



Object type: Figure
Indigenous name: *Uli*
Culture/location: Central New Ireland, Mandak-Barak region
Date: mid-19th–early 20th century
Materials: Wood, paint, fiber, shell
Dimensions: H. 52 x W. 16 x D. 13 ¾ in. (132.1 x 40.6 x 34.9 cm)
Institution and accession number: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1979.455



Object type: Funerary Carving
Indigenous name: *Malangan*
Culture/location: Northern New Ireland
Date: late 19th–early 20th century
Materials: Wood, paint, fiber
Dimensions: H. 108 in. (274.3 cm)
Institution and accession number: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1978.412.712

The ethnic groups in the region of Melanesia had a very different perspective of the cycle of life compared to the perspective held within most western societies. Viewing this perspective on the life cycle through a Western lens was what drew my attention to the ways that death was handled in Melanesian society. Life went beyond the boundaries of the physical world, and as one's life in the physical world began to come to a close, preparations were made for the transformation into the spirit world. Part of those preparations included the carving of many funerary sculptures that would be used for a host of ceremonies. These elaborate and expressive carvings allowed the spirit of the deceased to manifest in a physical form (D'Alleva 1998, 77).

Uli and *malangan* figures were two types of carvings found in parts of the New Ireland Province of Papua New Guinea, the difference being that *malangan* carvings were found in the North and *uli* carvings were found in central New Ireland. The meaning and ceremonies associated with these figures were similar because they were both from the same island. Most

of the difference arose from the actual physical form of the carvings and what was done with them after their use.

The *uli* was a memorial figure that would have been brought out during the conclusion of funerary celebrations that happened the year that followed the death of one or many important men, usually chiefs (Wardell 1994, 114). The ceremonies that displayed *ulis* brought people together from neighboring villages for the purpose of dancing and feasting, which plays into the theme of art being made for social interaction on the Melanesian islands. The sculptures were carved in a hermaphroditic form, meaning that it featured both male and female characteristics. The male characteristics included a carved phallus, a crested helmet that probably represents the headpiece that men would wear during times of mourning, and sometimes a beard made of real human hair. The female characteristic of the *uli* involves the inclusion of breasts, which are assumed to be female, but could just be large male breasts which were admired on the island (Pelrine 1996, 115). These characteristics are all represented in the *uli* figure held in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The hermaphroditic nature of these objects could also be a nod to the beliefs of the people regarding the moon, which was sometimes identified as a man and other times identified as a women (Spiegel 1973, 195). Considering the emphasis on human organs associated with reproduction could lead one to assume that fertility was an important theme to include in the *uli* figures. The inclusion of fertility in a funerary object and ceremony also displays how the life cycle was understood to be fluid in the region. From personal experience I have never seen a celebration of reproduction in a funeral ceremony.

These figures were very large and were one of the few objects produced in Melanesia that were made to last. After their use, the *uli* would be placed in specially-built round huts to be used again in the future after being repainted (Wardell 1994, 121). This can be used to set the *uli* apart from the *malanggan* because the *malanggan* was for the most part not used multiple times. The *uli* figure found in the Metropolitan Museum of Art was 52 inches in height. There is also one found in the Brooklyn Museum of Art which is 59 inches which is comparable to the size of an adult bicycle, so these by no means were objects meant to be carried around for personal use.

Malanggan figures were similar to the *uli* in the sense that they both were used for funerary ceremonies. Although these practices aren't as popular now, *malanggan* is still being carved today, while the *uli* is not. In fact, because there is so little known about the direct use of *uli*, we don't have the opportunity to fully understand a great deal of its uses like we do with the *malanggan* figures. Though *malanggan* was made for social interaction, the family-specific

forms were not to be reproduced by other families. There was an understanding of copyright in the community. A family could sell their copyright, forfeiting their right to produce the form and allowing another family to produce it (Geismer 2009, 49). Individual men would also compete to obtain the greatest amount of rights to produce *malanggan*, as the more rights you had, the higher your status and prestige were (Kjellgren 2007, 151).

Malanggan were more elaborate in the sense that the sculptures incorporated more of the physical form. In all of the *uli* that I examined there were only human forms present. *Malanggan* on the other hand features other animals such as specific species of birds and fish that were important in cultural tales and myths. The *malanggan* found in the Metropolitan Museum of Art features a human figure emerging from the mouth of a fish, which is said to possibly be an indication of death at sea, but animals could have been featured for the sake of the inclusion of one's totem, or spiritual emblem (Kjellgren 2007, 161). One theme that is central to the use of *malanggan* is its destruction at the end of its use (Geismer 2009, 50-51). This connects to the fact that most of the art produced in Melanesia was not made to last and places more of an importance on the mental image that the *malanggan* creates, rather than the actual physical form.

These two figures were once very important in New Ireland culture. It is important to observe these objects and realize that their importance goes beyond their creation and original use. Mapping the life of those who passed on a carving would have been part of the last mourning ceremony and would have triggered the emotions of those finally able to see the finished product. And now so many of these objects are on display where they mainly go through the Western lens and can therefore be misinterpreted. Though I have no personal experience with these objects, it was important for me to respect them and be careful not to insert any sort of bias. With that being said, examining these objects and the cultural practices that go along with them was eye-opening and made me question funerary practice in my own society.

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