

Oceanic Art

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, you will learn about the art and architecture of Oceania, a region consisting of numerous countries and islands in the Pacific Ocean and vicinity. Despite the lack of written records and the existence of very few artifacts, there are distinctive styles of Oceanic art and architecture that have survived to the present day, representing the animals, people, and spirits that inhabited this culture's physical and spiritual world. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

- [1. Geography of Oceania](#)
- [2. Ubirr and X-Ray-Style Painting](#)
- [3. Lapita-Style Pottery](#)
- [4. Stone Sculptures of New Guinea](#)
- [5. Rapa Nui Moai](#)
- [6. Nan Madol](#)

1. Geography of Oceania

Oceania is a geographic region that includes Australia, Papua New Guinea, New Zealand, and the island regions of Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia. People in non-English speaking countries consider Oceania to be a continent, although its main characteristic is being located under the Pacific Ocean.

Oceania comprises around 25,000 islands and 14 countries. Culturally, the people of this area have more in common with each other than they do with other areas, such as Asia or the Americas. People from southeast Asia first settled in New Guinea and Australia about 40,000 to 60,000 years ago, spreading to the other Pacific Islands around 30,000 years ago.

The people of Oceania left behind no written record that we know of and very few artifacts, since most of the work they produced was in perishable materials such as wood and bark. If you visit a museum that has a collection of art from Oceania, you may notice that most of the works in the collection were produced in the last 200 or so years, which is beyond the scope of this course. We will be looking at a few examples of work made in ceramic and stone, rock painting, and architecture that have survived to the present day.



Map of Oceania

2. Ubirr and X-Ray-Style Painting

The site of Ubirr in Arnhem Land in northern Australia, also the location of an Aboriginal campsite during the rainy period, is home to the oldest rock art in Oceania. Artists have continuously painted and repainted certain sites in this area for the past 40,000 years. The subject matter includes animals, painted to create magic to increase their numbers for hunting, and mimi, or spirits from the Dreaming, or creation period. Some of the paintings are thought to have been made by mimi and not humans. They were made in red ochre, using the end of a stick as a drawing and painting instrument. Some of the images include those of the thylacine, or Tasmanian tiger, which has been extinct in Australia for the past 2,000 years.



Rock painting of mimi spirits

Kakadu National Park, Australia

The earliest forms of rock art are called mimi, in reference to the spirits that are the subjects of the paintings and who are also thought to have made them. Aboriginal people believe that the mimi taught them all of their survival skills, including hunting, fishing, and cooking. They resemble stick figures in this stage of rock art.



Aboriginal rock art

Anbangbang Rock Shelter

Kakadu National Park, Australia

Another of the artistic styles that has been identified in Ubirr is known as the X-ray style, which involves depicting animals in a way that it appears that their bones and internal organs are visible. First, the artist draws the outline of the animal and fills it in with white. The bones and organs of the animal are then drawn on top of the white in darker colors. Although the X-ray style has been found in multiple locations, including Siberia, New Guinea, and North America, it is most commonly associated with Australian rock art.



Lapita-style pottery fragments

c. 1000 BCE

Terracotta

3. Lapita-Style Pottery

The Lapita people came from the Philippines and settled New Guinea and the islands of Melanesia, including the Solomon Islands east to Samoa. They produced a distinctive style of pottery that they stamped with patterns that we refer to today as dentate, or appearing like a tooth mark. This pottery is so distinctive that archaeologists have used it to map the eastward expansion of the Lapita people from the Philippines and Taiwan, where examples have been found, throughout Melanesia and Polynesia, from 1600 to 500 BCE. Geometric and pattern-based styles of bark painting that closely resemble Lapita pottery are apparent in present-day bark painting from these regions.



