



Object Type: Feast Bowl
Culture/location: Papua New Guinea, Admiralty Islands, Lou Island
Date: circa 1800
Materials: wood, parinarium nut paste, traces of pigment
Dimensions: H. 25 x W. 45 x D. 45 in.
Institution and accession number: M.2008.66.26



Object type: Mask
Indigenous name: murua
Culture/location: Papua New Guinea, New Ireland
Date: circa 1890
Materials: wood, sea sponge, snail opercula, pigment
Dimensions: H. 37 x W. 18 1/2 x D. 10 in.
Institution and accession number: M.2008.66.39

Most Melanesian art informed the relationship between the community and spirits and ancestors. Held with high importance was the chain of ancestors and lineages as a continuous force in society. Funerary traditions and rituals were held to celebrate the deceased and to honor them as to earn or accumulated protection, wisdom, and power. Artworks commissioned for these rituals helped to inform the power and presence of ancestral spirits within society. Mortuary rituals focused on the skull of the deceased because it was deemed to be the most powerful part of the body, the seat of the soul holding spiritual power (D'Alleva 1998). Melanesian art, in contrast to Polynesian art, was not made to last, thus an important theme of impermanence is emphasized.

On the Admiralty Islands, skulls of deceased male patrilineal relatives are kept in wooden bowls often decorated with spiraling handles, like the feast bowl shown above, and are hung up inside the entrance of the house to protect the family (D'Alleva 1998). When the male head of the household dies, the previous skull is discarded and the skull of the newly deceased takes its place protecting the house and those who dwell within it (D'Alleva 1998). Upon European contact, missionaries discouraged the use of such objects and practice of worship resulting in the bowls being discarded or destroyed. As I have previously mentioned,

impermanent art objects aid social relationships of the community with the spiritual world through their representation of memories and practice throughout Melanesia. The preservation of culture and tradition in this sense is the continuous process of production, display, and transaction through memory rather than durable objects (Kuchler 1987).

Another impermanent art object prevalent in Melanesia was the malangan mask and sculpture. Malangan celebrations of northern New Ireland often include feasts, performances, and exchange of ornaments to honor the dead. Commissioned malangan figures and masks are typically mounted on the façade of a ceremonial house, the power of which comes from the gaze and aesthetic of the work. (Kuchler 1987; Edgerly 1982). These masks were also used in initiation rituals highlighting a balance between life and death and the continuum that exists within the culture; new adults are initiated as the deceased are celebrated through mortuary rituals (D'Alleva 1998). Every piece is produced by a skilled carver usually incorporating images of fish, birds, and flowers, and symbolically painted with red, black, white, blue and yellow pigments to retell the events of the deceased (Edgerly 1982). Each sculpture is complex and encompasses meaning and reference to clan history, ancestry, and spirits. After the display the malangan sculptures are either burned or allowed to rot to prevent others from using their spiritual power (Kuchler 1987). Each sculpture is unique because they are destroyed after the ritual. The culture and tradition is thus upheld through memory and conscious action as each sculpture is made over and over again; malangan sculptures are re-embodiment's of memorized imagery, the production process based on retention and recall (Kuchler 1987).

It is not the skull or the sculpture that is valued in my opinion but instead the memory. Memory is what keeps the tradition, development, and relationships strong. To remember the ancestral spirits is to keep them a part of everyday life and to hold different rituals and celebrations with feasts and commissioned artworks is a way of maintaining a social relationship with the spirit world. The impermanence of these objects informs the importance of memory and process. This construct of impermanence is also present in gift-giving and exchange. When trading, the objects may not last, but the implication of the trade, the relationship that is inquired does last (Gorlich 1998; D'Alleva 1998). I believe that Western contact emphasized and potentially even created the distinction between social meaning and material value. The impermanence of objects and artworks contrast the permanence of social relationships, consequently strengthening them and their meaning and value. I chose to focus on these objects because their importance to me relied on their inevitable destruction; the meaning being established through the memory of process, production, and re-production.

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