



Object type: Canoe Prow
Indigenous name: N/A
Culture/ location: Oceanic, Papua New Guinea, Northern New Ireland
Date: 19th – 20th century
Materials: Wood and pigment
Dimensions: 21 1/2 x 5 x 9 in.
Institution and accession number: Museum of Fine Arts Boston: Arts of Asia, Oceania, and Africa Gallery (Gallery 177) 1991.1073



Object type: Canoe Prow Ornament
Indigenous name: Musumusulu or Nguzunguzu
Culture/ location: New Georgia group, Solomon Islands
Date: 19th century
Materials: Wood, pearl shell, and pigment
Dimensions: N/A
Institution and accession number: Indiana University Art Museum, 96.8

Both objects were made for the same purpose: to protect a canoe's crew from any harm while traveling at sea. Each canoe prow ornament would sit in a carved location at the front of the canoe. According to Deborah Waite, when the piece was placed into the slot, it would capture the spirits of the ocean, and ensure the men a safe journey (Waite 2000, 119). Although both objects are from Melanesia, they exemplify two very different styles of art. I chose these objects because I felt they were two of the best representations of the indigenous people on the respective islands. Each piece shows the unique characteristics of the culture in which it was created while demonstrating great detail and artistry.

The first object from Northern New Ireland, part of Papua New Guinea, represents a very simple, but complex style of artwork. The design of the ornament is simple, with natural shapes and tendencies, but complex because the artist overlays the human head with birds and feathers. Also, the artist uses simple geometric shapes to create the intricate designs featured in the prow. In a journal article written by Douglas Newton, he states, "The art styles of all these river groups show a basic reliance on a small range of forms; two dimensional surfaces are covered with a limited number of standardized abstract designs in bilaterally or biaxially

symmetrical compositions” (Newton 1973, 41).” According to the author, the artist of the canoe prow would create a painting of the prow and then proceed to create the prow based on the painting. The Museum of Fine Arts Boston website states, “Careful study of this canoe ornament—which would have decorated either prow or stern -- reveals a human face in the center surrounded by birds, feathers and animal – like heads relating to ancestral myths associated with the canoe’s owner (MFA 1992, 2).” The symmetry of the prow design adds more emphasis on the detail and time allocated to creating such a piece. Lastly, author C. G. Seligman wrote, “Birds are the most important of the linked totems of the [local tribe] (Seligman 1917, 41).” Birds depicted on the ornament are directly linked to the owner of the canoe’s totem, which carries generations of significance to each individual. Melanesian art has a large focus on man’s connection with the spirit world, and the theatrical and flamboyant carvings in this piece show how devoted the artist was to pleasing the spirit.

The second object, from the New Georgia group, Solomon Islands, represents the same general principle of the first object, but in a different manner. With extenuated facial features, anatomical joints, and inlaid with other materials, this object appears to have been made by artists in another Melanesian culture. A journal article written by Paul S. Wingert, discusses the spiritual and physical importance of each feature on the ornament. He wrote, “...distorted lower and upper jaws, nose, mouth, and teeth, have an animalistic appearance, an examination of a number of these carvings show that they are merely exaggerations of the prognathism, fleshy noses, and full-lipped mouths of the Solomon Islanders (Wingert 1952, 149).” Artists of the Solomon Islands depicted themselves on canoe prows as a way of showing personal gratitude to the spirits for keeping them safe. In a journal article written by Deborah Waite, she discusses different spirits associated with various objects around the Solomon Islands. She wrote, “...figures apparently referenced a protective spirit of the sea...this was the spirit Kesoko (Waite 2000, 119).” Kesoko was very important to the people of the Solomon Islands because most of the trade, fishing, or warfare that occurred was done on the water. Having a spirit to protect the island’s inhabitants was just as important as the food or traded goods they brought back. The artists of the Solomon Islands were known for creating pieces with great detail and precision. Wingert wrote, “In [the ornament] and many other objects from these Islands a very careful shell inlay is used on the black surfaces to define further structural parts and details (Wingert 1952, 149).” He goes on to say the shells inlaid in the wood also created a pattern, and were precision cut into intricate patterns. Shells were held in place with nut glue derived from local trees.

Both canoe prow ornaments shown above are representative of the indigenous culture in which they were created. The first object represents how animals and the human form can be

intertwined in a beautiful demonstration of man versus nature, while still showing the level of detail the artist put into the piece. With ornate pearl shells, and special attention to proportions of different aspects of the figure, an artist from the Solomon Islands did a magnificent job at capturing his unique culture, while pleasing the spirits at the same time. In essence, the objects are functional and beautiful at the same time, while providing the viewer with an in depth look at each culture. Melanesia's inhabitants had a special relationship with the water/sea because they spent so much time around it and interacting with it. These people were extremely sea faring and in order to properly respect the spirits, they created objects like the canoe ornaments above.

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