Flutes

Flutes are made in all regions of Oceania except Australia. Fashioned predominantly from bamboo, Oceanic flutes have diverse forms and functions. Side-blown varieties are played like a Western flute—by holding the instrument transversely and blowing across a hole in the side. Depending on local traditions, end-blown types are generally played by holding the flute vertically and blowing across a hole at one end. Nose flutes, sounded by blowing the flute with nasal breath rather than with the mouth, are also produced in some areas. The role of flutes, to a large extent, varies according to their size. Smaller types, often with finger holes that allow the musician to vary the pitch, are almost universally secular instruments, played singly for personal entertainment or courtship or, in some places, as part of musical ensembles. In contrast, large bamboo flutes several inches in diameter and often more than six feet long without finger holes are made primarily in central and northeastern New Guinea, where they are sacred ceremonial instruments played exclusively by men.

Sacred Flute

Papua New Guinea, Lower Sepik region, Murik Lakes
Early to mid-20th century
Wood, bamboo, fiber

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979 (1979.206.1703)

In many parts of the Sepik River and Highlands regions of New Guinea, men create massive sacred flutes from bamboo, which are often several inches in diameter and up to ten feet long. Sacred flutes are blown, like their Western counterparts, using a hole cut in the side. In the Sepik region, the upper end is often sealed, as here, with a carved wood stopper depicting a supernatural being. Sacred flutes are men's instruments used only in ceremonial contexts and may not be seen by women or children. Lacking finger holes, they produce a single tone and are predominantly played in pairs, each with a different pitch, the musicians alternating to create a tune. Sacred flutes are widely associated with male initiation, where their sound represents the voice of spirits. This example from the Murik people was the voice of a type of spirit called *brag.* One of a pair, it was played during the second stage of male initiation when, after a physical ordeal, novices were given their first instruction in playing these sacred instruments.

Man from the Middle Sepik region of New Guinea playing a sacred flute with an ornately carved flute stopper. Photograph courtesy of Jacques Vileminot

Flute

New Britain, Tolai people

Late 19th century

Bamboo

The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
The Crosby Brown Collection of Musical
Instruments, 1908 (08.254.1)

Nose Flute (*Bituucu, Bitu Ceguvi, Bitu ni Vakatagi,* or *Bitu Vakatagi*)
Fiji
ca. 1830
Bamboo

The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
The Crosby Brown Collection of Musical Instruments, 1889 (89.4.795)

Played with the nose rather than with the mouth, nose flutes are widely made and used in every region of the Pacific except Australia. To play them, the musician generally holds one nostril shut with the thumb or a finger and sounds the flute by blowing with the other into a small hole drilled near the top of the instrument. Nose flutes are almost universally made, as here, from bamboo and, like other small bamboo flutes, are typically used in informal settings. This example is from Fiji, where nose flutes were played by both sexes to provide soothing music when at rest or during courting. The melodies, composed of two to four notes, were quiet and plaintive, providing a relaxing interlude or softly enticing a current or prospective lover.

Flute (*Pumingi*)
Papua New Guinea, Highlands,
Chimbu region, Kuma people
Mid-20th century
Bamboo

American Museum of Natural History
(80.1/3213)

The peoples of the Chimbu region of the mountainous central highlands of New Guinea create two types of bamboo flutes: large side-blown flutes, which are sacred instruments used in men's ceremonies; and delicate end-blown flutes, such as the one seen here, known as *pumingi.* Consisting of a long, slender cylinder of bamboo with four finger holes at the lower end for creating the notes, *pumingi* are predominantly secular instruments employed for entertainment and recreation. They are usually played by men but can also be used by women. *Pumingi* performances, in which the flutes are often played together in groups of up to four, can take place anytime but generally occur at night or in the early hours of the morning. Although their music frequently serves purely for entertainment, *pumingi* are also employed in a variety of rites intended to foretell the future, cure sickness, or drive off malevolent spirits.

