Object type: Yam Mask
Culture/location: Abelam people, Middle Sepik River region, Papua New Guinea
Date: early to mid-20th century
Materials: fiber, paint
Dimensions: H. 25 in.
Institution and accession number: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1978.412.858

Object type: Funerary Carving (*Malagan)*
Culture/location: Northern New Ireland, Papua New Guinea
Date: late 19th-early 20th century
Materials: wood, paint, shell, resin
Dimensions: H. 52 1/4 x W. 3 3/4 x D. 13 1/4 in.
Institution and accession number: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2007.215

In this summary, I compare and contrast two objects: the yam mask and the *malagan* carving, both of which are associated with manhood rites from two regions of Papua New Guinea. I find these objects fascinating for their ability to facilitate interactions within and between communities, not because of how they were created but because of their involvement in ceremonies. Both objects demonstrate that artistic production plays an important role in the lives of indigenous people in Papua New Guinea, which is distinctly different from how many Western cultures interact with artwork. In examining these objects, I also highlight the emphasis that people in Melanesia put on the relationship with nature and the spiritual world.

The yam masks were used in rituals around a species of yam that is large with a long and thick tuber shape, called *waapi*, and were referred to as “long yams.” The cultivation of this crop originated from the Samukundi Abelam, who are horticulturalists living in the East Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea (Scaglion 1997). However, the cultivation of long yams was seen in other communities along the Sepik River such as the Yangoru Boiken (Roscoe 1989), the Avatip in the Ambunti District (Harrison 1982), and the Ilahita Arapesh in the Maprik area (Tuzin 1972), suggesting the occurrence of trade and exchange between these communities. The yams were associated only with men and served as symbolic representations of their masculinity. Several rituals accompany the cultivation and the harvest of the long yams. Before planting yams in the gardens, many ceremonies were performed to prepare the garden such as the cutting down the

stalks of wild sugarcane from the previous year's garden to symbolize the clearing (Harrison 1982, 149). Caring for the yams required specific farming techniques with distinctive games and collective rituals (Harrison 1982, 115). Additionally, women were not allowed to come near the garden; they were considered intruders (Tuzin 1972, 232). During ceremonies, the yams were transformed into human images and decorated like a man; decorations and male features such as belts, armlets, shell ornaments, and genitalia were painted on the skin of the yam (Tuzin 1972, 236). The yam masks, woven by the harvesters using fiber and made exclusively for the yams, contributed to transformation of the long yam into humans. The intricate details and time required to make the mask, along with the extensive techniques required to grow the yam, further emphasized rituals and representation of manhood and masculinity in indigenous groups along the Sepik River. While participating in important ceremonies was significant for individual men, the masks also served as evidence of networking events and interactions between different communities through competition and trade.

In contrast to the yam rituals, in which the men were in control of representing their masculinity, the *malagan* carvings were designed by specialized artists in the community to commemorate the life and achievements of a deceased person. The carvings on these standing wood figures were executed as part of the funeral celebration months or years after a person's demise (Lincoln 1989, 197). Several motifs were often identified on these carvings such as the bird or flock of birds and fish; however, meanings of a specific carving form could not be determined as it belongs to a larger network and system of other carving forms (Albert 1986, 242). Nevertheless, these animals were believed to act as agents in the transformation of the dead as the funeral ceremonies were supposed to relieve the dead from their physical forms. Additionally, the figures were also called by the names of the deceased and were engaged with actively by the people involved in performing the rituals, turning them into living objects that embodied the deceased (Albert 1986, 244, 248). Therefore, the *malagan* carvings also served as a means to mediate contact with the ancestor.

In addition to their roles in symbolic representation and commemoration of the deceased that accompanied the funeral rituals, *malagan* carvings as artistic forms provided some insights into the social interactions within and between communities. The *malagan* designs were owned by specific clans that could only be obtained through inheritance, purchase, or dream (Lincoln 1989, 222). As representations of the deceased, the carvings interacted with the family and community members during the ceremony. They served to evoke memories and elicit emotions in the viewers, facilitating interactions between generations, with the ancestors and with the spiritual world (Küchler 1988,626). Additionally, observations about

artistic production processes, such as the relationship between the artists and the deceased and the artist and the commissioners or the organizer of the ceremony, could be made through comparing the specific designs made from different events (Lincoln 1989, 219). The carvings had the ability to bring together the largest number of people and enable the formation of relationships between different communities (Lewis 1969, 23).

The major difference between the yam mask and the *malagan* carving is the context in which each object was used. The yam mask was related to specific individuals in the community, while the *malagan* carvings and figures were communal objects. Despite this difference, both objects were employed in elaborate rituals celebrating the lives of the living and the deceased. As such, they were integral to fostering and maintain relationships both within a community and between different communities.

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