



Object type: Mask (Murua)
Indigenous name: n/a
Culture/Location: New Ireland
Date: 1890
Materials: Wood, Sea sponge, snail opercula and pigment
Dimensions: 37x18 1/2x 10in.
Institution and accession number: Indiana LACMA, M.2008.66.3.



Object type: Mask (tatanua)
Indigenous name: n/a
Culture/Location: New Ireland
Date: 19th Century
Materials: Wood, pith and shell
Dimensions: 19 1/2 in (49.5cm)
Institution and accession number: LACMA, M.71.73.149

In this module I will be focusing on the importance of symbolism within New Ireland, primarily with malangan and the objects used in the ceremony. In this module, I use an artistic lens, placing emphasis on the materials used to create the objects above and how these materials help construct the elaborateness of the objects, which helps illuminate their importance. As an artist myself, I know these objects would be labeled under sculptures and/or mixed media art. The reason for this is because the materials incorporated such as the wood, sea sponge and snail opercula are not something that we in the western world would think of incorporating, let alone for a functional use. In an article review by Charles Bordogna on *African and Oceanic Art from the Wingert Collection* by Rosalind Jeffries, he quotes the author's description of a Nalu banda mask "with its convoluted and complex lines as 'an ingeniously syncretized ensemble' distinguished by 'layers of pattern upon pattern...syncopated over great cubistic forms.'" (Bordogna. 87). The way the western world has come to understand and describe these mask is through the use of artistic vocabulary worlds. The description of cubism

isn't something that I would hold onto when describing these masks because the indigenous people may not necessarily have knowledge of cubism as an art form or possibly our definition of it. For clarification, I am not undermining the intelligence of the indigenous people of New Ireland, but attempting to understand their practices.

The first mask, the *Murua*, falls into the description of having "convoluted and complex lines" because of its design. At the sides of the masks are column-like structures that contain "tree-like" features which symbolize the connection that the indigenous people have to nature. In some parts of Oceania, fishing became an important symbol, which can be noted in the artworks that were created. The carving technique is recognized by being the work of a "master woodcarver" because of how complicated and elaborate the carving is (Gerbrands. 77-78). The materials used such as the sea sponge and snail opercula are examples of the artists' decision of using what lies within their surroundings to their advantage. The mask itself contains a human-like figure at the top portion. The person wearing the mask would hide behind the face of this figure. The genealogy connection would have fallen onto the idea that the masks would be used in a performance honoring the dead, which explains the figure seen. One can assume that the more elaborate the materials are, the more it would honor the spirits (Wardwell).

In the Bordogna article, the author explains that the use of white as either a pigment or material could reference "the whiteness of spiritual insight..." In Melanesia, cultures and tribes surround themselves working towards ceremonial events that focus on the dead known as Malangan. In these ceremonies known as the malangan, spirits are honored by the performances that are conducted with the use of the masks and with hope that the dead who are honored will embody the sculptures made for the ceremony. These sculptures are then "symbolically killed in the exchanges, and are destroyed" (Kuchler 627).

The second object *tatanua* is another example of a mask used within the ceremonies. The large face of the masks is a result of the wood that was carved and then inlaid with the

fabric that is seen on top. Pigmentation becomes important and a traditional aspect of the ritual which takes place in creating the masks. According to McKesson in his article, "*In search of the origins of the New Caledonian mask*," the pigment used represented and honored the spirits or those who the ceremony is for (McKesson 87-88). At first, I had assumed that the color of pigmentation came from the sap of a tree, or a specific leaf, similar to some scale insects creating a specific dye when they are crushed. But this knowledge I have gained on spirituality and symbolism gives an entirely new perspective. The ceremony itself honors and celebrates much of the culture, society and surrounding tribes in New Ireland but their emphasis in spirituality is a major point of interest.

An important component to the malangan ceremonies is the decomposing of the objects used within the ceremonies (Eves 251). The objects, once serving their purpose, would be left to be consumed by the earth in a way of releasing the spirit that was infused within them. This would then be a symbolism of the dead ancestors' release into the next stage of their life, the spirit realm. This is similar to installation art, which serves its purpose for a specific scenery, place and time and then never recreated or remade the same. Installation becomes a realm that us, artists, are compelled to stay away from because of the thought of "destroying an artwork" that we have put so much time and effort into creating. To the people of New Ireland, the purpose of spirituality becomes a step that could help them ease the pain of destroying the art. My assumption would be that destroying or the decomposing of the objects is a way for those who've lost relatives to not look back. To not spend their entire days mourning the dead, which is the complete opposite of what artists in the western world would do. For example, take Félix Torres, who created an installation piece as a way of honoring his late lover.

Comparing the malangan tradition to what we in the western world have is a bit of a stretch but I felt that it was necessary to understand how important the tradition is. The tribes of New Ireland are very spiritual, as creating a connection to the spiritual world is an important

aspect of their lives. Art becomes more than just something that has a functional use or is aesthetically pleasing. The art takes form by becoming a symbol of those who the ceremony is for or the spirits that they are meant to honor. Every aspect of the object from the materials used to the pigmentation are symbols that play a role in the ritual. The act of leaving the object to decompose or physically destroying it becomes a performance act in itself that concludes the malangan ceremony. It is a step of looking forward rather than dwelling in the past, which is what art in western world does. We idolize and put artworks from artist to higher standards but at what point do we let that go? Would we want to?

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