Tradition and Change: Art from Oceania

The cultures of the Pacific, Australia and the Indonesian archipelago are as impressive and extensive as the geographic area that encompasses them. The remarkable works of art in the Oceanic collection of the Museum of Art and Archaeology, all acquired as gifts, reflect only a small portion of this great diversity. Collections often have a specific geographical focus due to the interests of the donors and nature of their donations. The majority of the objects in the Museum’s collection came from the independent country of Papua New Guinea, with outstanding pieces from Indonesia, Fiji and Australia.

The art in this exhibition represents several facets of life and society, such as men’s secret societies, women’s roles and warfare. Men’s societies or cults were major societal forces in many of the cultures and produced much art in relation to their affairs. Most of the objects on display were used in conjunction with men’s activities and were stored within the men’s house. Other items such as food dishes, dance wands and agricultural tools give evidence of alternative roles and activities. The objects are displayed in geographic and cultural groupings to illustrate thematic motifs and to underscore certain stylistic commonalities.
**Hand Drum**
Indonesia, West Papua, Central coastal area
Asmat people
Wood, cane and reptile skin
61.89.10
Gift of Mrs. Ingeborg de Beausacq

Hand drums were a common type of musical instrument and provided the dominant beat in all dances and ceremonial observances. They were the personal possessions of initiated men and were usually carved by the owner. The designs on the sides and handles related to the man’s clan totems and individual motifs. This drum features the *bipanew*—a man's nose ornament—under the drumhead and a series of praying mantises along the handle.

**Jipae Funerary Costume**
Indonesia, West Papua, Central coastal area
Asmat people
Fiber, seeds, quills and pigment
61.89.13
Gift of Mrs. Ingeborg de Beausacq

Initiated men wove and decorated each bark-twine costume for a specific funerary ceremony. Such a costume represented the spirit of a person who had recently died. The ceremony would include several costumed male dancers, as the ritual was usually held for several people at a time. This observance encouraged the spirits of the recently deceased to leave the village and travel on to Safan, the realm of the spirits.
Shield
Indonesia, Borneo, East Kalimantan
Kenyan-Kayan People
Wood, metal, cane, hair and pigment
65.223
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Cedric H. Marks

This distinctive shield was the personal possession of a Kenyan-Kayan warrior. The intent of the shield decoration was to scare an enemy and instill awe. Men from this area of Borneo were known to decapitate their enemies and keep the heads in their men's houses. Each lock of hair on the shield was supposed to betoken an enemy killed in battle. In later times, horsehair replaced human hair. The backside of the shield is covered with illustrations of protective spirit faces and dragon-like creatures.

Dance Staff
Papua New Guinea, East Sepik Province, Lower Sepik River region, Kayan area
Wood
81.110
Gift of Mr. George H. Dougherty

Lead dancers wore elaborate feathered costumes in ceremonial celebrations. A dancer would hold this staff in his hand and raise it in time to the music. The decorative flanges along the sides of the staff would have been strung with feathered and beaded cords and occasionally with plant decoration. The small figures on the head of this fine staff represent the ancestral hero who was part bird and part man.
**Digging Stick**  
Papua New Guinea, East Sepik Province, Murik Lakes area  
Murik people  
Wood  
61.89.2  
Gift of Mrs. Ingeborg de Beausacq

Women were the traditional farmers in the Sepik River region. With some exceptions, men cleared the land and women cultivated it. Their primary gardening tool was the digging stick, used to loosen the earth and clear out roots. This finely carved tool is decorated with the symbolic ancestral crocodile father with its son on his back. This symbol has several meanings, one being a reference to the way a boy is held by his uncle or father during his skin cutting initiation.

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**Tumbuan Mask**  
Papua New Guinea, East Sepik Province, Lower Sepik River region, possibly Murik Lakes area  
Murik people  
Wood and pigment  
61.85.13  
Gift of Mr. Samuel Rubin

Masks of this type are carved in the tradition of Murik Lake area men's ceremonial masks. These masks were often incorporated into a larger costume that covered the man's body. The small tab on the bottom was used to hold the mask in place while dancing. The birdman design, in combination with the painted facial decoration, illustrates a conjoining of middle and lower Sepik River styles.
**Food Platter**  
Papua New Guinea, East Sepik Province, Boiken Plains area  
Boiken people  
Wood  
65.289  
Gift of Mr. Morton D. May

This feast platter was carved from the buttress root of a *ficus* tree by men from the Boiken Plains. Such platters were traded throughout the Lower Sepik region and were usually decorated by neighboring Murik Lake carvers. The platter designs originate in the Murik Lakes area and refer to important fauna such as crabs, sea eagles and specific shellfish prized for their shells. This platter’s border design refers to pairs of wings of the sea eagle and to the *Kalian* seashell.

