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PHILIPPE PELTIER

## WORKS BY IRIAN JAYA (NEW GUINEA INDONESIAN) ENTER AT THE NATIONAL MUSEUM AFRICAN ARTS AND OCEANIA

Asmat, Mimika and Dani: three peoples of Irian Jaya, Indonesian part of the island of New Guinea. Three peoples whose art is almost completely absent from the Français collections for obvious historical reasons: this part of the world was first colonized by Holland and France never led exploratory or scientific expeditions. The National Arts Museum of Africa and Oceania has just acquired a remarkable collection of monumental pieces from these three regions 1. This acquisition is complemented by a generous gift from Todd Barlin. Thanks to this set, it is possible to evoke the often complex rituals of these peoples, while giving to see objects as strange as exceptional. We present here the most important and spectacular pieces of this collection that is the subject of an exhibition until 2 September 1996 at the Museum of Arts of Africa and Oceania.

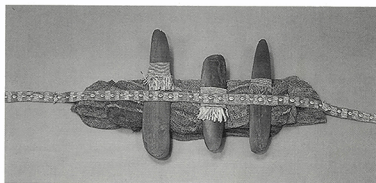
The absence in the French collections of objects of Irian Jaya was all the more regrettable as the Asmat and Mimika have invented forms that are among the most impressive and most bewildering of this part of the world, yet rich in surprises. Moreover, this unique art is disappearing: thus, among the Mimika, very soon placed under the control of the missionaries, who forbade cults and ceremonies. Currently, only a few villages continue "the way of the ancestors". It is the same for the Asmat, whose case is a little different. Contact very early - Captain Cook tried to approach the Asmat coast and a bay still bears his name - they were placed in the 1950s, then during the annexation of the island by Indonesia, under the ban of practicing their ancestral cults. We owe the survival and development of their art to the energetic action of Bishop Sowada, a Catholic bishop who settled in Agat. It is also the work of Professor Adrian Gerbrands whose collections made known the art Asmat. And finally to the pieces collected by Michael Rockefeller in 1961, during the tragic expedition that cost him his life. As for the Dani, their late discovery - during an air reconnaissance during the last world war - and their isolation - a battered and almost inaccessible valley - protected them for a long time from the rest of the world.

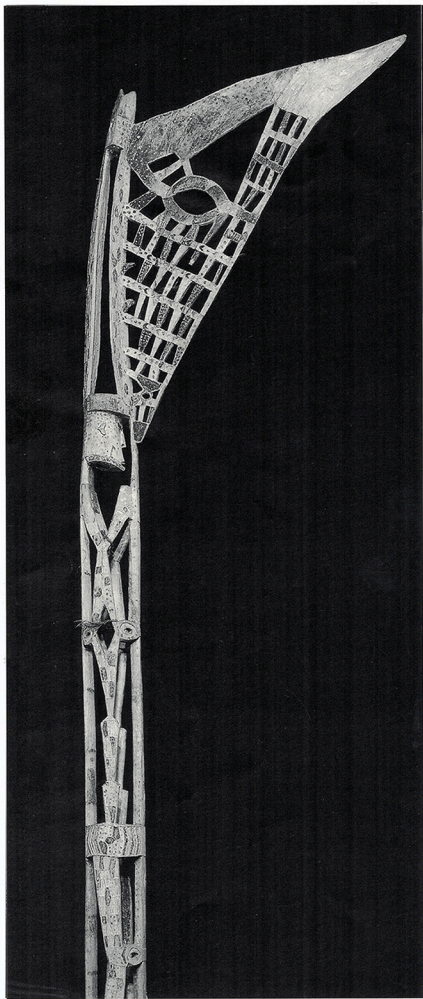
Of these three cultures, that of the Dani is, like many other highland cultures, and strangely poor in artifacts. The funeral of a great warrior who died on the battlefield was the only time the men built a platform or rested for the death and exchanged stones and pork. A rich man offered three or four flat stones surrounded by an orchidee ligature. These stones were presented, aligned on nets made and worn by women. A band, on which seashells are sewn, was placed longitudinally on the whole 3 (Fig. 1). This arrangement is reminiscent of certain contemporary Western creations, but this apparent similarity should not obscure the fact that what we consider to be art is, in the Dani, linked to exchange and sacrifice.

