

Explorations
Visual and Performing Arts
Grade: 4/5



AUSTRALIAN-STYLE RHYTHM STICKS

You can find rhythm sticks – also called clapsticks – in cultures all over the globe. In Australia there are a special kind of clapsticks that are called bilma used to accompany the didgeridoo and also as part of a special Aboriginal corroboree ceremony.

MAKE YOUR OWN AUSTRALIAN-STYLE RHYTHM STICKS

During the ceremony, participants get to interact with sacred “Dreamtime” through song, story, dance and special clothing or costumes. Making your own bilma means you can explore the beautiful dot design patterns as well as the artistic themes often seen in Australian Aboriginal art.

WHAT ARE BILMA?

Most traditional bilma are made from the hard wood of a eucalyptus tree, native to Australia. Some simple bilma are made from two basic sticks tapped together. Other bilma used in ceremony are carved and painted and look more like the work of an expert craftsman. Modern bilma can often be found decorated with the distinctive dot pattern found in Australian Aboriginal art.



WHAT YOU NEED:

- 2 wooden pieces about 6 – 8” in length
- sandpaper
- craft paint
- Q-tips (for the dot design pattern)
- Textured fabric paint (for more intricate patterns)
- Clear lacquer (if desired, to seal the project when it’s completed).

PREPARE YOUR CLAPSTICKS

To make your own bilma, start with two sticks, about 6-8" in length. You can use two sticks found in the woods or a length of wooden dowel found at a hardware store. You can also use an old broomstick or recycle the handle of a broken shovel or garden tool. If so, cut two pieces that are about the same size that will fit easily into your hand. You'll also need some painting materials.

To prepare the sticks you might need to sand out any rough edges. You may want to leave them natural or paint them an overall color as the basis of your artwork. Once they are prepped and/or painted, then you're ready to create your own design. Here are two options you might like to try.



A SIMPLE DOT BILMA

You can make colorful patterns with dots like those seen in Aboriginal art by dipping a Q-tip in craft paint and then touching it to the surface of your stick. Since forming patterns with dots can be a bit unusual, it's a good idea to play

with the Q-tips and dot patterns on a piece of paper first. Once you've gotten the hang of it, move on to decorating your sticks.



A CRAFTY TEXTURED DOT DESIGN BILMA

For a more elaborate bilma, you can work with the type of textured fabric paint that is found at any craft store. Although this type of paint is often used on fabrics, it also works perfectly on wood. Since the level of paint that comes out of the nozzle is a bit tricky, it's a good idea to practice on a piece of paper first to see how the fabric paint will flow for you. Once you like how it works, start creating the design on your sticks. There's one warning here, though. Fabric paint takes a bit of time to harden, so make sure you've set your bilma on something to dry – such as an empty, open egg carton. That way your dots can dry perfectly and not smudge as you complete your project.



Once you're happy with what you've created, you can seal the project with a coat of clear lacquer, if desired.

PLAYING THE BILMA

Traditional bilma are played by holding one stick in place in one hand and tapping on top of it with the other clapstick. If you make a didgeridoo, you can have one person play the didg and another can keep the beat with the bilma.

You can play like this or you can experiment with tapping the sticks together in any number of other ways. Sing a favorite tune and tap along in time or experiment with songs from Australia like "Kookaburra". See if you can play along to the different rhythms that you hear!