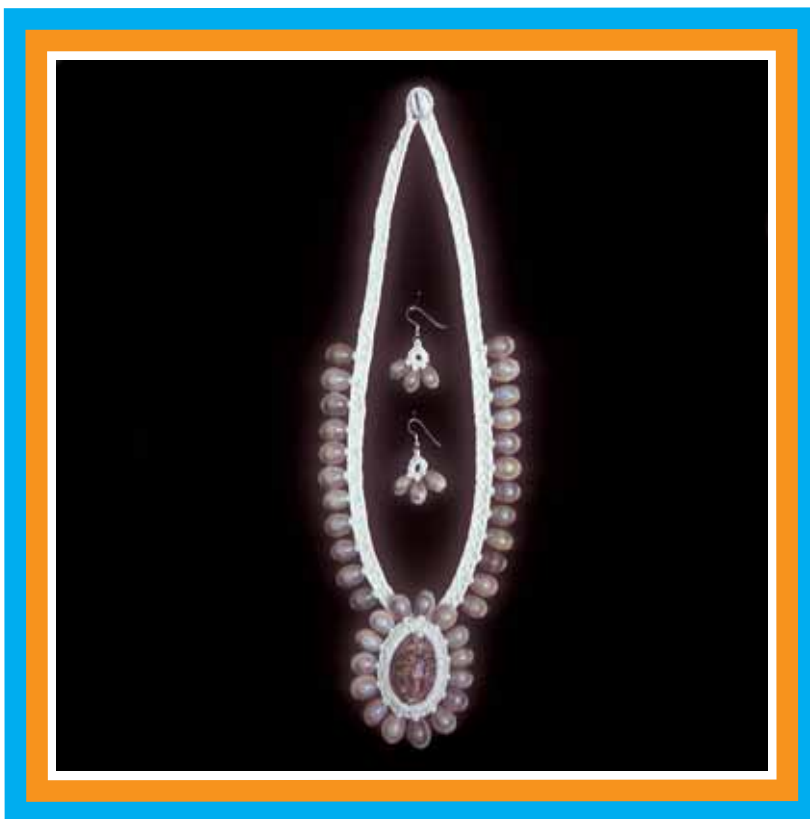


78. Assorted individual flowers



79. Corsage

JEWELRY



80. NECKLACE (“MARMAR”) & EARRINGS



Marshallese woman wearing jewelry

The Marshallese have always worn jewelry. The old chieftains' necklaces incorporated shell, coral, and bone and had an ornament hanging from the center. Commoners wore simple strands of shells. Today's necklaces ("MARMARS"), earrings, bracelets and belts are made primarily of cowrie shells, small cone shaped shells, cat's eyes (the operculum from the limpit snail) and coconut fibers.



Necklaces given to United States Lieutenant Eugene Bogan in 1944 -Alele Museum



81. a, earrings - b, c



82.



83.



84. necklace - a, earrings - b



85.



87. Necklace - a, earrings - b, bracelet - c



Marshallese woman wearing jewelry



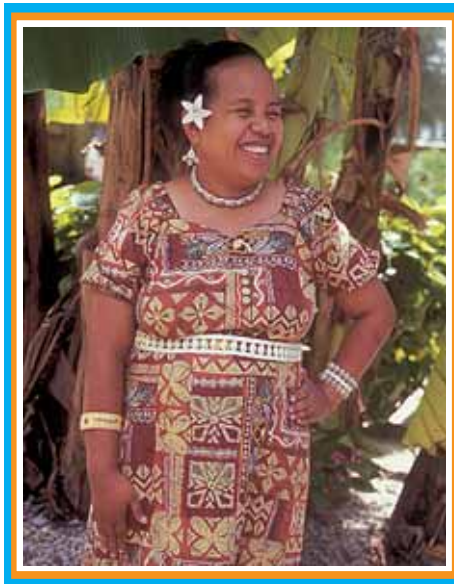
86.



88.



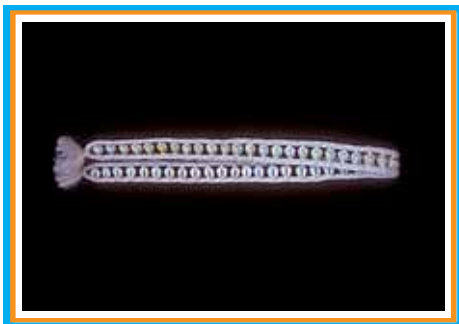
89.