Bird head figure

Morobe province

Stone sculpture

4. Stone Sculptures of New Guinea

The oldest works of art found on the island of New Guinea are a series of sculptures made of stone that depict animals, such as echidnas, birds, or humanoid figures. Other objects include bowls, or mortars, carved out of stone, and pestles. Most of these objects are undated, but one has been radiocarbon-dated to 1500 BCE. We are not totally sure regarding the function of the free-standing sculptures but think that they might depict deities or important ancestors. When people from New Guinea find these objects in the present, they regard them as made by the gods and use them in rituals.



Moai at Ahu Tongariki

Rapa Nui

5. Rapa Nui Moai

Easter Island, also known as Rapa Nui, is home to 887 monolithic sculptures known as moai. They were produced from 1000 to 1600 CE and are made of volcanic tuff, which is a type of stone made of compressed and solidified ash. They consist of oversized heads and bodies with no legs and tiny arms. There is one moai

that has a beard and another that has legs and is kneeling, but they are exceptions. Many of the moai were moved from the quarry to the beach and positioned so that their backs are facing the sea. Others were buried up to their necks, preserving their bodies and preventing erosion. Some of the moai have petroglyphs carved into their backs. Three hundred and ninety-four of the moai were moved to stone platforms known as ahu, which are common in Polynesian culture. Many were left unfinished at the quarry where the stone was obtained. Some of the sculptures are wearing “pukao,” or hat-like structures made of red volcanic stone and added later. The pukao seem to represent the topknots worn by people of high status. Archaeologists have also determined that the deep eye indentations were meant to hold eyes made of white coral with pupils made of volcanic stone.





Fragment of a moai with eye, discovered during the restoration of Ahu Nau Nau on Anakena Beach in 1978. It is made of white coral with a red scoria pupil.

Europeans first arrived at Rapa Nui in 1722 and made note of the presence of the moai, which were all still standing. When they returned during the 19th century, they had been toppled. The reasons are unclear and could range from tribal warfare to the arrival of Christianity to the island. Rapa Nui also suffered ecological degradation and collapse when the people cut down almost all of the trees, around 350 years ago. Diseases brought from Europe and the slave trade caused further collapse of the local population.