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**Food Bowl**  
Papua New Guinea, East Sepik Province, Lower Sepik River region, Murik Lakes area  
Murik people  
Wood  
61.85.12  
Gift of Mr. Samuel Rubin

The Murik Lakes are adjacent to the mouth of the Sepik River where it flows into the Bismarck Sea. The ancestral birdman figure is a common motif throughout this area, and initiated men wear birdman masks. The figures used as handles on this bowl feature both the birdman face as well as an elaborate hair ornament worn by initiated men. [See the birdman mask 61.85.13 also on view in this gallery.]
**Dance Paddle**  
Papua New Guinea, North Solomons,  
Buka Island  
Buka people  
Wood and pigment  
61.86.2  
Gift of Mr. Allan Gerdau

The people of Buka Island have a characteristic art style that is dominated by a motif of large-eyed wooden spirit figures, called *kokorra*. The *kokorra* were the focus of the men’s secret masking society, and they served as the public symbol for the society. Dance paddles were used by men in special ceremonies as an accompaniment to the group’s choreography.

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**Hand Drum (roko)**  
Papua New Guinea, Southern Highlands, Lake Kutubu area  
Foi people  
Wood and pigments  
81.108  
Gift of Mr. George H. Dougherty

The hand drum is the personal possession of an initiated man. Drums were carved with an adze and hollowed out by a slow burning process. Drumheads were made from the stretched skin of the green tree python—it is missing on this example though. The pigments on the drum were derived from a white local stone and tree seed pulp. The oval-shaped design near the head of the drum is said to represent the eyes of the drum.
Yam Masks
Papua New Guinea, East Sepik Province, Maprik area
Abelam people
Rattan, feathers and pigments
73.255 and 73.256
Gift of Dr. and Mrs. Werner Muensterberger

The Abelam people reside in the foothills of the Prince Alexander Mountains, just north of the Sepik River. The men's cults in this area revolve around yam agriculture and the large, five-foot-long yams are cultivated only by the initiated. The best of these yams become the focus of the harvest festival, during which ancestral spirits are believed to temporarily inhabit the yams. Finely woven masks were attached to the yams and represented the faces of the ancestor.

Fighting Tops
Papua New Guinea, East Sepik Province, Maprik area
Abelam people
Coconut shell
61.89.17 and .18
Gifts of Mrs. Ingeborg de Beausacq

Coconut shell is used to fashion many utilitarian items among the Sepik area people. A pointed stick wound with a short string was fitted in the hole of this coconut shell top. When the string was pulled, the top would skip and spin. Boys and young men decorated the tops with totemic designs and used them in mock battles. The person who could knock over his opponent's top won the contest.
Men's Ceremonial Axe
Papua New Guinea, Southern Highlands, Mount Hazem area
Melpa people
Wood, stone and fiber
61.89.12
Gift of Mrs. Ingeborg de Beausacq

This type of axe was not a utilitarian tool, but was part of an initiated man's everyday gear, usually held in the hand or tucked into the belt. It was used to emphasize a point of conversation in ceremonious speeches or to direct the crowd's attention to a specific object during formal presentations. The stone blade was the most valuable part of the axe, as it was difficult to manufacture and the material was derived from a specific quarry site. Due to their rarity, the blades of these axes also served as a form of monetary exchange.

Male Ancestral Figure (*nggwal*)
Papua New Guinea, East Sepik Province, Maprik area
Abelam people
Wood and pigments
61.86.10
Gift of Mr. Allan Gerdau

Men's initiation is a complicated process, with seven known knowledge levels. It often continues throughout the lifetime of the initiate. Ornate sculptures such as this example are revealed to the initiate as part of their narrative education. The hornbill birds on the head of the figure represent clan totems and spiritual ancestors who help pass knowledge on to the initiate.
**Suspension Hook**  
Papua New Guinea, East Sepik Province,  
Middle Sepik River region, Chambri Lakes area  
Wood  
61.89.1  
Gift of Mrs. Ingeborg de Beausacq

Hooks were the storage cabinets of Sepik River peoples. Suspended from ceiling beams by ropes, they helped protect valuables or perishables from rodents. Items were placed in large net bags and hung on the hook's prongs. This type of hook was probably used in a domestic setting for storage of personal items. Larger, more elaborate hooks were displayed and used in the men’s house. The small head at the top of this hook is a general representation of an ancestor with ceremonial face decoration.