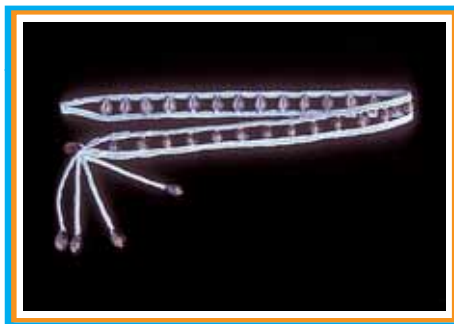
90. BRACELETS
from left a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h



90 a. - detail

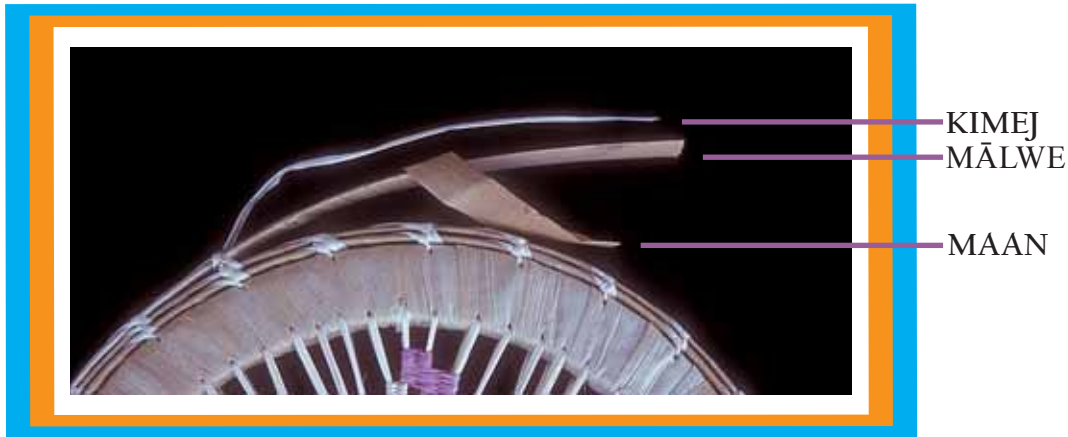


91. BELT - "KANUR"



92. BELT

FIBER PREPARATION



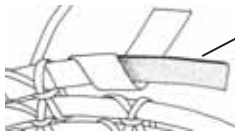
The Marshallese women are considered to be the finest weavers in Micronesia. But, before they can even begin weaving, countless hours are spent collecting and preparing the local plant fibers.

MĀLWE is the stiff core material used in baskets, wall decorations, headbands, ornaments, and fans. It is made from the great mid rib of the coconut palm frond.

KIMEJ is the white stitching material used in most handicrafts. It is made from the new shoot of the coconut palm.

MAAN is wrapped over the mālwe or used in handbags, hats, and mats. It is made from the prepared leaves of the pandanus tree.

JAB (not shown) is a fiber used to add color or decoration to mats, hats, and baskets. It is made from the hibiscus tree (“LO”).



MĀLWE (core material) - This flat, flexible material is made from the great midrib ("PAP") of a coconut palm tree ("Cocos nucifera")



1. Fronds being cut from coconut palm



2. Palm midrib being removed



3. Stripping off end leaves



4. Splitting the rib into sections



5. Scraping off the inner, pulpy part of the rib

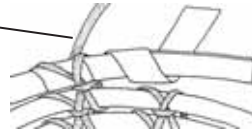


5a. Scraped piece in process



6. After drying for a day in the sun, the MĀLWE is twisted into rings and stored in a basket

KIMEJ (stitching and weaving material) – This beautiful, strong white fiber is made from the leaves of a new shoot of the coconut palm (“JUUBUB”)



1. Select a new shoot from the palm that has just begun to open.



4. Put the leaflets into a pail of water.



5. Boil the leaves for several minutes in fresh water until the green color in the leaves is almost gone.



2. Remove the leaflets and their midribs from the fronds midrib.



3. Scrape off the soft inner material from the leaflets.



6. Remove, untangle, and tie the leaves in bundles. Hang in the sun for 1 - 2 days to dry.

At this time the kimej can be dyed with natural or commercial dyes.



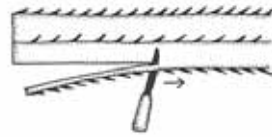
MAAN (wrapping and weaving) – This versatile fiber is made from the dry leaves (“MAANBIL”) and the green leaves (“MAANRAR”) of the pandanus or Screw Pine (genus *Pandanus*)



1. Collect brown leaves from the tree



2. Remove side and midrib thorns



3. Flatten and knead the leaf in your hand to soften it. Wrap the leaves into a roll and store in a dry place.

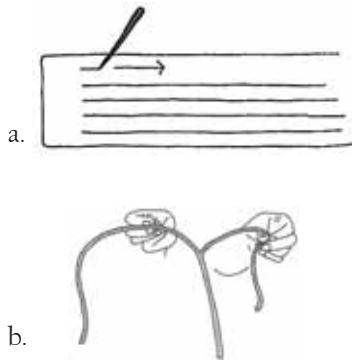


4. “JALJEL in MAAN”



MAANRAR

Collect the green leaves and remove thorns. They can be dried in the sun for several days and will turn a lighter color than maanbil. Or, you can cook-dry the leaves over a pit fire for 1 – 2 minutes on each side and then put them in the sun to further dry. This produces an off white shade. The leaves are then wound into a “JALJEL in MAAN” for future use.



