

Take One...  
Tahitian Mourner's Costume  
Teacher guidance notes

These guidance notes are designed to help you use this Mourner's Costume as a focus for cross-curricular teaching and learning. A visit to the Pitt Rivers Museum gives the chance to see your chosen object and offers your class the perfect learning outside the classroom opportunity.



## Starting Questions

The following questions may be useful as a starting point for developing speaking and listening skills with your class.

- What do you think we are looking at?
- What materials have been used to make this object?
- What different parts to the costume can you identify?
- How has it been decorated?
- Why do you think there is a mask?
- Why might someone have worn this Costume?
- How would you feel if you met someone wearing this Costume?
- How would you feel if you could wear the Costume yourself?

This Tahitian Mourner's Costume was collected on Cook's Second Voyage of the Pacific (1772-75). It was collected by Reinhold Forster and his son George, the naturalists on the voyage. Information about the Forster Collection at the Pitt Rivers can be found at:  
<http://web.prm.ox.ac.uk/cookvoyages/index.php/en/index.html>



Inspired by the National Gallery's  
Take One Picture programme

# Background Information

## The Ceremony

This Costume was worn by the Chief Mourner in a ceremony marking the death of a high-ranking chief in 18th Century Tahiti. The Chief Mourner was usually a relative of the deceased chief and would be accompanied by a group of attendants with soot-blackened and painted skins. He would roam around the district with a sword edged with sharks' teeth, and the sound of his pearl clappers would warn people to get out of the way. If anyone got in the way of the Chief Mourner and his group they might be injured or killed – the mourners were seen to be mad with grief and not responsible for their actions during this time! The number of mourners a chief had and how long they mourned for depended on the wealth of the family of the deceased person.

## The Object

The materials used to make the Costume were rare, expensive and sacred and therefore only available to the elite. For example, one pearl shell cost the equivalent of a pig!

The Costume is made up of many parts:

- A pearl shell mask with a headpiece edged with tropic bird feathers
- A crescent-shaped wood chest piece with mounted pearl shells
- A chest apron of slivers of pearl shells
- A bark cloth apron with coconut shell discs
- A pigeon feather cape and tassels
- A barkcloth cape
- Pearl shell clappers in the hand of the figure

## The Historical Context

Captain James Cook undertook three major voyages of the Pacific between 1768-1779 and established a reputation as a great navigator, cartographer and enlightened discoverer. During the Second Voyage (1772-1775) he captained HMS Resolution as he set out to search for the great southern continent. Of the 117 men on board ship he took two naturalists, father and son team Reinhold and George Forster. The Forsters made detailed notes on the natural history and cultures of the islands they visited, and collected many natural specimens and objects such as the Chief Mourning Costume from Tahiti.

The Chief Mourning Costume is a prized item of the Forster Collection at the Pitt Rivers Museum, and forms part of one of the world's greatest collections of 18th Century Pacific art and objects.



Portrait of Johann Reinhold Forster and Johann George Forster, by Jean François Rigaud, 1780, oil on canvas, 126 x 101 cm. Courtesy, Hans-Jörg Rheinberger.

# Ideas for creative planning across the KS1 and KS2 curriculum

You can use this Mourner's Costume as a starting point for developing pupils' critical and creative thinking as well as their learning across the curriculum. You may want to consider possible lines of enquiry as a first step in your cross-curricular planning. This may help build strong links between curriculum areas. After using strategies to help children engage with the object and asking questions to facilitate dialogue you can work with the children to develop lines of enquiry which will interest them.

Here are a few suggestions of possible lines of enquiry using this object:

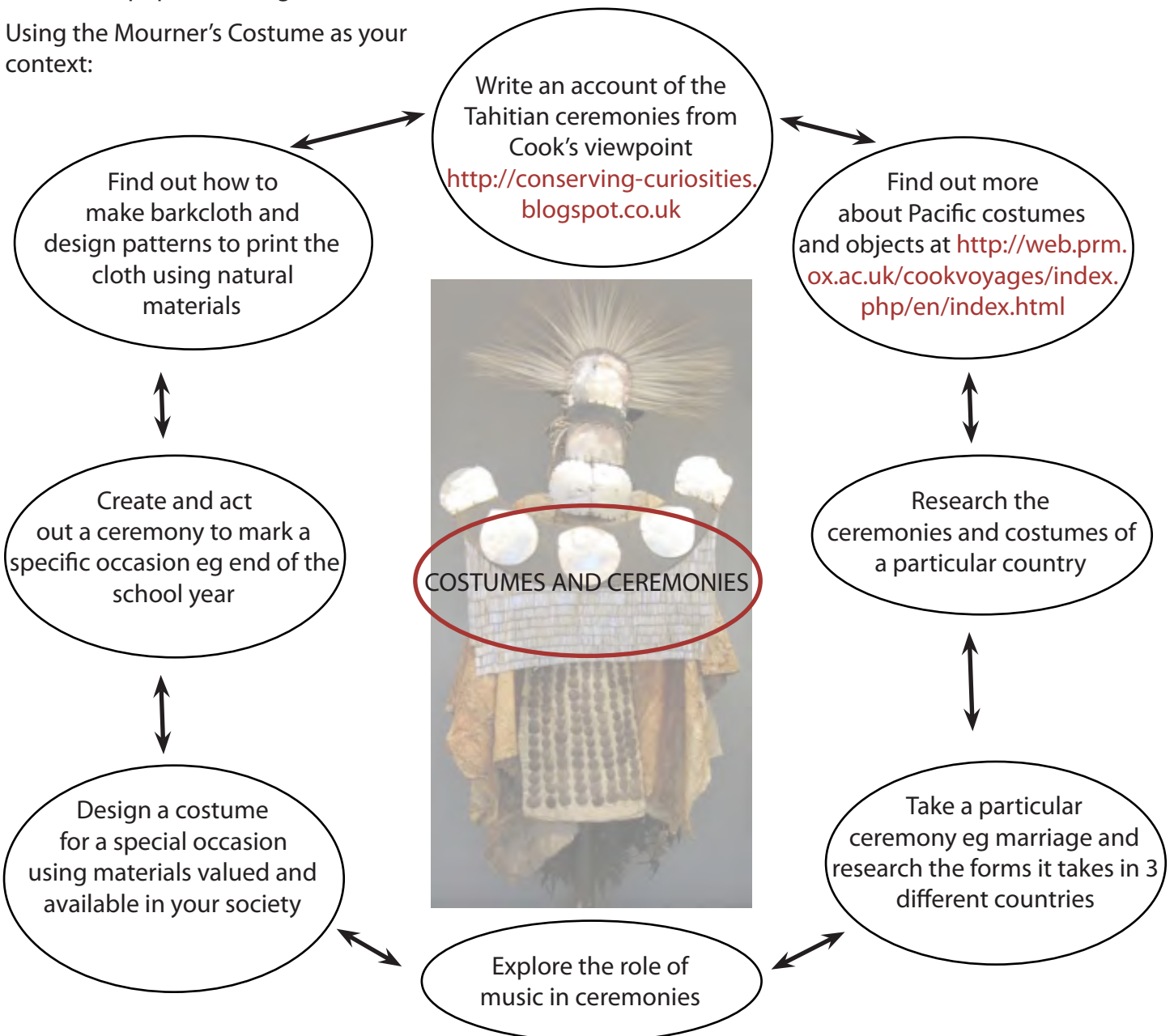
- Explorers
- Materials
- Collectors and Collecting
- Costumes and Ceremonies
- Pacific Islands

Using one or more line of enquiry as your starting point consider how you can work in a number of curriculum areas to build links.

## Using COSTUMES AND CEREMONIES as a line of enquiry

Here are a few ideas of how you can develop a range of learning opportunities to engage pupils with this line of enquiry. Each activity can link with the others to build on pupils' learning across the curriculum.

Using the Mourner's Costume as your context:



## Take One...Inspires

- Take One... encourages teachers to use an object, painting or other resource imaginatively in the classroom, both as a stimulus for artwork, and for work in more unexpected curriculum areas. Work in many curriculum areas can be inspired by using a single object as a starting point.
- The challenge is for teachers to use objects to develop culturally enriching, relevant and practical learning opportunities across the curriculum.

## Tips for introducing objects to a class

- Display an image of the object in the classroom for a number of days with a tape recorder or 'graffiti wall' for children to add comments or questions about the object. Once comments and questions are gathered a class discussion can follow.
- Display a large image of the object in the classroom. Cover it with paper and then gradually reveal it in the days leading up to your visit, asking pupils to guess what they are going to see.
- Work in pairs sitting back to back. One child has a picture of the object and describes what they can see whilst the other draws what is described
- Introduce an object to the whole class in a question and answer session as outlined on page one
- Create a word bank using words that come from looking at the object and use these to create poems.



Family activity making mini-explorer suitcases. Participants collected pictures of objects Cook acquired on his Pacific voyages in their mini-suitcases. Many of the objects Cook collected are on display on the Lower Gallery of the Pitt Rivers Museum.

To support your Take One.. project book a:

KS1&2 Take One.. workshop - 75 minutes

Contact

E: [education@prm.ox.ac.uk](mailto:education@prm.ox.ac.uk)

T: 01865 613031

## Take One...INSET Training

Book a staff INSET session to find out more about our Take One.. programme, and how to engage children with artefacts across the curriculum.

Suitable for Foundation to KS2 teachers.

Venue: Pitt Rivers Museum

Please email [rebecca.mcvean@prm.ox.ac.uk](mailto:rebecca.mcvean@prm.ox.ac.uk)

**“We had a fantastic session. It gave us lots of ideas of how to use this object as a focus for this term’s creative curriculum project.”**

Feedback after a recent  
Take One...INSET