While stones are the main riches of the Dani, they are sorely lacking in the coastal marshes where Mimika and Asmat live. Both groups derive their livelihood from the forest and sago palm fields.

1. Dani origin. Valley of the Baliem. Stones, nets and head bands. Exchange in 1990 following the Kurulu Mon. Paris. National Arts Museum of Africa and Oceania.

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Trees and the fauna associated with them play a fundamental role in cosmogony and social representations. A man is the equivalent of a tree. One of the original myths tells of how a mythical hero, Fumeripits among the Asmat, made the horns by animating anthropomorphic carvings in wood by the rhythm of his scenes. Since then, this gesture has been repeated by the successive generations. Sculptures, like masks, continue to come to life when given a name.

Mimika's objects are rare and the information we have about them is often lacking <sup>4</sup>. The two carpets (mbitoro) acquired by the museum are exceptional <sup>5</sup> (Figure 2). They are the work of several sculptors <sup>6</sup> and were fabric in 1985 to celebrate two deaths, Mamo and Wenaco, of the village of Timuka. Each mbitoro, cut in a tree, has at its summit a perforated projection which surmounts a stylized figure whose head is full but whose body is evoked at its center. These figures are in the image of the body of man an envelope that will escape the mind after death. Mbitoro poles are erected in front of houses; they carry the names of the two men they celebrate. During rituals, the poles are loaded with energy that will be released when they are left behind sago: this inlay must allow the regeneration of sago that Mimika derives a large part of their food.

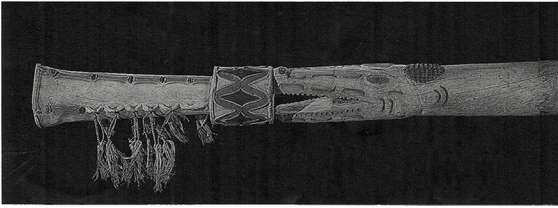
The Mimika objects, probably the best known of the specialists, are the yamal boards that come from the western part of the region. Two outstanding copies were donated to the museum <sup>7</sup>. Yamats are often narrow wooden planks that an untrained eye could confuse with shields. They are kept in the houses of men, or they are aligned along the mm that faces the entries. According to Kooijman, each yamate carries a drawing associated with the different ariclers of the clans <sup>8</sup>. The boards are set up in front of the men's house, where they are suddenly revealed to the young boys of the village during emakame parties, which are organized periodically to renew the vital principles that generate the world.

This same concern for the regeneration of the forces of nature is at the center of the Asmat rituals, populations where objects of similar shapes and serious motifs are found. This homomorphism, however, is misleading: one must not automatically deduce a similarity of usage or meaning. Luckily, Asmat culture is known to us <sup>9</sup>. However, this knowledge is quite relative since Asmat is a complex marquetry of subgroups, each of which has its own rituals. Certain objects are therefore made only in a group of villages linked together by a network of relatives.

This is the case of omu <sup>10</sup>. The omu is one of the most amazing pieces of Asmat culture. Long strands, they present in their midst a carved interlacing that maintains a vacuum in its center. This interlacing represents the original ancestors, snake or crocodiles, which are related to the appearance of life. They are used in the rituals I-ti which manifest the triparl.iLion du moncle (moncle ancestors, spirits of the dead, and the living), and are intended to return the spirits of the dead in the world that will be now their.

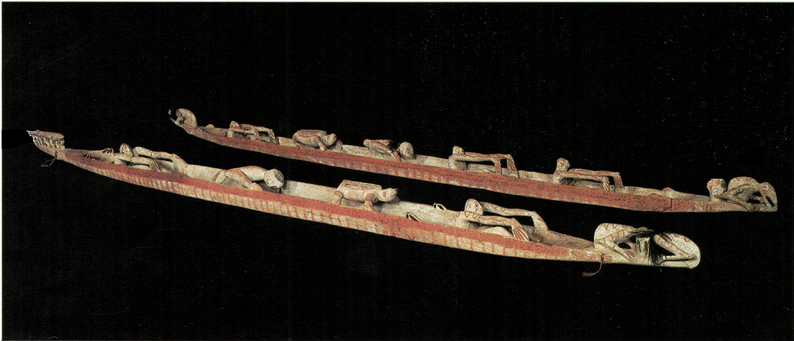
<sup>2</sup> Origin Mimika. Artists: Satrinus Perayau, Germaius Erneau, Emepeyu Amatos, Urbanus Erneau, Alfons Ikititaro, Paternus Aiperou, Joseph Amatamukara Mbitom. Carved post in Joseph Mamo's cabinet. 1988-1989. Paris. National Arts Museum of Africa and Oceania.





