

Label Copy for Time and Tide: The changing Art of the Asmat

***Bipane* (Nose ornament), before 1983**

Shell, string, beeswax

AMAA@UST 0683

The *bipane* is the signature body ornament of the Asmat. Worn primarily by men, it relates symbolically to success in the hunt. Its distinctive curves, painstakingly carved of shell, represent the tusks of a boar or the tail of a cuscus (a small, furry marsupial). The halves are sealed together with beeswax, sometimes over string or copper wire. *Bipane* are worn through a piercing in the nasal septum and hang down around the mouth, simulating the appearance of tusks. Formerly common throughout Asmat, this accessory is often depicted in other art forms as a shorthand reference to the men who wore it.

***Bipane* (Nose ornament), 1963**

Shell, copper

AMAA@UST 0940

***Bipane* (Nose ornament), 1963**

Shell, fiber, beeswax

AMAA@UST 0939

Headband, 1998

Rattan, sago fronds, ochre, lime

AMAA@UST 2307

Panel, before 2005

Wood, pigment

AMAA@UST 1313

Shield, before 1981

Casuarina Coast

Wood, lime, ochre, soot, sago fronds

AMAA@UST 0109

Shield, c. 1971

Casuarina Coast

Wood, sago fronds, pigment

AMAA@UST 0389

Asmat shields are always named after an important ancestor of the owner whose spirit and energy infuse the shield for the owner's protection. Up to three other deceased relatives can also be identified and connected to the shield, as sources of additional power. Artists of the Casuarina Coast often make this link between the shield and protective spirits visually explicit, as on this example. The phallic element projecting from the top represents the primary ancestor. Carved on the body of the shield, one above the other in traditional Asmat style, are human figures whose flexed arms and bent knees recall how—in the Asmat creation story—the original people looked before being brought to life. Their posture also evokes that of the mantis, an insect often used as a symbol of hunting in Asmat art.

Shield, before 1981

Casuarina Coast

Wood, lime, ochre, soot, sago fronds

AMAA@UST 0114

The various regions of Asmat (the area of New Guinea where the Asmat people live) have distinct aesthetic styles, which are most clearly reflected in their shields. A defining characteristic of this classic example from the Casuarina Coast is the small, three-dimensional sculpture of the primary ancestor associated with the shield, seated atop the piece. The roughly rectangular main part of the shield is filled with large shapes meant to intimidate enemies, whether alive or from the spirit world. At the top and bottom, double-curved symbols with central projections, called *ainor*, serve to instill fear. The loosely C-shaped curved designs in the middle are *bipane*; they represent shell nose ornaments and, by association, the men who wore them. Other symbols stand for coconuts and bowls. Tassels of sago-palm frond along the shield's edges complete the visual effect.

Anton Dapo

Figure, 2005

Simsagar village, Safan region

Wood, pigment

AMAA@UST 1318

Loosely inspired by *bis* (ancestor-spirit) poles, this exuberant, recently made Asmat sculpture features four ornately carved outthrust wings containing a profusion of birds, people, and animals, surrounding a central male figure in a headdress. The work illustrates a traditional story about a special mangrove tree that villagers climbed to escape floodwaters.

Ancestor pole, before 1997

Wood, soot, lime, ochre, sago fronds

AMAA@UST 2263

Ancestor pole, 1990

Casuarina Coast

Wood, rattan, coix seeds, lime, ochre

AMAA@UST 1076

Although they have traditional antecedents, ancestor poles like this one are made today primarily as art objects, so the carver has considerable flexibility in what he chooses to represent. A striking contemporary feature of this pole is the artist's placing of accessories such as spears, shields, and drums in the hands of his figures—reflecting a shift toward naturalism and away from the static formality of older sculpture. The male figures wear ceremonial garb, including belts made of seeds and fiber, fiber armbands and leg bands, and representations of cuscus-fur headdresses.

Stefanus Farat

Drum, 1998

Kayirin village, Safan region

Wood, ochre, lime, lizard skin

AMAA@UST 2316

Drum, before 2005

Wood, ochre, lime, lizard skin, rattan,
AMAA@UST 2020

Eddo Orem

Drum, 2004

Naneu village, Safan region
Wood, lizard skin, pigment

Asmat drums are carved from a single block of wood, which makes their execution all the more remarkable. In this example, Eddo Orem created an elaborate frieze of figures on either side of the handle, whose C shape echoes that of the *bipane* (double-curved shell nose ornaments) incised along the sides of the drum. Fluid waves of flying-fox feet fill the remaining space. The friezes resemble *ajour* (openwork carvings), with linear groupings of men and birds in a loosely rectangular shape. The busy, energetic quality of this drum is characteristic of contemporary Asmat art.

Bowl, before 1981

Ewta River
Wood, lime, ochre, soot

Bowls vividly illustrate the effects of outside influences on Asmat art. Originally, Asmat bowls represented the human form: the rounded hollow suggested a belly, a head faced this depression, and limbs were sometimes indicated along the sides. Each vessel represented a specific ancestor of the owner and was named after that person. Since bowls were stored in rafters above the living area, their undersides were often decorated with classic Asmat symbols such as the *bipane* (double-curved shell nose ornament), as on this example. When collectors began acquiring these objects as artworks, however, wood-carvers started crafting them with the head turned outward so it was visible on the same side as the incised decoration. Bowls also became shallower, making them easier to hang on walls. In response to the market, a functional form changed into a primarily aesthetic one.

Bowl, before 1970

Wood, lime, ochre, soot

Bowl, before 1997

Wood, lime, ochre, soot

As they have developed into decorative rather than utilitarian objects, Asmat bowls have become increasingly refined and innovative. This example has the strong symbols and colors of traditional Asmat visual language, but instead of the entire bowl suggesting a human body, a discrete figure is sculpted atop the vessel. It still represents a specific ancestor whose spirit is linked with the object—as is true of all Asmat art—but the ancestor appears in a new location and form.

