

MAKE YOUR OWN

# Bilma or Australian Clapsticks



## WHAT ARE BILMA?

Sometimes when a didgeridoo is playing, you can hear two small but loud clapsticks keeping a beat for the music. These are called bilma. Most traditional bilma are made from the hard wood of a eucalyptus tree, native to Australia. They are used to keep time to music but also as part of the special Aboriginal corroboree ceremony where dancers become of "Dreamtime" through dance, music and special clothing or costumes.

## WHAT DO BILMA LOOK LIKE?

Some simple bilma found in Australia 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. More modern bilma also have the distinctive dot pattern found in Australian Aboriginal art and can be quite beautiful and creative. If you make your own, you can be inspired by Australian culture and designs or you can use art that reflects your favorite colors or patterns or images that you find inspirational.



## WHAT SUPPLIES DO YOU NEED?

Supplies for this project are simple. For the sticks, you can use two sticks (about 6-8") 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. A basic supply list can be found below.



## SUPPLIES

- 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

First, start with your sticks. They might need a bit of sanding to smooth out rough edges. You might want to leave them natural or paint them an overall color as the basis of your design. Once they are prepped and/or painted, then you're ready for creating your own design. Here are two options you might like to try.



At right – a bilma painted with Q-tips dipped in various colors. Below, bilma decorated with textured fabric paint.

### 🌸 A SIMPLE DOT BILMA

If you look at most Australian Aboriginal art, it's formed by a series of dots that create a picture. You can make these dots 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 like "Kookaburra" or "You Gotta Didg" and see if you can play along to the different rhythms that you hear!



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