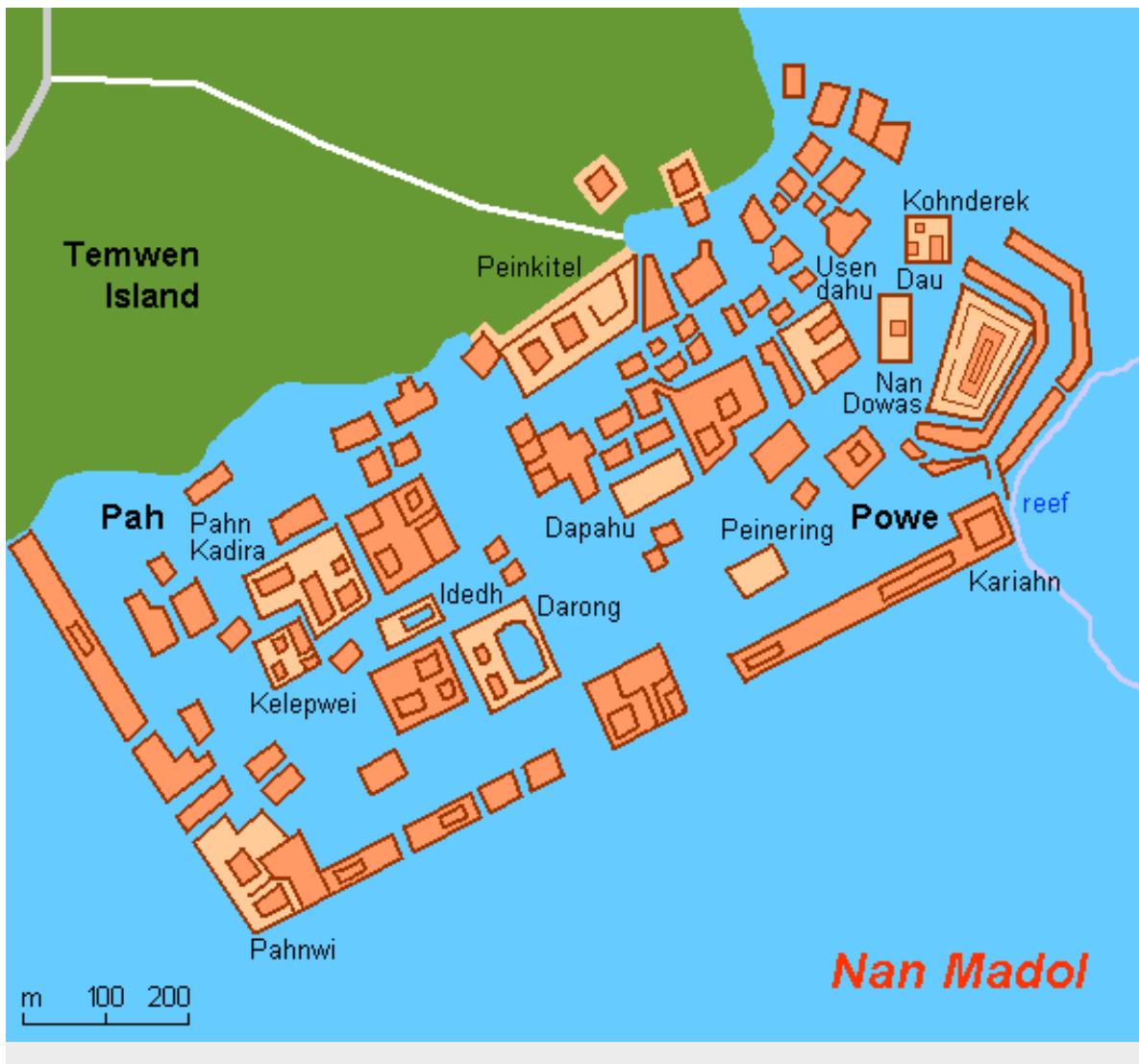
6. Nan Madol

The site of Nan Madol is located in the Federated States of Micronesia, on the island of Temwen, near the larger island of Pohnpei. The name roughly translates to “the spaces between.” It consists of 100 artificial islands made out of rectangular, megalithic stone and spread over 200 acres, creating a settlement that accommodated around 1,000 people at its height. It was occupied from 1200 to 1700 and was the center of the Saudeleur dynasty, which controlled a kingdom of 25,000 people. The structures show that they had different functions and that there was social stratification, with higher-status people having better living quarters.



Nan Madol

The construction of Nan Madol involved moving thousands of tons of stone and sinking it into the sand. No one knows how the people of this city did it. To this day, the ruins create a series of lagoons and inlets that resemble a floating city and are still structurally sound. It is the only city built on a coral reef and appears to float on top of the water. It has been nicknamed “the Venice of the Pacific.”



Map of Nan Madol



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you explored the **geography of Oceania**, a unique region comprising around 25,000 islands and 14 countries in the Pacific Ocean. While most of the work the people of Oceania produced was made from perishable materials such as wood and bark, leaving very few artifacts, there do exist examples of work made in ceramic and stone, rock painting, and architecture that have survived to the present day. You explored several examples of Oceanic art, including examples of Australian rock art, the Aboriginal **X-ray-style paintings** of animals and mimi, or spirits, from the site of **Ubirr** in Arnhem Land in northern Australia; **Lapita-style pottery** from Papua New Guinea, with its distinctive stamped patterns; **stone sculptures of New Guinea** depicting animals or humanoid figures; the famous monolithic sculptures known as **moai** on Rapa Nui, or Easter Island; and the site of **Nan Madol** in the

Federated States of Micronesia, a "floating city" of 100 artificial islands made out of rectangular, megalithic stone, built on a coral reef.