Object type: Dance Headdress
Culture/location: Papua New Guinea, New Britain, Sulka people
Date: 1880
Materials: Wood, fiber, bark strips, shell, cassowary feathers, and pigment Dimensions: 62 x 46 x 35 in. (157.48 x 116.84 x 88.9 cm)
Institution and accession number: LACMA (M.2008.66.5)

Object type: Mask
Indigenous name: Lor
Culture/location: Papua New Guinea, New Britain, Gazelle Peninsula, Tolai People
Date: 1900
Materials: Forepart of human skull, human hair, wood fiber, nut paste, and pigment
Dimensions: 18 x 13 x 11 in. (45.72 x 33.02 x 27.94 cm)
Institution and accession number: LACMA (M.2008.66.42)

Melanesian art encompasses a highly diverse set of cultures, and is perhaps most interesting for the complex trade, artistic, social, and historical connections and networks that art historical research can suppose between these. Even seemingly 'outside' cultures may have precedents in Melanesia, with some scholars positing that original Lapita travelers may indeed have reached Melanesia and Papua New Guinea (McNiven et al. 2012). Here, I have chosen to investigate objects which I believe resonate with themes of cultural exchange and adaptation in Papua New Guinea, and which I find deserving of greater art historical exploration and attention in light of an imperialist tradition which has too long reduced and dismissed the complexity of Oceanic cultures.

A history of cultural contact in Papua New Guinea is supported by both linguistic and cultural evidence. One may note, for instance, the deep similarities between the Papuan language of Sulka and surrounding Oceanic languages, which display so many resemblances

they sometimes defy classification as one or the other, suggesting, of course, high levels of contact between Papuan groups such as the Sulka and their Oceanic counterparts (Reesnik 2005, 148). Art historical evidence exists as well, and one of the most valuable points of comparison between different cultures of Papua New Guinea and beyond is ceremonial objects and body adornments, such as this headdress of the Sulka and this mask (lor) of the Tolai.

The importance of masks to the inhabitants of New Britain and especially to the Tolai for ceremonial purposes is well known to art historians. Traditionally, part of the function of Tolai ceremonial masks, kept in men's' meeting places, was to assert the place of men in society. Within the male population, moreover, only the "big men" (rather than "little men") were allowed to create and know about the masks, indicating that masks had a large role in defining and preserving social structures (Jebens 2003; Corbin 1976, 18). On the other hand, however, masks were also said to be communally owned, and changes to Tolai mask tradition in recent years complicate the idea of social preservation. If there is room for change within such an old and seemingly conservative tradition, then notions of Tolai social hierarchy as regulated by the masks are surely somewhat fluid as well; and the Tolai have been historically adaptable, innovate, and creative (Corbin 1976; Jebens 2003, 116). Epstein, for example, suggests a Tolai capacity for adaptation under German colonization – and despite Epstein's strongly slanted, Euro-centric description of the Tolai, his report nonetheless presents some picture of the complexity of being Tolai and of social roles within Tolai society (Epstein 1961). However, in light more recent reappraisals, present-day art historians should be aware of the lack of detailed knowledge on the specificities of Papuan cultures, and indeed of Oceanic cultures as a whole in Western art history. Conjectures on this particular mask may still offer insight only if one can admit to this information

gap and resist drawing too-definite conclusions. In relation to this lor, then, the information I can offer is no more than my best surmise.

By my surmise, however, regarding the construction of this mask itself and its formal properties – besides its socio-historical context – return to the theme of social roles and fluid intercultural interactions. The name lor, for example, means skull, and contains a fragment of human skull, which is most probably a reference to genealogy and ancestors, spirits, or respected men of the community, to whom the skull fragment would likely have literally belonged (The Met Museum). The mask may have also represented a "spirit that crawls," which took part in a dance ceremony called tambaran kakao, and that the spirit would reveal choreography to a community leader. Today, much of the Tolai population is Christian, and (Christian) religious ceremonies are still accompanied by masked dances, reflecting preservation, cultural change, and creativity after colonialism (The Met Museum).

Similarly, the headdress of the Sulka refers to themes of tradition, change, and social standing, in a complex cultural-artistic milieu. This headdress is topped with a woven sculpture and may, similarly to the lor, indicate cultural standing through ceremonial use. Much like another Sulka mask form (the hemlaut), indicators of wealth – such as light pigment, shell, and cassowary feathers – are attached to the mask, and mark significance for traditional special occasions such as initiations, funerals and weddings, thereby creating new social standings and bonds in this Papuan society while reinforcing older ones as well (Corbin). Also as with the lor, Corbin continues, hemlaut masks and similar others were still made contemporarily (at the time of publication of the article), and also used in Christian religious services. Once again, this very clearly showcases both the preservation of Sulka traditions through rapid socio-cultural shifts (under colonization and otherwise) and a willingness to adapt as a general quality of Sulka art

where masks are concerned. Although in an area of study which is still filled with uncertainties, I would like to reiterate the danger of generalization, of perpetuating reductive imperialist attitudes which turn complex Oceanic cultures into stereotypes. Finally, once again as with the lor, such headdresses and masks required immense amounts of time and skill to make, and despite association with individual community leaders, dancers, and individuals undergoing the ceremonies, the mask or headdress may have retained a communal element. Ceremonial headdresses and masks were communal for the nature of the ceremonies themselves, but also in that the bright pigmentations, leaves, and feathers used were crafted with visual appeal and observers' pleasure in mind, which they would express through gifts to the dancer once the ceremony was finished (Corbin).

These Sulka and Tolai pieces display many formal and contextual similarities to one another, especially in common themes, which – although unsurprising given their geographical proximity – are nonetheless fascinating for the degree of similarity in light of the extremely complex relationships among Papua New Guinea's many cultural groups, many of which challenge researchers and historians and which prove fluid, historically and contemporaneously. They showcase the social roles of individuals and community, and most of all the immense social changes and artistic innovations that seem to accompany one another, contradicting old occidental notions of primitivism and suspension in time, which, themselves, have failed to evolve.

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