Flute
Philippines
Mid-20th century
Bamboo

American Museum of Natural History
(70.1/8495)

Flute

Vanuatu, probably Ambrym Island
Mid- to late 20th century
Bamboo

The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
Anonymous Gift, 1988 (1988.381)

The peoples of Vanuatu, in the southwest Pacific, create a variety of end-blown bamboo flutes that are held vertically by the musician, who blows across the upper end of the instrument, which usually has a notch. Commonly played by men, flutes in Vanuatu are primarily secular instruments used for casual entertainment, relaxation, or to accompany storytelling. However, some varieties, or melodies, also have supernatural powers that can be used in love magic or to help promote the sprouting of the yam crop. This example is probably from Ambrym Island, where artists often create ornate flutes adorned with stylized designs representing both natural and supernatural phenomena ranging from gardening to marine life, spirits, and motifs with hidden erotic significance. Many Ambrym flutes, such as the one seen here, also have a serrated double projection at the lower tip that represents the mouth of a particular species of fish.

Māori *Pūtōrino*

One of the enigmas of Oceanic music is the *pūtōrino,* a flutelike instrument once made by the Māori people of Aotearoa (New Zealand). Fashioned from a piece of split wood, hollowed out and then bound back together to form the body of the instrument, *pūtōrino* have a single hole at the top and a figure-eight-shaped or oval hole at the center. It is uncertain exactly how the instrument was originally played, but the musician possibly blew into or across the hole at the top and used a finger to cover and uncover the central hole to modify the sound. *Pūtōrino* were reportedly played as flutes and trumpets (with the lips vibrating) and also used as megaphones to modify the human voice. The sound was said to represent Hineraukatauri, a female ancestor who personified flute music. Use of the *pūtōrino* gradually died out after the mid-1800s, but contemporary Māori musicians have begun to re-create the instrument, which is now sometimes played like a Western flute by holding it transversely and blowing across the hole at the center.

Flute (*Pūtōrino*)
Aotearoa (New Zealand),
Bay of Plenty region, Māori people
Ca. 1800–1820
Wood, fiber

The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial
Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller,
1979 (1979.206.1599)

Flute (*Pūtōrino*)
Aotearoa (New Zealand), Māori people
Late 19th century
Wood, fiber

The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
The Crosby Brown Collection of Musical
Instruments, 1889 (89.4.1754)

Biwat Flute Stoppers

In the Sepik River region of northeast New Guinea, sacred flutes, used in initiation and other rites, were among the most culturally important musical instruments. Sacred flutes, such as the one exhibited nearby, typically were made from large stalks of bamboo and played like a Western flute, by blowing through a hole in the side of the instrument near the upper end. The tops of side-blown flutes were frequently sealed with ornamental stoppers. Among the finest flute stoppers are those of the Biwat people, which typically depict stylized human images with enlarged heads and high domed foreheads. Although they portray human figures, the stoppers adorned *ashin,* flutes associated with crocodile spirits. *Ashin* flutes were used, in part, during initiation rites in which novices crawled into the mouth of a large crocodile effigy. Its teeth, actually sharp implements wielded by the initiators, made cuts on the novices' bodies that healed into permanent scarification patterns, marking them as initiated individuals. The smaller stoppers likely sealed the tops of other sacred flutes.

Flute Stopper
Papua New Guinea, Lower Sepik region,
Biwat people
Late 19th–early 20th century
Wood, paint

The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial
Collection, Purchase, Nelson A. Rockefeller
Gift, 1968 (1978.412.1545)

Flute Stopper
Papua New Guinea, Lower Sepik region,
Biwat people
Late 19th–early 20th century
Wood, paint, shell

The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial
Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller,
1979 (1979.206.1556)

Flute Stopper
Papua New Guinea, Lower Sepik region,
Biwat people
Late 19th–early 20th century
Wood, paint, hair, fiber

The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial
Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller,
1979 (1979.206.1574)

Trumpets

Trumpets appear throughout the Pacific. United by a common playing technique rather than a specific form, trumpets are used by vibrating the lips while blowing into a hole in the end or side of the instrument, the hollow body of which amplifies the sound. Although capable of multiple tones, almost all Oceanic trumpets produce only a single note. The most widespread type is made from the shells of large marine snails and has a blowing hole created by removing the apex or making a hole in the side. Other forms are made from wood or bamboo.