**Female Ancestral Figure**  
Papua New Guinea, East Sepik Province, Keram River area, Kambot village  
Kambot people  
Wood and paint  
65.252  
Gift of Mr. Morton D. May

The Keram River is a major tributary of the Sepik River, and this sculpture was made by people from this area. Small female figures were often made in memory of important females in the village. The shape of the eye relates to the common belief that certain ancestors had the ability to transform into a bird—specifically a cockatoo. The figures were kept in the men's house and carried during major ceremonies such as harvest festivals or the opening of a new men's house.
**Men's Lime Container and Spatula**  
Papua New Guinea, East Sepik Province, Middle Sepik River area  
Iatmul people  
Gourd, clay, cowry shells, fiber and bone  
65.286  
Gift of Mr. Morton D. May

Betel nut, chewed with lime from burned seashells, is a popular narcotic. Each person has his or her personal lime container, some decorated, some plain. This impressive container is embellished with shell money made from small cowry shells, traded inland from the coast. The spatula is carved from the leg bone of a cassowary bird, with the joint having been modeled into the shape of a cockatoo's head.

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**Men's Ceremonial Mask**  
Papua New Guinea, East Sepik Province, Tambanum village  
Iatmul people  
Wood and pigments  
65.299  
Gift of Mr. Morton D. May

Birds play a major role in Sepik River mythologies. This mask represents a male spirit who has the ability to transform into a bird. This character is a popular figure that is featured on many forms of Sepik art. Note its use on several pieces in this gallery.
**Spirit Figure (bioma)**
Papua New Guinea, Papuan Gulf region, Era River area
Gibaio people
Wood and pigment
76.30
Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Morton D. May

Gibaio men were great hunters of wild boars and huge crocodiles. Sculptures like this one, in both male and female forms, were carved by initiated men and stored with trophy skulls of animals kept in the men's house. The figure’s legs were usually placed striding a skull, or in the eye sockets of a skull, thus linking it with the spirit of the dead animal. Biomas were believed to contain the animal spirits that assisted the owner in his hunting forays.

**Throwing club (i ula tavatava)**
Fiji, Viti Levu Island
Viti people
Wood
61.86.7
Gift of Mr. Allan Gerdau

These types of personal weapons were commonly carried by men in their waistbands. The early Fijian people lived in turbulent times, with warfare being a major element in their culture. Weighted to be thrown as missiles, the clubs were hurled with enough force to bring down or kill a person. They were made from the rootstock and main trunk of small trees. This is an elegant example, with fine chip-carving on the base of the handle and a well-formed club head.
**Parrying Shield (mulga)**
Australia, Western Victoria, Lower Murray River region
Murri people (?) Wood and pigments

67.29 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Rennan H. Ross

This type of shield was commonly used throughout the lower Murray River region in southeastern Australia. The dense hardwood of the shield was incised with designs that were significant to the owner’s clan and lands. The shield was used in close combat to ward off blows.

**Club (quirriang an wun)**
Australia, Western Victoria, Lower Murray River region
Murri people (?) Wood

67.26 Gift of Mr. and Mrs. Rennan H. Ross

Weapons were important tools for men in nomadic hunting-and-gathering societies. This club, a good example of its type, served to protect the owner as well as to aid him in procuring game for the community. Carved from heavy hardwood, it could be used as a club or as a hook for snagging prey before pummeling it.
Spear Thrower (woomera)
Australia, Western Australia
Wood and fiber
61.86.4
Gift of Mr. Allan Gerdau

The *woomera* was a fundamental tool of the hunter and warrior. It was used to help lengthen the distance covered by a thrown spear. The thrower would hold the knobbed end and place the notched butt of a spear against the peg at the top; when the arm goes forward, the spear flings off the peg at a low trajectory with added force. This example is richly decorated with intricately incised lines.