

# Calabash Art

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The calabash is a unique medium which has been used by the indigenous people of the Caribbean for ages. The art has been done in many forms and oral tradition has expressed various specific methods on how to handle the art itself.

The methods may be seen to be slightly different throughout the region since the indigenous people at varying times belong to many different tribes. It is therefore necessary to observe the skills and methods used. In the earlier days calabash was used basically as utensils and for decorations. These ornaments were decorated with designs engraved on the backs of the calabash and would normally portray the tribe that a particular person came from.

It must be emphasized that the calabashes used by the Kalinago of Dominica are derived from the *Crescentia cujete*, commonly known as the calabash tree, a species of flowering plant that is native to Central and South America. It is a dicotyledonous plant with tripinnate leaves and the fruit itself is inedible.

In the late 1960's the Kalinago people improvised on the utility of the calabash and therefore began adding the engraving of sceneries: land and seascapes and other themes. Special attention was also paid to the designing of the traditional motifs used by the ancestors especially in the form of masks. It must again be re-emphasized that these gave a clear indication as to the tribe that the persons belonged to and their social position within the community.

Presently, the art form has been developed to the extent that it has become a major income generating activity within the Kalinago Territory. The art work can be seen displayed throughout the territory and in numerous souvenir shops all around the island. From time to time the skill is taught at school and community levels through youth and adult education programs.

It must be realized that the process of ensuring a finished product involves a long process. First, the proper calabash gourd must be selected based on the intent of the artist and





then cut in half to be thoroughly cleaned out. Traditionally, the cutting was done using a special; little known secret technique where a bit of string was utilized. The technique involved wrapping the string around the calabash and adding pressure on it at intervals. Presently, the cutting is done using the normal hand saw and the inside is taken off using a spoon.

After the initial cleaning stage, the calabash can either be left out in the sun to dry or smoked over a fire. They can normally remain during this stage for up to seven days. The former process allows the calabash to become leather-like in colour whereas the latter allows for a darker hue. These

methods depend solely on the intent of the artist. After this point the calabash is ready for engraving.

Since the calabash becomes similar to canvas, wood or any other medium after the drying process, the artist will delve into the production of a masterpiece.

The most common themes are masks depicting the decorations used on the painting on the faces of the Kalinago ancestors. As previously alluded to, the artists can express all other types of themes from nature, imaginary designs and even portraits.

The tools utilized in calabash art are very rudimentary ranging from pocket knives, screw drivers, and scrap metal. The engraving method, although very simple, can be very dangerous, especially since the calabash is normally placed on the lap with the tools being used at 45 to 65 degree angles. The main concern is with the slippage of the tool from the calabash into the hand or lap of the artist.

The main concern of practitioners of the calabash art is the passing on of the skill to the younger generation of Kalinago people. This can be addressed at the school level where it can be taught within a structured setting in an effort to hold fast to it as an important aspect of the Kalinago culture.