Before you can weave with the softened pandanus leaves, they need to be stripped into thin sections (a) and the rough inside surface removed (b). The strips are flattened and rolled into a ball (c).



c.



Hibiscus Flower

JAB (used for color)

This fiber is made from the hibiscus tree (“LO”). A young tree with no side branches is cut down and the outer layer scraped off. The trunk is then buried in the sand in the lagoon water to loosen and soften the outer white layer. This stringy layer is then removed, washed, and dried in the sun like kimej. It is then ready to use or to be dyed.



Cowrie shells on Wall Decoration

COWRIE SHELLS

are used to embellish many handicrafts. The most commonly used cowries are the “money cowrie”, the “strawberry”, and the “gold ringer”.



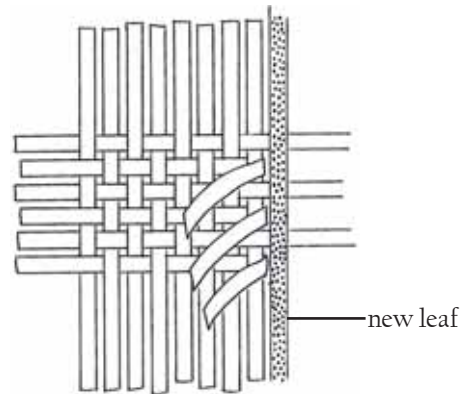
Cowrie shells being cleaned by ants

Cowries are collected at low tide and placed slit side up in a shady area where ants can eat out their insides. After the shells have been cleaned, holes are drilled in them.

WEAVING TECHNIQUES



Plaited pandanus leaves



PLAITING

Plaiting with pandanus and coconut leaf products is common throughout the Pacific. This simple over-one, under-one technique offers many design possibilities. Patterns are created by using dark and light strips of pandanus leaves and by laying in strips of natural and dyed hibiscus fibers.

Mats are plaited on the ground on a hard surface while baskets are usually woven over a wooden mold.



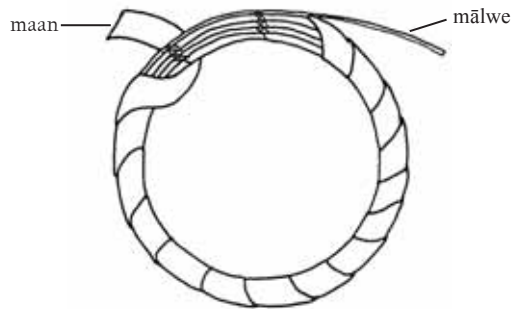
Mat weaving



Plaited Kimej

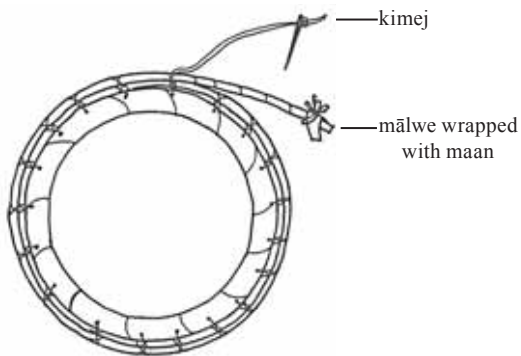
COILING

Wall decorations, fans, and many baskets are made using the versatile coiling method. Coiling consists of stitching one row on top of another row. Kimej is used as the stitching material and mālwe wrapped with maan is the core material.



Foundation ring for fans, wall decorations, and basket bottoms.

With flat sides together, coil and stitch 6-7 rows of mālwe together and wrap with maan.



Several rows of coiling and stitching are done on top of the foundation ring before the inside weaving begins (next page) and the piece is completed.



Coiling stitch



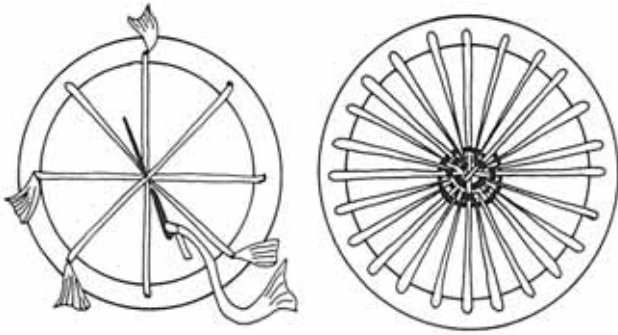
The framework of most pieces consists of a prepared central foundation ring that is the core for further stitching and coiling.