3 Origin Asmat. Village of Jeni. Jeer. Beam house of initiation (emak cem). 1988. Paris. National Museum of Arts of Africa and Oceania.

4 Origin Asmat. Village of Jufri. Wu ram on. Pirogue for the initiation ceremonies. Paris. National Museum of Arts of Africa and Oceania.



Other examples are given by the jeer and the wuramon 11. The first (Fig. 3) is a ridge, one of whose ends is carved with a crocodile head blowing into a flute. The second (Fig 4) is a bottomless canoe carved with strange figures: men marts during the year, figurations of spirits of water, including a Z-shaped, turtles .... These canoes, which measure several meters long, count among the most complex and impressive sculptures of Asmat culture. These two objects are used during initiation ceremonies. The beam emerges from the roof of the emak cem, literally the "house of bones", a small house erected to shelter the initiates. As for the canoes, they will be revealed to young boys at the end of their confinement, the culminating day of their initiation, or they receive the scarifications that signal them as men made.

All these objects, omu, jeer and wuramon, are from the northwestern area. The basu suangkus are native to the central region.

Basu suangkus translates as "making the head of man visible". They were used during a ritual associated with head hunting, a practice now banned by the Indonesian authorities. Currently, the use of basu suangkus has changed: they are carved during the preparation of large hunts to wild pigs. The sculpture is strange in its shape and position on the ground. It is composed of two carved crosspieces connected by wooden planks which delimit a space intended to receive the larvae of sago. Sleepers are finished with human figures associated with bird heads. Each of these figures is the work of a sculptor paid for his work 12.

Finally the collection, besides a rare pole bis (a piece ex-cutee to celebrate a dead) or pillars figures (Jewe bis) which are placed in the houses of men, also includes seven masks Asmat and Mimika 14. The set of these masks was generously donated by Todd Barlin, a gift that will allow-



5 Origin Asmat. Village of Weo. Altiste: Bu Jemmai. Jipac. Funeral suit made in memory of Takaine. 1992. Gift of Todd Bartin. Paris. National Museum of Arts of Africa and Oceania.

to present almost all forms of Asmat masks, each specific to a region or group of villages (Figure 5). Masks also participate in the rites of fertility. They bear the name of a dead man who returns to the village where he will live for some time. Welcomed by clamor, lodged in the house of the men, he will be redoubt because of his constant requests of food, until he is definitively hunting of the village. The death that he embodies then returns to the world of ancestors. Becoming a benevolent spirit, it will provide the living protection and food.

There is a strange impression of all these pieces. It is partly the result of unusual shapes - intertwined shapes that change - and the horizontal position these sculptures occupy in space. It also bears on another aspect: if we compare the sculpture of these objects to other Asmat pieces, the finish, the care given to the details, appears at first sight less important than that which is worn to the horns or shields. This is explained by their use: while horns or shields are carefully preserved, monumental pieces are produced for short use. They are abandoned in the swamps, or, they participate in the regeneration of species whose cycle is the object of ritual activities. But this raw aspect is precisely as much as the strangeness of the forms or the impressive size of certain pieces, at the origin of the sensation of power which emerges from these sculptures and which fascinates every attentive spectator.

