



Object type: Standing figure
Indigenous name: Totok
Culture/Location: Malangan, New Ireland
Date: 19th to 20th century
Materials: Wood, pigments, snail valves
Dimensions: H 44 in.
Institution and accession number: Museum Of Fine Arts Boston, 1994.426



Object type: Malangan figure
Indigenous name: N/A
Culture/Location: Malangan, New Ireland
Date: 20th century
Materials: Wood, paint, fiber, shells
Dimensions: N/A
Institution and accession number: Denver Art Museum, 2001.177

Unfortunately, due to imperfectly or poorly documented data from the collections of many indigenous art objects, Melanesian art pieces are often considered and evaluated against general backgrounds and stereotypes (Lewis 1969, 9). In this summary I consider two artworks from New Ireland. More specifically, two figures that hail from an important ceremonial celebration and exchange within New Ireland communities, called *malangan*. The term *malangan* represents the name of the ceremonies and the dances and figures created within them (Küchler 1987, 238). This summary analyzes the structure, painting and overarching connections of characteristics in Melanesian art in both the *totok* (standing figure) as well as the more contemporary unnamed *malangan* figure in order to highlight the similarities and differences of each piece.

New Ireland art is sculptural and very rich in form, featuring extravagant wood carving, painting and many added materials such as shells, sponges, twigs, and feathers (Lewis 1969, 11). This ideal proves true to the Melanesian characteristic of including diverse materials, and is extremely apparent in both pieces. Both the unnamed figure and the *totok* include detailed woodcarving, thorough painting and added shells (Museum of Fine Art Boston 2016; Denver Art Museum, 2016). While these objects share some formal similarities, they also differ, showing connection to the Melanesian characteristic of specialized production. For instance, the *totok* appears to depict a standing human figure, whereas the unnamed figure includes two human-like

figures as well as a totem figure representing a fish or whale (Denver Museum of Art, 2016). However, the differences and similarities do not end with the formal articulation and choice of materials.

Communities in New Ireland utilize painted motifs on figures within funerary ceremonies to represent the individual being celebrated, which also implies the Melanesian characteristic of a strong connection to the spiritual world (Hendrix 2003, 410-11). We see that the two pieces employ similar color, yet the specifically chosen motifs underline their individuality. The chosen motifs engraved on the figures are likened to a particular biography and story to tell (Melion & Küchler 1991, 29). While I am not able to summarize the intended meaning of the objects' motifs, I can point out that they both show diversity and detail. Moreover, I must mention that the unnamed figure was collected more recently, perhaps indicating a change from the older motifs seen in the *totok*. It is also possible that the more recent object incorporates contemporary designs. The formal and temporal diversity of the two pieces invites speculation and evokes dynamism, reminding us that cultural forms change with time (Johnson & Walpole 1990, 31). The motifs utilized in these pieces not only represent specific individuals, they also refer to transitions within their life and thus embody a strong sense of spirituality.

Following a *malangan* ceremony, the figures are destroyed by burning them or leaving them to rot to prevent others from utilizing the spiritual powers in malevolent sorcery (D' Alleva 1998, 74). This idea emphasizes a reoccurring theme in Melanesian art: objects are not meant to last, and therefore the only way to recreate them is through memory (Küchler 1988, 634). The ephemeral nature of these objects was one of the main reasons I was drawn to them as it strongly contrasts with the way I traditionally perceived art objects as objects that are meant to defy time constraints. With focuses on the use of diverse materials, specialized motifs, and spiritual connections, the two pieces are strongly connected to the general characteristics in Melanesian art yet also show originality. By comparing and contrasting the structures, painting styles, and overarching themes engaged by each piece, I learned a great deal about *malangan* ceremonies and objects. It is through their creation and destruction, structure and painting, that they accentuate the complexity, spirituality, and beauty that is *malangan* art.

Bibliography

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