**ACTIVITY: Exploring Lapita pottery through observation and art**

**Activity idea**

In this activity, students combine scientific observation with drawing and/or design to explore Lapita pottery.

By the end of this activity, students should be able to:

* discuss aspects of the Lapita cultural complex
* offer explanations on how experts use Lapita pottery as evidence of Pacific migration
* observe Lapita motifs
* use art skills of their choosing to replicate Lapita motifs on paper or in clay.

**For teachers**

Lapita is the name given to ancestors of the Polynesians, including Māori, who were the first people to explore and settle the remote parts of Oceania. Their settlements have been identified and tracked by their distinctive pottery.

Lapita pottery is earthenware pottery with unique patterns and designs from dentate stamping – where a pattern is applied by a tool (for example, a shell with small grooves cut in it), tapa cloth or woven materials. Design elements evolved but retained commonalities and can be traced from the earliest Lapita settlements through to later settlements in Vanuatu, Fiji and Samoa.

***Using observation skills***

This activity uses Lapita pottery to help students improve their scientific observation skills. The article [Observation and science](https://www.sciencelearn.org.nz/resources/605-observation-and-science) notes that we learn to observe more scientifically when:

* observations are prompted by appropriate questioning
* observations are connected with growing background knowledge on the subject or object under observation
* we are given the opportunity to share, discuss and debate observations.

***Finding out about Lapita pottery***

The article [Lapita cultural complex](https://www.sciencelearn.org.nz/resources/3205-lapita-cultural-complex) – along with the images and [video](https://www.sciencelearn.org.nz/videos/2159-lapita-culture) – provide a basic introduction to the Lapita people, their pottery and how it is used to trace migration patterns.

A Google search for images of Lapita pottery designs provides a wealth of images and allows the user to filter for specific Pacific Island groups or locations if desired.

***Observing Lapita pottery***

There are a number of images of reconstructed pots, pottery sherds and design patterns available online. Choose an image appropriate for your students. While observing the image(s), there are some things to take note of:

* The overall design system often includes layers – upper and lower design fields.
* There are often repeating decorative motifs in these fields.
* Some of the motifs are quite fine – likely made with tools having very small teeth.
* The larger, dentate-stamped motifs have likely been made with tools that have medium-sized teeth.
* Cloth was also used to create dentate-stamped motifs.
* The layers between design fields may be defined by borders, some of which are patterned or left open.
* The borders can be horizontal or vertical.

***Questions to deepen understanding***

Consider using some of the following questions, which cover learning about the Lapita cultural complex, observing images of the pottery and the nature of science.

* Who were the Lapita people?
* What are their origins?
* Why are they known as Lapita?
* What artefacts did they leave behind?
* How are the artefacts used as evidence of Oceania migration?
* What marks the end of the Lapita cultural complex and the beginnings of Polynesian society?
* What are some of the design features you can observe in the image?
  + Are there upper and lower design fields?
  + Are there borders around the design fields?
* What motif/patterns can you see?
* How do you think these motifs/patterns were created?
* Is the entire surface of the pot covered with designs?
* Did learning about Lapita pottery, observing and discussing the design work help/influence your observational drawing or help with your accuracy in creating patterns on clay?
* Do you think that scientists and archaeologists interested in Lapita pottery would make observational drawings, create tools or work with clay like you have?
* Why would experts want to model how the pottery and/or tools were made?

***Replicating Lapita motifs and patterns***

Provide materials for students to create observational drawings of Lapita pottery.

* Choose an image/part of an image for students to sketch.
* Cut an image with repeating motifs/patterns in half and ask students to continue the patterns to fill the space.
* Design and sketch a bespoke pot using a standard Lapita shape and motifs.
* Experts can begin their bespoke pot by using a sherd and recreating the pattern.

Provide materials for students to experiment with clay slabs and create tools for dentate-stamped motifs.

* Experiment with the tool-making process by creating tools from modern materials like plastic or cardboard.
* Experiment with both fine-toothed and medium-toothed tools. Transfer the designs onto clay.
* Experiment with transferring cloth designs onto clay.
* Once techniques are successful, experiment with creating a repeated pattern.
* Decorate a slab with several patterns – separated by borders – on both upper and lower design fields.
* Discuss how the students might make tools using the same types of materials as used by Lapita peoples.