#### NOTES

- All these pieces were collected in the field during the last fifteen years by Todd Bartin. Some of these pieces are difficult to date. Nevertheless, their age probably does not exceed thirty or forty years, which does not remove anything to their quality.
- On the art of war among the Dani (a war that was endemic) cf.: Gardner, Robert and Heider, Karl. *Gardens of War*. Random Press, 1968. A series of photographs shows the exchanges after the death of a warrior, and inlage 188 more particularly the disposition of the stones during these exchanges. Pierre Petrequin's studies on the lithic apparatus of Irian Jaya can also be seen, notably P. Petrequin, A.-M. Petrequin, "Haches de Yelem, Munyem's henninnettes", *Journal of the Society of Oceanists*, vol 91, n° 2, 95 to 113.
- The ensemble acquired by the museum has three stones that rest on 4 nets. The stones measure respectively: 1.5 x 67.5 x 14 cm; 1.5 x 60 x 11 cm; 1.5 x 51 x 13 cm. The band with seashells 318 x 5.2 x 0.5 cm. The set is registered under the inventory number MNAO 95.5.15 a b.
- The only recent synthesis: S. Kooijman. *Art, art objects, and ritual in the Mimika culture*. Leyden, 1984.
- Mbitoro, wood, white and black pigments, H. 4.57; L. 1.58; 0.26; MNAO 95.5.2. and H. 4.55; L. 1.34; D. 0.25; MNAO 95.5.1.
- Their names are: Saturinus Perayau, Germaius Emeau, Amatos Emepeyu, Urbains Emeau, Alfons Jkititaro, Paternus Aiperou, Josef Amatemukata.
- They both come from the village of Kekwa. wood, black and white pigments, H 1.245; L 0.20; E. O, QI, MNAO 95.6.8 and H. 2.73; L. 0.21; E. 0.02, MNAO 95.6.9.
- S. Kooijman. *op. cit.* n. 4; p. 63
- We shall refer, among other things, to Adrian Gerbrands' masterly and innovative study, *Wow-!pis: Eight Asmat Woodcarvers of New Guinea*, The Hague, *Art in his context* serie, No. 3, 1967; by the same author, *The Asmat of New Guinea*. The Michael Rockefeller Expedition 1961, New York. The Museum of Primitive Art, 1967; by Tobias Schmeebach, *Asmat Images: Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress*, Miluileapolis, Crosier Mission, 1985. Dirk Smidt (ed) *Asmat Art: Woodcarving of Southwest New Guinea*, Leiden -Amsterdam, 1993. The latest work is the catalog of the Konrad collection which has been exhibited in Berlin: *Asmat. Mythos und Kunst im Leben mit den Ahnen*, Berlin-Dahlem, Museum [Ur Volkerkunde, 10 October 1995 - 31 March 1996.
- The omu are made in the villages of Pupis, Momoagu, Orogo and perhaps Oiakapis and Weo. All these villages are located in the northwestern part of Asmat territory. There is no place of origin or name of sculptor for the piece in the collections. Wood, lime, red ochre earth, L. 3.06; D. 0.25. Inv. 95.5.7
- The pieces acquired by the mu see come from Jeni village on the Pomatsj river and for the wuramwn of the village of Jufri on the river Unir., Jeer: wood, lime, black pigments and red ochre, L. 3.45; 0.27; MNAO 95.5.4.; wuramwn, wood, lime, red and black pigments, casuar feathers, seeds and palm fibers, one: L. 6.30; H. 0.29; I. 0.315; MNAO 95.5.5; the other: L. 5.92; H. 0.285; I. 0.31; MNAO 95.5.6.
- The basu suangkus acquired by the museum was harvested in the village of Kailno. It dates from before 1985. Wood and seeds, lime. Overall Dimensions: L. 2.95; I. 1.01; H. 0.43; MNAO 95.5.3.
- It comes from the village of Fos on the upper course of the river Siretsj. This village is one of only two villages in this region that make bis poles. It is constituted of a masculine figure that overcomes your feminine figure. Between the two figures is an open rostrum, which is the penis of the post. Wood and lime, H. 2.83; L. 1.35; I. 0.28; MNAO 95.5.9.
- They all come from the same house of men (game) in the village of Atsj, on the river Betsj. Wood. The heights vary between 1.81 and 2.87. They are inventoried under the numbers MNAO 95.5.10 to 95.5.14.
- They come from the villages of Momoagu on the Pomatsj River, Weo and Irogo on the Ji River, Asat on the Fai River, Basinj and an unknown village, for the Asmat masks. To this set is added a rare Mimika mask, which was made in the village of Lpaya on the south-west coast. The masks are about 1.70 high and 0.70 wide. They consist of a braid on which is fixed a skirt sago fiber. Various elements such as feathers, seeds or wood can be attached. They are stored under the MNAO 95.5.8 and 95.6 Inventory Inventories. 3 to 7.