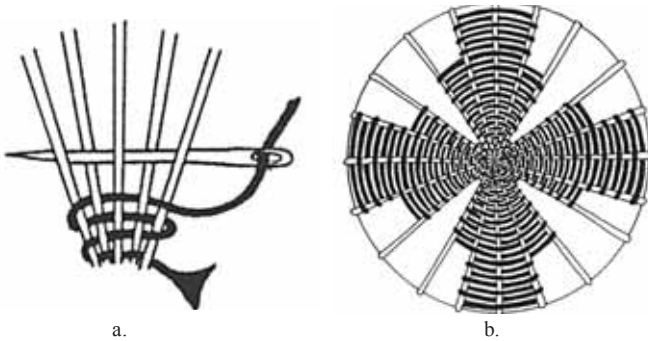
Flat coiled rows on bottom, and stacked coiled rows on side of a basket.

WOVEN DESIGNS teneriffe (“BENBEN”)

Many Marshallese handicrafts are known for their colorful and intricate needle woven designs, “teneriffe”. This universal and historical technique can be traced back to the embroideries and laces of Europe’s Middle Ages.

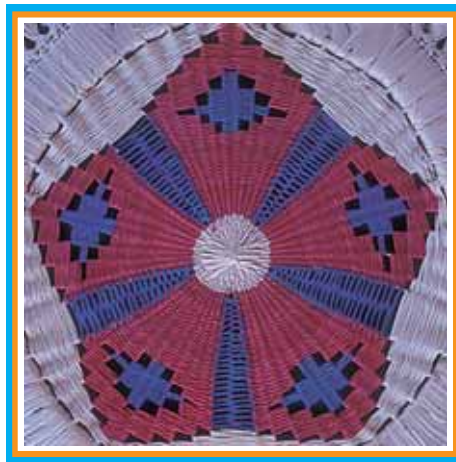


Before a teneriffe design can be made, the area to be woven must be warped or strung (“TO”) with kimej.



To weave the design, weave over and under the spokes with a needle threaded with kimej (a.) Drop spokes to form designs (b.).

The teneriffe patterns are endless and provide a personal and creative outlet for the weaver.



Likiep fan detail



Woman stringing



Wall Decoration detail

GLOSSARY

AT – hat
BENBEN – needle woven designs (teneriffe)
DEEL – fan
DEKENIN – mallet made to pound pandanus leaves
IEP – basket
JAB – weaving material made from the hibiscus tree
JAKI – mat
JALJEL in MAAN – roll of dried pandanus leaves
JANINI – sleeping mat
JEPKO – coarsely woven floor mat
JUUBUB – new shoot of the coconut frond
KANUR – belt
KIMEJ – weaving material made from the new shoot of the coconut palm
KKWAL – coconut sennit
KOMMOL TATA – thank you very much
KŌRKŌR – small, paddling canoe
LIKAJJIR – money cowrie shell
LO – hibiscus tree
MĀ – breadfruit tree
MAAN – pandanus leaf
MAANBIL – prepared dead pandanus leaves used for weaving
MAANRAR – prepared green pandanus leaves used for weaving
MĀLWE – stiff core material used in handicrafts; from the great rib of the coconut palm frond
MARMAR – necklace
MATTANG – instructional stick chart
MEDO – specific voyage stick chart
METO – general term for navigational stick charts; stick charts used for only a few islands
MONAKJANS – wooden molds to make purses and hats
OBON – old style round, flat tray; general term for wall decoration
PAP – great midrib of a coconut palm frond
REBBELIB – general navigational stick chart that covers most of the Marshall Islands
TIPNOL – large outrigger sailing canoe
TO – stringing or warping for teneriffe
TŌLAO – coarsely woven sitting mat
UT – general term for flower
WA – canoes
WALAP – largest outrigger canoe
WŌJLA – traditional triangular canoe sails
WUT – headband

KOMMOL TATA

I would like to thank the Marshallese Ministry of Resources and Development and the United Nations Development Program for selecting me to develop this Handicraft Catalogue.

It has been an honor to have the opportunity to create a catalogue that credits and celebrates the creativity of these talented Marshallese artisans.

My vision was to create an “art catalogue” that was not only informative and concise, but beautiful and elegant. Each handicraft was photographed as if it were a museum piece.

Since the purpose of this catalogue is to help promote the sale of the Marshallese handicrafts internationally, I encourage you to support these artisans and add to your personal collection.

Respectfully,

Judy Mulford
Carpinteria, California, USA

JUDY MULFORD, MA in Art, is a California basketmaker, teacher, and author who has done fiber research throughout Micronesia for 35 years. In 1991 she wrote her second book, Decorative Marshallese Baskets. Her artwork is exhibited nationally and internationally and is in many private and museum collections.

Please note: this catalogue does not represent all of the varied handicrafts available.



Eonbit cook-drying green pandanus