While some varieties, notably the didjeridu of northern Australia, form part of musical ensembles, trumpets are employed primarily as signaling devices, often to mark the onset of important events such as ceremonies or dances. In the past, they were also used to drive off malevolent influences, announce the deaths of prominent individuals, or keep canoes together at sea. In many areas, trumpets were associated with warfare and were blown before or during combat or to proclaim victory.

Conch-Shell Trumpet (*Davui*)
Fiji
Late 19th century
Shell, fiber

The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
The Crosby Brown Collection of Musical
Instruments, 1889 (89.4.1823)

As in many parts of the Pacific, conch-shell trumpets in Fiji, called *davui,* produce a loud sound that carries over long distances and were used as signaling devices rather than played as part of musical ensembles. This example is from western Viti Levu, whose inhabitants formerly created a distinctive variety of *davui.* A unique feature of their shell trumpets is the presence of a small finger hole, bored near the mouth of the shell, which allows the player to vary the pitch, creating a rising and falling tone. Virtually all other Pacific trumpets emit only a single note. In contrast to other Fijian conch-shell trumpets, western Viti Levu *davui* are end blown, with a blowing hole made by removing the apex of the shell, rather than side blown. They are also frequently decorated, as here, with elaborate ropelike tassels made from coconut-husk fiber; those in other parts of Fiji are unadorned.

Conch-Shell Trumpet
Philippines
Late 19th century
Shell

The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
The Crosby Brown Collection of Musical
Instruments, 1889 (89.4.3417)

Side-Blown Trumpet

Papua New Guinea, Middle Sepik region
Late 19th–early 20th century
Wood, shell, hair, fiber

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Rogers Fund and Martin Wright Gift, 1980 (1980.262)

In former times, side-blown trumpets—played by blowing, while vibrating the lips, into a hole on the side, rather than the end, of the instrument—were associated with warfare in the Middle Sepik region of northeast New Guinea. Among the Iatmul people, side-blown trumpets were sounded after a raid to announce the arrival of the warriors as they returned to their village with prisoners or enemy heads. Like many Iatmul instruments, the trumpets were often played in pairs by two men, each using a trumpet with a slightly different pitch, who took turns sounding them to produce a two-note composition.

Asmat Trumpets

The Asmat people of southwest New Guinea create *fu,* distinctive trumpets made from thick stems of bamboo. Used primarily as signaling devices, the trumpets formerly were closely associated with warfare. When raiding an enemy village, warriors blew the *fu,* whose loud sound was believed to terrify enemies and render them immobile. When returning to their village following a successful raid, the warriors again sounded the trumpets to proclaim their triumph. *Fu* were also played during male initiations and to accompany drum performances. Warfare had ceased by the mid-twentieth century, but the Asmat continue to use trumpets for signaling and other purposes.

Some *fu* are undecorated but most are ornately carved with geometric designs in which representational motifs, such as small hands (reportedly those of spirits), are occasionally discernible. More rarely, trumpets have a pair of legs at the base. The form of these instruments, with their torsolike bodies and protruding legs, is sometimes interpreted as a stylized headless human figure, a reference to the former practice of head hunting.

