

Basic Detail Report



00045957

Title

Shell bracelet

Date

2008

Primary Maker

Lola Greeno

Medium

Blue maireener, yellow penguin, white cockle shells, string or thread, silver clasp

Dimensions

Overall: 25 x 212 x 15 mm, 13 g

Name

Bracelet

History

The contemporary Palawa (Tasmanian Aboriginal people) had their beginnings in the early 19th century when European sealers in particular stole Aboriginal women from both the Tasmanian and Australian mainland and settled on the north-east Tasmanian islands in Bass Strait. The communities grew and the skills of sealing and then muttonbirding became the mainstay. By the mid-19th century a community of 50 was centred on the Furneaux Group. The lifestyle was built on both Indigenous and European ways - hunting kangaroos and other animals, growing crops and using a mixture of many languages. Stringing shells as a way of earning money has been an occupation for Aboriginal women in the Furneaux island group since around the 1930s. The practice of necklace-making in the region dates back at least 2,000 years, and the associated knowledge and skills are passed down by women over generations. Lola Greeno was taught by her mother Val MacSween, who in turn was taught as a young girl by the 'Old People' of Cape Barren Island. Shell craft and muttonbirding were economically important to the community when Val was young. As with the muttonbird season, the community sees the time when the necklaces are being made as a time when history, language and song are shared and passed to younger generations. The making of such necklaces is being revived across the Bass Strait islands, especially Cape Barren Island. Traditionally the necklaces had ritual and cultural significance as gifts, body adornment and tokens of honour. This significance remains, although there are now wider meanings associated with them. This includes being a gift marking rites of passage, cultural and personal expressions of identity, family heirlooms, trade goods, souvenirs, and works of art. As one of a family of ten, Lola remembers her mother "made them in the earlier times for pocket money helping to feed and clothe us kids". Different shells are collected at different times of the year, according to the seasons. The men often help the women to collect

the shells from the ocean and beachside. The main species of shell used in necklace-making is the iridescent maireener (rainbow kelp shell) which is collected during the spring tides. The shells are found clinging to living seaweed so to collect them means to wade into the water. They are also occasionally found washed up on the beach after heavy weather. It can take an hour or two to get a cupful of shells. The maireener shells grow within a twelve month life cycle and there may be two suitable tides in a year that go out far enough from the shore for the collectors to gather shells, which must be done within a three-hour time span. The shells are gathered from the sea grass and sea weed one at a time by bending down in knee high sea water. The maireener shells need to be collected live from the sea to retain the shell strength and lustre. Once the maireener shells are collected they are exposed to outside conditions for two to three months until the sea snails have disappeared from the shells. The shells are then washed several times with acids such as vinegar to clean them, dried, pierced with a needle and cotton thread (for small delicate shells) or metal tools (for bigger ones), and then sorted by size. The areas where maireener shells are collected are diminishing for a number of reasons including pollution from local land run-offs, tourist activities, fish farming and over-collecting by the increasing number of shell necklace-makers in recent years. The use of smaller shells is increasing since the larger maireeners are becoming more scarce. Some of the rarer shells, such as maireener, rice and toothey shells, can only be collected from Flinders Island. The other main shells used are the tiny rice shells (which look like small grains of rice), which are collected from dried seaweed found along the beaches. Other shells used include the cockle, crow, penguin and toothey shells. Some shells may already have a natural hole in them but generally they need to be pierced with a strong sharp tool. The rice shells are so small and fragile they can be pierced with a needle. Traditionally, shells were pierced with the eyetooth of a wallaby or kangaroo, threaded onto kangaroo tail sinews or string made from natural fibres, and smoked over wood ash to clean any sea snails out. Then they were rubbed in grass to remove their outer coating to reveal the pearly surface. The shells were also polished using muttonbird or penguin oil. The size of the shells plus the washing, cleaning, polishing, sizing and sorting of each shell means that making a necklace or even a bracelet can take a long time. Fingers need to be supple and nimble; they get sore after a while. There are definite patterns to each piece and it is worked before the stringing commences.