



Object: Ceremonial Board (Gerua Wenena)
Culture/Location: Papua New Guinea, Siane People
Date: 1955
Materials: Wood and pigment
Dimensions: 58 x 23 x 3 in.
Institution and Accession Number: The Los Angeles
County Museum of Art
M.2008.66.17



Object: Yipwon Spirit Figure
Culture/Location: Papua New Guinea, Korewori River area
Date: Mid 1800s
Materials: Cowrie shells and pigment on wood
Dimensions: No dimensions given
Institution and Accession Number: Denver Art Museum
2001.157

This summary compares and contrasts two prominent objects from Melanesia: A Gerua Wenena (Ceremonial Board) and a Yipwon Spirit Figure. I chose these objects as I was attracted to the abstract simplicity of them and was curious about how they represent forms that differs from the majority of Melanesian art. While both figures are from Papua New Guinea, there is a distance of 260 miles of separating the East Sepik Province and the Eastern Highlands Province. These two objects show both similarities and many differences. Both of these objects should be noted as distinct from traditional Melanesian aesthetic themes as they are not particularly theatrical, flamboyant or expressive, and they do not make use of multiple materials. Rather, both objects utilize geometric forms and clean lines in their visual representation.

The Ceremonial Board is a carved wooden board that has been painted. A majority of these boards found in museum collections follow similar color schemes and similar paint designs. Though this is the case, the specifics of the colors and patterns differ from one clan to another, as a particular geometric design is the exclusive rights of a particular tribe (Kjellgren 49,

2014). The shape is said to refer to the Highland Creation Myth where the circular head represents the sun (*fo numunc* or “house of the sun”), the diamond shaped body (*afanila* or “hand of the moon”) and the bent limbs (*oma* or “the way”) as the bridge between the two (Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco). These boards are used in pig ceremonies where the chief of the tribe or “Big man” wears it on top of his head, with the legs of the Gerua straddling his head. It is important to note that, “While the overall human image ... is said to portray a supernatural being, the geometric designs that adorn it symbolize clan ancestors (Kjellgren 49, 2014).” In this, the boards capture the spirit of the pig that leaves the pig’s body after it is sacrificed in order to return it to the spirit world to ensure the continued fertility of a clan’s pigs (Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco). While these Ceremonial Boards are used during large festivals and are thus viewed by everyone, the Yipwon Spirit Figure is kept in the Men’s House.

These Yipwon Spirit Figures are characterized by their hook-like forms surrounding the central element, which can either refer to the heart, or in some larger figures, both the heart and the penis. These figures represent strong spirits who have angered the Sun through killing one of his male ancestors. In response, the Sun forces the yipwon to stay on Earth to be the patron spirits of warfare and hunting (Kjellgren 58, 2007). It is important to realize that these figures are passed down through generations. They are not like many other Melanesian art forms that are meant to be impermanent. As this is the case, these figures were not always imbued with the Yipwon spirits, but rather were activated through ritual. In order to bring forth the spirit, the man most closely related to the figure would need to make a liquid. This liquid incorporated betel nut, ginger, the individual’s blood, and substances from the intended target of the hunt. In applying this mixture, the figure becomes imbued with the spirit that will aid them on their hunt or battle (Kjellgren 58, 2007). The duality of the spirit, as it is sometimes in the piece and other times not, could potentially be the reason for both the naturalistic and abstract aspects of the form. While the anatomically correct head and foot are representative of the external aspects of the spirits, the abstract concentric crescents refer to the internal aspects of the spirit (The Metropolitan Museum of Art).

While both of these objects are meant to be vessels for spirits in the material world, the Gerua is meant to be impermanent for the use of the clan during the ceremony, while the Yipwon Spirit Figure was meant to last. Both pieces represent figures in an abstract way. When comparing the aesthetics of the two pieces, it might be important to note the difference between the Gerua being flat and wide while the Yipwon is more three-dimensional yet narrow. Because the Gerua is used in larger festivals while the Yipwon is a more private figure used within the

Men's House, this could perhaps show the different functions of the two. While the Gerua would be a sign to show the might of a particular clan or village, through its use in ceremonies when many clans are present, the shape of the Yipwon figure is perhaps as such due to its use in the ritual for a good hunt as the sharp shape of the crescents have the ability to kill the animal being sacrificed.

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