An Asmat man sounding a trumpet during a reenactment of a battle between warriors in canoes.
Photograph by Michael C. Rockefeller, June 26, 1961, Courtesy of Mary Rockefeller Morgan

Trumpet (*Fu*)
New Guinea, Papua Province,
Asmat people
Mid-20th century
Bamboo

The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial
Collection, Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller and
Mrs. Mary C. Rockefeller, 1965 (1978.412.1022)

Trumpet (*Fu*)
Carved by Biain
New Guinea, Papua Province,
Asmat people, Pomatsj River, Agani village
Mid-20th century
Bamboo

The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial
Collection, Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller and
Mrs. Mary C. Rockefeller, 1965 (1978.412.1000)

Trumpet (*Fu*)
New Guinea, Papua Province,
Asmat people, Siretsj River, Kaimo village
Mid-20th century
Bamboo

The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial
Collection, Gift of Nelson A. Rockefeller and
Mrs. Mary C. Rockefeller, 1965 (1978.412.1012)

Tube Zither (*Sesando* or *Sasandu*)
Indonesia, Nusa Tenggara, Timor Island
Late 19th century
Bamboo, wood, palm leaf, metal wire

The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
The Crosby Brown Collection of Musical Instruments, 1889 (89.4.1489)

Among the most remarkable string instruments in Oceania is the *sesando,* a tubular bamboo zither with ten or eleven metal strings set in a resonator made from the frond of a lontar palm. Collected on the Indonesian island of Timor, this *sesando* was likely made by a member of the local Rotinese community, originally from the neighboring island of Roti. *Sesando* music is believed to have supernatural powers; in Rotinese origin traditions, the genesis of the instrument is given equal place with marriage, mourning, and death. When playing, the musician uses the right hand to pluck the bass strings while the left hand plays the treble. The pitch is adjusted with a complex series of movable bridges and tuning pegs. Occasionally played as a solo instrument, the *sesando* is predominantly used to accompany songs with verses composed in *bini,* a special poetic language, and refrains in ordinary Rotinese. The songs are often philosophical, portraying the world as dominated by inescapable fate and life as at times disappointing and ultimately fleeting.

A group of musicians playing sesandos *on the island of Timor.*
Photograph by Nobuko Kajitani

Drum (*Warup*)
Australia, Torres Strait Islands
19th century
Wood, lizard skin, paint, fiber

Gordon Sze

The most important musical instruments in the Torres Strait Islands between Australia and New Guinea are wood drums. Dancing was, and remains, a vital part of Torres Strait Islander culture, and each community formerly had one or more drums, used to accompany both sacred and secular dances. Sacred dances were often secret and required extensive preparations. Secular dances, however, might take place almost any evening, especially if visitors were present.

Hourglass-shaped drums such as the one seen here were called *warup.* As the islands often lacked suitable timber, many drums were probably acquired in rough form from neighboring areas of New Guinea and finished by local artists, who adorned them with elaborate designs representing totemic animals and attached ornaments of shell, feathers, and other materials. The heads typically were made from lizard skin and tuned by applying drops of hot wax to the surface. Although less ornate than in the past, drums remain a vital part of contemporary Torres Strait Islander culture.

Ocarinas

Like conch-shell trumpets, ocarinas, also called vessel flutes, are predominantly fashioned from natural objects such as the shells of coconuts or small gourds, though there are examples made from manufactured materials such as ceramic. In contrast to flutes, which are tubular, ocarinas are hollow spherical or oblong vessels equipped with a single blowhole and often with one or more finger holes to allow the musician to change the pitch. In Oceania, ocarinas were used in a variety of contexts. In some areas, as among the Abelam people of New Guinea, they were ritual instruments played as part of religious ceremonies during which their sounds were said to be the voices of spirits. In parts of the New Guinea Highlands, in contrast, they were played simply for entertainment, and in Hawai'i they were used while courting.

Ocarina (*Ipu Hokiokio, Pu'a,* or *Ipu Hoehoe*)
Hawai'i
19th century
Gourd

The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
The Crosby Brown Collection of Musical Instruments, 1889 (89.4.735)

In former times, Hawaiians created ocarinas typically fashioned, as here, from small, roughly pear-shaped gourds that were specially cultivated or from the shells of large nuts. The ocarinas, variously called *ipu hokiokio, pu'a,* or *ipu hoehoe,* were played by holding one nostril closed and blowing with the other into a small hole bored in the narrow upper portion of the gourd. A series of finger holes in the main body of the instrument allowed the musician to play several notes. With their soft, pleasing tones, *ipu hokiokio* were personal instruments played in intimate settings. Reportedly played by lovers to entertain each other in the calm of the evening, the *ipu hokiokio* was sometimes described as *he mea ho'oipoipo,* which means "a thing for love making."

