



Object type: Mask
Indigenous name: Mei
Culture/location: Ramu, Papua New Guinea
Date: 20th century
Materials: Wood with fiber tufts and basketry perimeter
Dimensions: H. 13 1/2 x W. 3 1/2 in.
Institution and accession number: The Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University, 1996.36



Object type: Mask
Indigenous name: N/A
Culture/location: Iatmul, Papua New Guinea
Date: 20th century
Materials: Wood, pigment, cowrie shells
Dimensions: H. 17 1/2 x W. 3 1/2 in.
Institution and accession number: The Cantor Arts Center at Stanford University, 1992.72

Masquerade is a common theme across Melanesia; masks are often theatrical, flamboyant, and expressive (Kaeppler 1963, 119). These two masks, both from Papua New Guinea, are similar in that they are dramatic, have totemic references, and can be linked to the influence of trade practices. These masks were most likely used in ceremonies that celebrate either genealogy or a men's secret society (Kaeppler 1963, 124).

In order to better understand the Iatmul mask, it is important to understand the culture that created it. The Iatmul people live along the middle of the Sepik River in Papua New Guinea in large communities (Silverman 2003). Within the community, the men who descended from the community founder hold the political power (Silverman 2003). However, women do have a role in society as mothers, caretakers, and peacekeepers (Silverman 2003). Social relations constitute a huge part of daily life; the community is closely knit because of familial ties and friendships (Silverman 2003). However, there is an underlying competitiveness between families and men's secret societies (Silverman 2003).

The second mask was created by an artist from Ramu. The Ramu people live near the Ramu River in Papua New Guinea; this river runs from Eastern Papua New Guinea to the ocean, where it ends twelve miles from the Sepik River (Stanhope 1968, 137). I could not find any other information on the Ramu people; even the tiny bit of information I found is dated. I am wondering why this is the case. To me, this raises questions about why this culture is not studied or represented as much as other cultures such as the Iatmul. I have found sources that pertain to the geography of the land, but there is almost nothing about the people and their art, which is disheartening to me because I would love to know more.

Although not much is published about the Ramu people, their art ties into the broad themes of Melanesia because people travelled along the Sepik River system and its tributaries. The Ramu people had contact with other people and shared their ideas and goods in a sophisticated, politically-motivated way (Gell in Görlich 1998, 295). For example, it was common for Melanesians to give their art as gifts; however, a favor was expected in return (Carrier 1992, 190).

It is not my intent to make or perpetuate generalizations, but in some Melanesian cultures, men from within the same family or societal group identify themselves based upon their totem (Silverman 1996, 33-34). A totem is an animal reference to a group's ancestry and myths (Lang and Burn 1902, 347). Each family or group of men had a totem that only they had the rights to create in artwork (Silverman 1996, 34).

Both masks seem to have totemic references and were probably used with other masks and objects during a community-based social ceremony (Kaepler 1963, 133). It can't be said definitively whether the totems in these two masks represent the totem of the man's family or the totem of his secret society. Secret societies were comprised of a group of strictly men (Dinerman 1981, 811). Each region had several secret societies in constant rivalry (Dinerman 1981, 811). Not all men belonged to a secret society, men had to be recruited and then move up the age grade (Dinerman 1981, 811). In the practice of secret societies, status was earned not inherited (Dinerman 1981, 811). Because of this, a man's place in society was not static; he had to complete tasks in order to increase his social rank (Dinerman 1981, 812). Being initiated into a secret society was a respectable honor, certainly worthy of celebration (Dinerman 1981, 812).

In my interpretation, the mouth of the first mask looks similar to a bird beak; this characteristic seems to be common in Sepik masks (Forge 1965, 23). I was unable to find published material about the potential meaning of the beak represented in Melanesian masks; however, the beak appears elaborately and elegantly carved and painted in order to make it

prominent. On the second mask, I see a totem, perhaps it is a crocodile, represented under the chin. There are several Iatmul myths and practices centered on the crocodile (Dinerman 1981, 815). For example, men that had been initiated into secret societies were seen as “crocodiles” because they upheld order in their community (Dinerman 1981, 815). This references back to the myth that the islands on the Sepik River remain above water because they are on the backs of crocodiles (Dinerman 1981, 815).

I chose these two masks because their beauty captured my attention. I love their forms as well as the detail and skill with which they were crafted. Once I read about the cultures, I was even more intrigued by the masks and wanted to share what little information I have found. I believe that we should collaborate more with the people whose ancestors created these masks in order to learn more about the Iatmul and Ramu people. These cultures are adaptive, not primitive; they have a presence today and I do not think it should go unnoticed or be overlooked (Errington 1994, 201-202).

Bibliography

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