



Object Type: Canoe Prow
Indigenous Name: *Haluan perahu*
Location: Western New Guinea
Date: 1890
Materials: Wood and cowrie shell
Dimensions: W. 35 x L. 71 1/2 in.
Institute: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1978.412.705



Object Type: Canoe Figurehead
Indigenous Name: *Nguzu Nguzu*
Location: Solomon Islands, New Georgia
Date: Late 19th Century
Materials: Wood, paint, shell
Dimensions: W. 4 1/2 x L. 5 1/2
Institute: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1976.351

In this module, I compare and contrast two objects associated with canoes and sea-faring culture in order to reflect on regional influence and artistic differences across Melanesia. One is from New Guinea and the other is from the Solomon Islands. Both represent the role that nature and ancestral spirits, both manifested and otherwise, play across islands. Together these two objects complete the forward segment of a canoe. Canoes in Melanesia were decorated far beyond the requirements of technical efficiency and required expert skill and craftsmanship. They were also sacred vehicles that sought to connect people with their ancestors and deceased family members through elaborate rituals and ceremonies. The large sea-faring canoes of Melanesia were used for important enterprises including transportation, fishing, and headhunting as well as special ceremonies. According to Deborah Waite's case study on canoes of the Solomon Islands, canoe building, fishing, and ritual were inextricably mixed (Waite, 44). This intimate proximity to spiritual influences and entities is seen throughout Oceania.

Looking first at the canoe prow from Papua New Guinea, one notices its elaborate carving in the form of a crocodile. According to the Iatmul people of the lower Sepik River, crocodiles are said to represent a spirit that formed the land and they are an important feature of Iatmul art and culture (Kjellgren 2014, 43). Crocodiles are also said to be dangerous and supernaturally powerful creatures throughout the Pacific (Kjellgren 2014, 43). Animals are often seen on canoes across Melanesia because they represent spirits or deities that hold great power and can connect the living to the spiritual world. In clans and villages across Melanesia, people are bound together by totems, which are commonly represented by animals—in this

case, the crocodile. In the Solomon Islands it is believed that each clan descended from their totem; therefore, the totem is treated with great respect and honor (Frazer 1994, 302). The more beautiful and elaborate the canoe prow was, the more status and power it held. The size of this canoe prow indicates that it was probably a part of a larger war canoe that could hold up to twenty-five men (Kjellgren 2014). Spirits were also said to travel by canoe to fetch the souls of the recently deceased (Waite, 60). Canoes of western New Guinea were carved out of a single, massive log that was hallowed out and represented a central focus of artistic expression for regional artists (Kjellgren 2007, 41). While these canoes are no longer used in warfare and spiritual ceremonies, they continue to be crafted and used for trade and general transportation (Kjellgren 2014, 43).

Carved prow ornaments and figureheads, such as the one seen above, completed the decorative assemblage of a canoe. They were lashed to the prows right above the waterline, suspended over the water as the canoes crashed through the waves (Waite, 51). These figureheads were said to keep off water fiends, like the dangerous sea spirit *kesoko*, who could cause the winds and waves to capsize the canoe (Kjellgren, 100). They were meant to protect the canoe's occupants and act malevolently towards an enemy. The use of the head as a symbol was most likely connected to the belief that the head contained the life-power of a human (Tickle and Sekules 1995, 84). Typical figureheads of the Solomon Islands are characterized by their protruding mouths, artificially elongated earlobes, and seated stance (Caglayan 2000). Often, the anthropomorphic figurehead also held other miniature heads as an allusion to their role in headhunting. To the people of the Solomon Islands, headhunting was considered a necessary part of their lives that ensured the health and well-being of the community. The accumulation of skulls also displayed status, as headhunting was a highly visible and ritualized event (Florek 2015). Black paint was used to cover the figurehead, which is embellished with low-relief carvings and inlaid with pearl shell. There appears to be file marks across the top, rounded shape of the head. Marks on the arms suggest either gouging by cutting tools, or damage during use. Prior to colonization, the tools used to make these figureheads were natural implements taken from the earth. The wood was carved from timber adzes and smoothed out with sharkskin (Tickle and Sekules 1995, 95). The making and fitting of the figurehead saw the completion of the canoe (Somerville 1897).

Today, canoes continue to be essential to daily life amongst the people of Melanisia and the construction and installation of canoe artifacts are still accompanied by appropriate rituals (Waite 2000, 116). While canoes of the stature seen above are no longer produced, the symbol of the *nguzu nguzu* has sustained throughout history. Following the 1970s, a

search for national unity for the Solomon Islands was accompanied by assertions of regional identity. The *nguzu nguzu* image became a symbol of the Western Solomon Islands (Tickle and Sekules 1995, 96). The continued construction of canoes and the use of the figureheads display the lasting importance symbolic cultural artifacts play within the cultures of Melanesia.

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