



Super Shells

by Feana Tu'akoi

Shell necklaces

Shells are important for the creatures that live in them, but once those creatures have finished with them, shells can be very important for people too. For thousands of years, people have used shells for many different purposes, for example, for jewellery and decorations or as tools, musical instruments, or even as money. Some people also like to collect shells.



Shell spoon



Shell trumpet

Jewellery and decoration

People have used the shapes and colours of shells to make jewellery, such as necklaces, earrings, and rings.



Cowrie shell ring



Shell earrings



Shell necklace



Shell card case



Shell box

Pāua shell and mother of pearl (from oyster shells) have beautiful colours that shine in the light. They are often used to decorate objects.



Hei tiki with pāua shell eyes



War canoe figurehead with mother of pearl decoration

People also decorate furniture, boxes, and even their gardens with shells. (On page 16, you can read about a whole house decorated with pāua shells!)



Shell garden

Tools

Long ago in Aotearoa, Māori used shells to make fish-hooks. They also used shiny pieces of pāua shell as lures to attract fish.

Mussel shells made perfect tools for scraping harakeke (flax). Today, some people still choose to use them for this.



Using a mussel shell to scrape harakeke

The Aboriginal people of Australia used the shells of a large sea snail for storing water. They also used them to bail out water from their canoes, so the shells became known as bailer shells.



Bailer shell



Māori fishing lure

Musical instruments

For thousands of years, people have made rattles, shakers, horns, flutes, and wind chimes from shells.

Shaker



People of the Pacific made trumpets from conch shells. Māori called these trumpets pūtātara. The beautiful “voice” of the pūtātara can be heard a long way away. It was used for calling people together, sending messages, sounding warnings, and playing music.

Blowing a conch shell



Pūtātara



Money

Shells have been used as money all over the world. They are small and light, so they are easy to carry around. Shells are quite strong too, so they don't break easily.

Strings of shell money

Cowrie shell money



Collecting shells

Some people find shells so interesting that they collect them. They get together with other collectors to show, identify, and talk about their shells.



Shell collection



Fred and Myrtle's pāua shell house

Fred and Myrtle Flutey were shell collectors. They lived in Bluff in the South Island. Fred liked to collect pāua shells from the beach and polish them up. Then Fred and Myrtle began using the shells to decorate their walls. They ended up with more than 1,170 pāua shells in their house! Their pāua shell house became a famous tourist attraction. Over a million people from all over the world came to see it.

Fred and Myrtle died several years ago, but people can still see their shell collection in the Canterbury Museum, in Christchurch.

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