



MELANESIAN ART
Auckland City Art Gallery 1966

We are very grateful that Miss Senta Taft of Sydney, who has carefully collected most of these objects on her travels in Melanesian areas, should so generously lend them for an exhibition in the Auckland City Art Gallery.

It is one accomplishment to have collected these works, but to lend them and make them available for purchase is not always an easy matter for a sensitive collector.

Miss Taft has a high regard for the people who produce these artefacts. If others come to share in this respect and understanding, then the exhibition will have achieved its end.

We would also like to thank Dr. T. Barrow for the informative note on the art of Melanesia, he has prepared to accompany this exhibition.

G.D.

These works of art come principally from the islands of New Guinea, New Britain and New Ireland. Though they come from areas which are geographically close there are stylistic differences among them. In the Sepik River area of New Guinea alone there exist at least six groups of styles, each of which has distinct local variations. It is difficult to single out features common to all the different styles in the area.

Some areas are richer in certain kinds of artistic production than others. The eastern highlands of New Guinea for example are poor in both sculptural work and two dimensional surface delineations, but are exceptionally rich as regards ornaments, particularly in the use of feathers. It is interesting to note that in the New Ireland area there is a very low level of technological development yet in contrast there is a very high standard of artistic achievement.

Trading in works of art also takes place, particularly in areas which have inferior indigenous artistic output. All kinds of objects are exchanged, from cult figures used in religious ceremonies (together with the appropriate dances, rhythms and songs) to carved bowls. It appears that New Guinea and the neighbouring islands undertook the mass production of certain wood carvings, especially wooden vessels, for export. "It is a mistake to assume that the European demand for 'curios' is entirely responsible for these native industries and for a consequent degeneration of indigenous arts and crafts, though in many cases this is undoubtedly true."*

For physical reasons alone these pieces can properly be called contemporary works of art. The materials from which they are made and decorated: wood, clay, fibre, bark, bone, shells and earth pigments, together with the tropical climate in which they exist do not make for permanence. Ancient works of art are therefore rare, and there is, or better, was, an everpresent demand for the creation of new objects. The artists or craftsmen who made these objects are unknown to us, but their anonymity is not important for they were manipulating traditional styles and motifs and using customary techniques. Any western theory of self expression was foreign to the spirit in which the works were created. The artist generally enjoyed prestige and respect within his own society for he was often responsible for making objects for ritual purposes and consequently was initiated into the activities and mysteries of secret societies. Nevertheless artists "like other members of the tribe, could if necessary, support themselves by agriculture, fishing etc. and in most cases this is indeed the normal practice."†

Neither was there the separation between fine and useful art that leads us to divorce work from culture. Rather objects were made "with art", and were consequently "works of art", but there was no such thing as "art", which could be accepted or rejected. The craftsman was an artist and vice-versa. Thus among the objects exhibited we find sacred figures and statues, together with drums and flutes, spoons and bowls, masks and shields. Many of the objects were in daily use, and the motifs employed in rituals were repeated in architecture as well as on weapons, boats and implements of all kinds. Although we are clearly not privileged to respond to or use these works in the way their makers did, our appreciation has greatly advanced from the regard of these objects as crude and meaningless curios. The experience of primitive art has significantly influenced the development of twentieth century European painting and sculpture. In their turn these developments have led us to a greater appreciation of the aesthetic qualities of the art of primitive man.

I.R.R.

*Leonhard Adam, PRIMITIVE ART, London, 1963, p. 69

†Buhler, Barrow Mountford, ART OF THE WORLD:
OCEANIA AND AUSTRALIA., London, 1962, p. 95

THE ART OF MELANESIA

All South Sea art has a rich aesthetic quality which is its most striking characteristic. Its appeal to the eye is immediate to almost everyone. But to begin to understand the art of Melanesia, Polynesia or Micronesia (the three culture areas of the South Seas), it is essential to know something of its social and religious function.

The subject matter of South Sea art, especially Melanesian art, is found in the South Sea islanders unquestioning belief in the existence of a vast army of gods, ancestral spirits, supernatural beings, animistic nature spirits, and totemic creatures. Almost all of these spirits are associated with the dead and are believed to watch over the affairs of the tribe. The carved images are vehicles of these spirits and are intended to either placate or use these beings of the supernatural world.

To the South Sea islander the carved image or the simplest motif of decoration possesses the magical power to either protect life or effect some end, such as the increased fertility of crops. The placing of a design on an everyday object such as a fish-hook gave the object 'mana', that is the power to be more effective in use. In this sense South Sea art is a utilitarian art aimed at the survival of the tribe. Modern man is inclined to think that designs are merely applied to make a thing more beautiful, but this is not so! No doubt decorative carving on an object gave extra pleasure to its owner, but the first intention was in evocative magic. Craftsmanship was anonymous and unselfconscious so beauty as civilized man understands beauty was a by-product, not an intention.

Melanesian art is elaborate in decoration and its mood is sinister. The materials used are generally softwoods painted with red, white or black pigments. In this respect it contrasts with the hardwood sculpture of Polynesia and Micronesia which is serene in mood and of an uncluttered elegance of style. Melanesian art is the Pacific art of dramatic effects and of ghosts and totems.

Melanesia, and particularly New Guinea, is an area where men have been, for many centuries, dominated by beliefs in the supernatural. The craftsmen have always been preoccupied in supplying paraphernalia for ancestor cults, secret societies and the materials of black magic. Far from being free and easy simple-lifers the Melanesian still living in a traditional society, lives under a burden of exasperating tribal obligations and taboos. The natural world is to him violent and uncertain while the supernatural world is always dangerous, and often malignant. The dramatic intensity of this art reflects a state of mind brought about by these beliefs.

Through their arts the Melanesian craftsmen honoured their gods and ancestors and helped society as a whole to relieve subconscious fears and anxieties. For this reason the artist was a very important person in Melanesian society and in great contrast to the artist in the western world who often feels he is rejected and unwanted by his fellow men.

The Melanesian artist also provided, unknowingly, a release to the imagination of civilized man, and a new lesson in aesthetics. The contribution of Melanesian art to modern western art is part of the widespread influence of primitive art in general.

There are of course distinctive art areas within Melanesia systematically sub-divided by ethnologists on the basis of style difference. New Guinea offers the greatest variety of distinctive styles because of its great diversity of environments, peoples and cultures. The present exhibition is essentially an exhibition of New Guinea art because most of the objects offered are from that country. It is an exhibition of Melanesian art in the sense that a number of other islands are represented, and because a background of New Guinea art is the best background to Melanesian art in general.

Dr. T. Barrow
Bernice P. Bishop Museum
Honolulu

The ceremonial masks illustrated on the cover, come from the Chambri Lake area. That on the front measures 53 inches in height, while the other measures 42 inches.