Ocarina

Papua New Guinea, Middle Sepik region,
Abelam people
Early 20th century
Fruit shell, pigment

American Museum of Natural History
(80.0/6344)

The Abelam people of the Prince Alexander Mountains in northeast New Guinea create spherical ocarinas from the dried shell of a local fruit for use in male initiation ceremonies. Beginning in childhood, each Abelam male must pass through eight separate initiation rites over twenty or thirty years before he is a fully initiated man. Each successive ritual entails a physical ordeal and the viewing of sacred objects within the men's ceremonial house. At certain times during the rites, such as during the transportation of sacred carvings to the ceremonial house or the procession of the initiates to the house, women and children, who may not see sacred objects or activities, must be warned to stay away from the area. To do so, men blow the ocarinas, usually in combination with other instruments. The sound of the ensemble, said to be bird and dog voices used by spirits, signals to women and children that it is time to take refuge in their houses or the forest until the secret portion of the ceremony is finished.

Ocarina
Papua New Guinea, Middle Sepik region,
Arapesh people
Early 20th century
Coconut shell, traces of pigment

American Museum of Natural History
(80.0/6302)

Ocarina
Papua New Guinea, Highlands, Civa Sina
Mid-20th century
Ceramic, fiber, paint

The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial
Collection, Gift of E. W. P. Chinnery, 1968
(1978.412.1532)

Friction Drum (*Lunet* or *Livika*)
New Ireland
Late 19th–early 20th century
Wood, shell

The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial
Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller,
1979 (1979.206.1477)

Made only on the island New Ireland north of New Guinea, the friction drum is unique to Oceania. It consists of a horizontal block of wood, the upper portion of which is carved to form a series of three or four sound-producing wedges (or "tongues") on the top. *Lunets* were played by men. To sound them, the musician moistened his hand with plant sap and rapidly rubbed his palm across the tongues, producing a series of rising tones that resemble the cry of the bird for which the instrument was named.

Lunets were used during the final mortuary rites of certain *malagan* ceremonies, elaborate rituals that honored the dead. During the ceremony the player would often be concealed inside a conical "nest" suspended from a tree or lying on a platform made from the roots of an upturned tree. Hidden within this enclosure he played the instrument, and its sound was said to be the voices of the spirits of the dead.

Bullroarer (*Upura* or *Imunu Viki*)
Papua New Guinea, Papuan Gulf,
Purari Delta region
Late 19th–early 20th century
Wood, lime

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979 (1979.206.1545)

An ancient instrument found in many parts of the world, the bullroarer typically consists of an oblong slat of wood with a hole bored in one end through which a long string is tied. To play it, the slat is swung rapidly in a circular motion through the air by the string, which causes the slat to rotate quickly on its long axis, producing a deep, undulating whirring sound. In some areas of the Pacific, bullroarers are secular instruments, even children's toys, but in many cultures they are ritual objects.

In the Purari River Delta in southeast New Guinea, bullroarers were highly sacred objects known only to a select group of initiated men. Played during male initiations, their eerie sound was said to be the voices of the *kaiaimunu,* powerful spirits embodied in large wickerwork effigies depicting monstrous animals kept in the men's ceremonial house. Sometimes called *imunu viki* (weeping spirits), bullroarers were also played at the funerals of prominent men, where the sound represented the cries of a spirit (*imunu*) lamenting the person's death.

Rasp

Some Oceanic musical instruments served a dual function. The Iatmul people of the Middle Sepik River region in northeast New Guinea use betel nut—areca palm fruit, which is chewed with lime made from burnt shells or coral and other substances—as a mild stimulant. Among the Iatmul, the ornate containers and spatulas used to hold and serve lime act as both betel nut chewing accessories and noisemakers.

