Figure 1

Object type: over-modeled skull
Indigenous name: Lor
Culture/location: Iatmul People,
Middle Sepik River, Papua New Guinea
Date: early 20th century
Materials: Wood, human skull, clay, cowrie shells, human hair, fiber, paint
Dimensions: H. 8.5 x W. 7.5 in
Institutional and accession number: The Brooklyn Museum, 62.18.1

Figure 2

Object type: Bonito Fish figure, container for human skull
Indigenous name: N/A
Culture/location: Santa Ana Island, Solomon Islands
Date: 19th century
Materials: Wood, paint, human skull
Dimensions: L. 4.7 1/2 in
Institution and accession number: Musée Du Quai Branly

Throughout all Oceanic art, the representation of ancestors is a hugely predominant and reoccurring theme. In societies/cultures throughout Melanesia in specific, this theme is applied very literally. In many Melanesian cultures, mortuary rituals focused on the skull of the deceased in an effort to ensure that deceased ancestors will remain a spiritually intact and relevant part of the family (D'Alleva 1998, 70-71). Incorporating the remains of the deceased into art and everyday life may seem bizarre to the Western viewer, but to the majority of cultures throughout Melanesia it is an extremely treasured process in understanding the discord between and after life and death. The two objects pictured are examples of Melanesian art made with human relics as a way to honor beloved ancestors whom have passed.

The first object is an example of a traditional form of mask made by the Iatmul People of the Middle Sepik River, Papua New Guinea (figure 1). This form is called an

over-modeled skull, a term referring to a technique used to decorate masks, shields, skulls, and other objects in which all or part of the original surface is covered with resin, clay, or other substances, which are often further sculpted, painted, and inlaid with materials such as shells or pearls. When using the overmodeling technique on a human skull, the sculptor generally seeks to reproduce the facial features of the deceased (Kjellgren 2007, 325). Skulls like these would be kept by the family of the deceased in respect to their ancestral spirit, and would be fully incorporated into their everyday lives. For example, they were often displayed in the front entrance of ceremonial houses, where they could be a physical part of initiations and celebrations, and protect against unwanted visitors and spirits.

In comparison to the over-modeled skull of the Iatmul People, the second object, a container in the form of a bonito fish is meant to house human relics instead of molding and layering material on top of them. Once again, this ensured that the ancestor would maintain a prominent role in society after they die. This particular object was created sometime in the 19th century on Santa Ana Island, Solomon Islands (figure 2). This example is made of only wood and human skull, although many objects of this type are usually embellished with paint referencing tattoo practices, and are inlayed with cowrie and conus shells (Conru, 2008). In the Solomon Islands, bonito fish are extremely sacred, because they are controlled by and are manifestations of tutelary deities (Davenport, 1981). Because of this, certain ceremonies revolve around bonito fishing expeditions, such as male initiations. In addition to initiation purposes, bonito fish are an inspiration for funerary art due to their immense supernatural properties, as depicted in figure 2. The art-making process of this object begins with the initial burial or exposure of the deceased body, allowing it to decompose. Once this occurs, the skull is taken and is carefully cleaned and placed in a cavity in the belly of the carved bonito fish figure. The visual impact of figures like the Iatmul's over-modeled skull and the bonito fish skull container involves rich and complex

symbolism designed to ward off dangerous spirits and enemies, and to ensure the continuation of the departed family member's presence in society.

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