

Kava spoon

Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne



Unknown maker (Melanesian, probably Papuan)

Kava spoon

coconut shell

14.0 × 8.3 cm

Grainger Museum

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01.3011

This spoon carved out of a coconut shell is of Melanesian origin, probably from the island of Papua. It is one of many ethnographic items acquired by the Australian-born composer, pianist and conductor Percy Grainger (1882–1961) over his lifetime.

In the accompanying label Grainger states that the spoon was given to him by his mother, Rose Grainger (1861–1922), and he goes on to say that it was a ‘Great Favourite of PG’s’. This spoon was designed to serve kava, a drink made from the root of a certain species of pepper. Kava was used in ceremonial occasions across the Pacific and is known to have both euphoric and psychoactive effects.

The handle is intricately hand-carved, with a variety of zig-zag and jagged patterns accentuated in white, in contrast to the smooth, curved shape of the bowl of the spoon. In Melanesian cultures, human faces were known to feature on everyday objects such as this spoon, as well as on those of a more sacred nature. Percy Grainger collected items primarily for aesthetic enjoyment and to inspire his own creative endeavours, rather than for their historical significance or cultural importance. With this in mind, his collection features a variety of items drawn from various cultures, including South African beadwork and Native American clothing.

Teaching Ideas

The University of Melbourne’s curriculum is rich and varied, and changes from year to year. For more teaching ideas, [contact a collection manager](#).

Preventive Conservation

Examine this object and discuss how best to store and preserve it for future use. Consider what problems might be encountered with this type of material and how these may be mitigated. Use your findings to create a risk management document.

Anthropology: Studying Human Diversity

Use this object as a basis for ethnographic enquiry. Explore and interpret the differences between its original purpose in a Melanesian community and its status now as a museum object. How may the background of this item shape the way it is displayed in a museum?

Drugs That Shape Society

Traditionally kava was used in Pacific Islander ceremonies and cultural rituals. Investigate kava’s more recent reincarnation as an illegal drug in Western Australia, and the social responses and repercussions.

Genealogies of Place

Use this object as a prompt for a creative writing piece that may explore not just the original Melanesian context but the ideas of diaspora, travel and the meeting of cultures.

Food, Culture and Identity

Consider the role of this spoon in eating or drinking customs in Melanesia and its adoption by Percy Grainger in the 1900s. Explore how these two contrasting identities may be projected in film, television, literature and public discourse about food.

Wooden Furniture Workshop

Examine the carving techniques used to create this object, as well as other spoons in the Grainger Museum Collection. Reflect on how design may be functional, as well as expressing specific cultural identity. Sketch a design for your own spoon or small-scale object, which reflects and embraces the style of a historical period studied.

Stories and the Arts

Throughout the course you will have considered how humans construct and communicate meaning through the expressive symbol systems of the arts. Discuss what story you think is expressed through this object and its craftsmanship, and why.

Respect

Consider ethical issues that may arise when displaying ethnographic collections, as well as early 20th-century collecting practices. Is it right for this spoon to be displayed in a museum?

Intersecting objects



Unknown maker (possibly
Plains Indian, North
America)

Spoon

bowl made of horn; handle
with beadwork and leather
strips

25.8 × 9.0 cm

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01.3005



Unknown maker (Sudanese)

Spoon

wood

24.5 × 10.6 cm

Grainger Museum

University of Melbourne

01.3009

To learn more, visit the website of the [Grainger Museum](#).

Further reading

Elinor Wrobel, *Percy Grainger: The noble savage: Featuring original costumes, photographs, memorabilia, ethnographic artefacts and music*, Melbourne: Grainger Museum, University of Melbourne, 1992.

Percy Grainger and the arts of the Pacific (exhibition catalogue), Melbourne: Grainger Museum, 1979, cat. 56 (pp. 32 & 39).