



Object type: Pigment Dish
Culture/location: Papua New Guinea, East Sepik Province, Iatmul
Date: 1950 province
Materials: Wood, fiber, and pigment
Dimensions: 11.5 x 5.5 x 1.5 in.
Institution and accession number: LACMA, M.2008.66.10



Object type: Pigment Bowl
Culture/location: Papua New Guinea, Admiralty Islands, Manus
Date: Late 19th-20th century
Materials: Wood
Dimensions: 7.5 x 15 x 10 in.
Institution and accession number: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1979.206.1426

Bowls in Melanesian culture are used for much more than just holding objects or food and drink. They were significant cultural objects that were at times, both symbolic and functional. In the Admiralty Islands, bowls could be used to hold the skulls of ancestral spirits, a spiritual ship, express their relationship with the environment, and were often used for trade (D'Alleva 1998, 85). These two bowls, one from the Admiralty Islands and one from the East Sepik Province in Papua New Guinea, have similar characteristics in that they both have decorative features that do not add to the function of the bowl. The pigment dish from the Iatmul people displays the tradition of their decorative arts by depicting a detailed human holding the dish (Met Museum). The human body is highly valued in Sepik culture and art so its importance is put onto one of the essential ceremonial practices. The bowl from the Manus Province was used for food rather than pigment. These dishes were used in feasts and celebratory practices, not just everyday life and this is why they have the added decorations and features (Hunt 1984, 81). The functionality of the objects differs although they both depict something more than just a dish to be used as a container or serving vessel.

Both pieces of art are made of wood, but the pigment dish has fiber and pigment within it which is not present in the bowl from the Admiralty Islands. This is because it was meant to hold pigment, which allows the dish to be more delicate and intricate because it does not have to endure someone eating out of it. The carved wood on both the front and the back of the pigment dish shows how it is a ceremonial dish, so while it is functional, functionality is not its priority. The

design that signifies the importance of the human body and the patterns that the latmul people paint on themselves during celebration are noteworthy parts of the piece (Kaufmann 2009, 7). The bowl has a simple bird design with carvings along the rim, but not as elaborate as the Pigment Dish. The materials used to make both of these dishes are from the trees of Papua New Guinea and although trading was common in Melanesia, and especially within Papua New Guinea, it is most likely that these pieces were created within each respective village (Case 2005, 356). The Bowl appears more handled and used than the Pigment Dish. This is because it was most likely used more frequently and it is older than the Pigment Dish.

Both pieces of art demonstrate the importance of objects associated with ceremonies within Papua New Guinea culture. Pigment is used for painting other artworks, or people, which was a common practice along the Sepik River (Cannibal Tours). The Pigment Dish depicts a man with spirals carved along the back, a style that is prevalent among the designs for body paint. The human body is glorified in this culture, representing that in their artworks through the fine details of the human (Wardell 1971, 2). The Bowl from the Manus Province shows the emphasis that is put on food and the importance of ceremonial meals to connect with ancestors and the community members. In their culture, every man has a patron spirit, in which this bowl represents (Ohnemus 1998, 205). This is an ancestor whose totem is a bird, which is the basis for the bowl's design.

I chose these objects because I was intrigued by the decorations that are present on both the Pigment Dish and Bowl. Seeing the bird designed around the bowl, I was curious why is it significant and why do they chose the animals they did. Following the bird, I wanted to look at something similar, an object that has a purpose but also a design that is important for the object. I wanted to look at something that was not art for the sake of being art, but something that was functional and useful at the same time.

Bibliography

Bowl. Late 19th-early 20th Century. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York. Web. <http://metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/313615>

Cannibal Tours. A Film by Dennis O'Rourke Production in Association with the Institute of Papua New Guinea Studies, 1988.

D'Alleva, Anne. "Island Melanesia: The Path of Peace." *Arts of the Pacific Islands*. New York: H.N. Abrams, 1998. N. pag. Print.

Hunt, Marilyn. *Ritual Art of the Sepik River: The Solomon Collection*. Ohio: Trisolini Gallery of Ohio U, 1984. Print.

Iatmul People. *Pigment Dish*. 1950. LACMA, Los Angeles. LACMA Collections. Web. <http://collections.lacma.org/node/215581>

Kaufmann, Christian. "Painting's Changing Role in Shaping Our Understanding of Sepik Art (part I)". *Pacific Arts* 8 (2009): 6–16. Web.

Ohnemus, Sylvia. *An Ethnology of the Admiralty Islanders: The Alfred Bühler Collection, Museum Der Kulturen, Basel*. Honolulu: U of Hawaii, 1998. Print.

Pigment Bowl. 19th Century. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, New York. Web.

Ryan J. Case, Guido F. Pauli, and D. Doel Soejarto. "Factors in Maintaining Indigenous Knowledge Among Ethnic Communities of Manus Island". *Economic Botany* 59.4 (2005): 356– 365. Web.

Wardwell, Allen. *The Art of the Sepik River*. Chicago: Art Institute of Chicago, 1971. Print.