In the past, Iatmul culture valued aggressiveness and assertiveness in men, and individuals used their lime spatulas and containers as rasps to emphasize these traits audibly. The tops of lime containers had a hole for inserting the spatula while the lower end of the spatula was carved with a series of ridges. When a man wished to call attention to himself in social situations, he rapidly thrust the spatula in and out of the lime container so that the ridges, rubbing against the edges of the hole, produced a harsh rasping noise that served as the audible expression of his pride, assertiveness, or displeasure.

An Iatmul man from Mindimbit village with a lime container and spatula. When wishing to draw attention to himself, he would thrust the spatula rapidly in an out of the container, creating a rasping sound. Photograph by Gregory Bateson

Rasp/Lime Spatula (*Tap*)
Papua New Guinea, Middle Sepik region,
Iatmul people
Late 19th–early 20th century
Wood, paint

The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial
Collection, Purchase, Anonymous Gift,
Nelson A. Rockefeller Gift and
Mrs. Gertrud A. Mellon Gift, 1963 (1978.412.821)

Rasp/Lime Container
(*Bandi Na Iavo*)

Papua New Guinea, Middle Sepik region,
Iatmul or Chambri people
Late 19th–early 20th century
Bamboo, wood, paint, fiber

The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial
Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller,
1979 (1979.206.1457)

Clapper/Lime Spatula
Papua New Guinea, Massim region
19th century
Wood, traces of lime

The Metropolitan Museum of Art,
The Crosby Brown Collection of Musical
Instruments, 1889 (89.4.768)

As in many Oceanic cultures, peoples in the Massim region (the easternmost tip of New Guinea and the archipelagos off its shores) use betel nut, the fruit of the areca palm, which is chewed with lime made from burnt shells or coral and other substances as a mild stimulant. To apply the lime to the betel nut, Massim peoples use lime spatulas with tab-shaped blades and handles carved in a variety of forms.

In one type, the clapper spatula, the handle is also a musical instrument. The handles of clapper spatulas are cut vertically into two sections that nearly touch at the top, and the center is hollowed out to form a sounding cavity. When struck against the hand or body, the two sections hit together, producing a loud clap. In the Trobriand Islands, clapper spatulas are reserved for chiefs. Under customary law, no one may stand higher than a chief, so chiefs, when walking, sound the spatulas to warn of their approach. Elsewhere in the Massim region, clapper spatulas are used to accompany singing and dancing.

Jaw Harps

Widely used throughout the world, jaw harps occur in every major region of Oceania except Australia. In the western Pacific they are predominantly manufactured from bamboo cut into a tapering form with two longitudinal slits made in the center to produce a narrow flexible section called a lamella. In some Pacific cultures the lamella is plucked directly. However, western Pacific jaw harps, such as these, generally have a hole in one end through which a string is tied. When playing, the string is plucked, causing the lamella to vibrate, producing a subtle, pulsing twanging tone that is modified by changing the configuration of the mouth and lips.

Because of its quiet sound, the jaw harp is a personal instrument, played for entertainment but also used for courting or love magic. It is frequently a man's instrument but in some cultures may be played by members of either sex. Most jaw harps are undecorated; these examples from the New Guinea Highlands, adorned with delicate floral and geometric designs, are exceptionally ornate.

Jaw Harp
Papua New Guinea, Highlands,
Lufa Kuma
Mid-20th century
Bamboo

American Museum of Natural History
(80.1/4299)

Jaw Harp
Papua New Guinea, Highlands, Korfan
Mid-20th century
Bamboo, fiber

American Museum of Natural History
(80.1/2656)

Jaw Harp
Papua New Guinea, Highlands, Korfan
Mid-20th century
Bamboo, fiber

American Museum of Natural History
(80.1/2657)

A Baruya man from the eastern Highlands of New Guinea playing a jaw harp. To sound the instrument he plucks the string with his right hand, causing the sliver of bamboo in the center to vibrate, producing a sound that is amplified by the mouth.
Photograph by Don Niles, Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies, 1982