

Basic Detail Report



00001864

Title

Mother of pearl butter knife

Date

19th century

Medium

Nacre

Dimensions

Overall: 16 x 110 mm

Name

Butter knife

History

For thousands of years, coastal Indigenous Australians collected pearl shell by combing the beach while the tide was out, and traded them with inland Aboriginal groups. The European-Australian pearling industry began in the 1850s and by the early 20th century pearlers from north Western Australia, the Northern Territory, and the Torres Strait were supplying 75 per cent of the world's pearl shell. A valuable material before the days of plastic, pearl shell sold for £150 per ton in Sydney in the 1860s. The abundant, versatile and decorative mother-of-pearl - the highly polished and shiny inner surface of a mollusc shell - had been used for centuries to make buttons, which were affordable for those with modest budgets. Before the creation of cultured pearls in the early 1900s natural pearls were extremely rare and expensive, and mother-of-pearl was used as an inexpensive alternative in a range of jewellery and accessories. It was also used to make buckles, cases and cutlery, and was used as inlay in watches, furniture, ornaments and instruments. After World War II the Australian pearl-shell industry suffered a down turn. Over harvesting meant that supply was low, and the development of plastics in the 1950s replaced a number of mother-of-pearl products - particularly buttons. By the 1960s the Torres Strait pearling industry had ceased, however innovations in pearl cultivation technology ensured the Western Australian industry survived. Today, Broome is known as the 'pearl capital' of Australia, and maintains a strong pearl cultivation industry.