Man's bag, before 2000

Rattan, coix seeds, cassowary quills, feathers, ochre, lime

Asmat women make the bags that both men and women wear and use. Women's bags are larger and more utilitarian, while men's bags, though functional, are more elaborate and reflect social status. The artist made this man's bag in a traditional style, incorporating a strong geometric design

enhanced by red and white pigments. The underlying motif is almost completely obscured by a decorative overlay of coix seeds, cassowary quills, and feathers, netted together in a complementary geometric formation. Coix-seed ornamentation also appears on the sides of the bag. The beauty of this object and the time and skill devoted to creating it testify to the owner's high social standing.

Apolinia Apinajia

Bag, before 1987

Syuru village, Bismam region

Rattan, ochre, lime, soot, sago fronds, coix seeds

Maria Apendeu

Bag, before 1987

Syuru village, Bismam region

Rattan, ochre, lime, soot, sago fronds, coix seeds

In the past, Asmat women artists were restricted to expressing their creativity through geometric motifs. Now, however, they are free to use pictorial forms, a change reflected in their weaving. For example, women today adorn bags with vibrant scenes of daily life, such as hunting, fishing, and travel. This one shows a person paddling a dugout canoe, identifiable as a woman because customarily women paddle sitting down. The woven scene is painted in the three traditional pigments—red, white, and black—and includes realistic details such as the red stripes on the canoe.

Skirt, before 1987

Sago fronds

Primus Awambi

Figure, before 2000

Per village, Bismam region

Wood

In the past, the physical remains of important members of Asmat communities were placed in the roots of certain spiritually charged banyan trees regarded as gateways to the next world. The interlocking, aboveground roots of the banyan are often depicted at the bottom of *bis* (ancestor-spirit) poles, artistically connecting these sculptures with death and the realm beyond. With the introduction of Christianity among the Asmat in the mid-20th century, the banyan motif became associated with resurrection. A carving like this one may therefore refer to Christ, despite its abstract appearance. An alternative, more traditional interpretation is that it represents the Asmat origin story, in which the “people of the tree” were brought to life from wood sculptures.

Ancestor pole, before 1980

Per village, Bismam region

Wood, lime, ochre, soot

Spirit mask, 1980

Attributed to Yaun Yufri village, Joerat region

Rattan, sago leaf, wood, cassowary feathers, ochre, lime, charcoal

Asmat artists create fiber body masks to give the spirits of the recently deceased material form in the physical world—so that family and friends can bid them farewell. Men fabricate these objects in secret, constructing the crocheted body of the mask over several months. The fibers are then painted with red and white pigments in linear patterns. To personalize the mask, which always represents a particular individual, artists attach ornamental pieces for the eyes and add other decorations, such as the carved wooden birds' heads and the nose ornament on this example. As a final touch, they tie long fringes of fresh yellow-green sago-palm fronds along the bottom and armholes to obscure the wearer and add yet more color. The overall effect remains dramatic even after the fibers have dried, as they have on this spirit mask.

Ancestor figures, before 2004

Wood

Artira

Shield, before 1976

Burbis village, Bras region

Wood, kaolin, ochre, soot, sago fronds

Sana

Shield, before 1981

Surabi village, Yupmakcain region

Wood, kaolin, ochre, soot

Pitmus

Shield, 1971

Brazza River

Wood, kaolin, ochre, soot

Gift of Gunter Konrad

Shields were prized possessions of Asmat men. Each one was carved from a single piece of mangrove root and named after an ancestor significant to the owner. The ancestral spirit then became connected with the object and helped protect the owner from harm, both physical and supernatural. Frequently, as in this example, the ancestor's face is abstractly depicted at the top. Flying-fox motifs on shield's body refer to the hunting prowess of additional important ancestors symbolically depicted there.

Petrus Tamnember

Drum, before 1981

Komor village, Unir Sirau region

Wood, rattan, sago fronds

Beoro

Drum, before 1981

Ao village, Joerat region

Wood, lizard skin, rattan

The oldest drums produced by the Asmat are the simplest, with minimal ornamental detail. This one is a transitional piece, considerably less decorated than drums made in recent years. The handle features two hornbill heads with eyes and other naturalistic details. The two large curlicues bracketing the handle may represent cuscus tails. Together with the flying-fox feet depicted on the body of the instrument, they connect this drum with the hunt, a common theme in Asmat art.

Drum, before 1997

Wood, ochre, lime, soot, lizard skin, rattan

Pami

Drum, before 1981

Bu Agani village, Unir Sirau region

Wood, lizard skin

This traditional-style drum is full of gentle curves, starting with its overall shape. Horizontal scallops carved across the body set off a sculpted handle consisting of two hornbill heads, whose execution is gracefully minimal. A warm patina where the heads join reflects long use. The instrument's age also shows in the blackened surface, a result of the drum's being suspended for years over the fire in the owner's living space. The smoke kept insects away and generally preserved the object.

Ancestor figure, before 1999

Wood, lime, ochre, soot

Gift of Rodger Dashow

Bis pole, before 2003

Wood, pigment, sago fronds

Gift of Fred and Kato Guggenheim, given in their son's name, Scott Guggenheim

Figure, before 2005

Yaosokor village, Kenekap region

Wood, pigment

Gift Mr. and Mrs. Eleazer Williams

Although its exact age is not known, this figure embodies the conventions of historical Asmat art. Executed in a classic style, it portrays a woman motionless and self-contained, her arms hanging near her thighs. The thick column of her neck emphasizes her static monumentality. Originally, she may have worn a grass skirt to cover her pelvic area, as is customary for Asmat women. The remnants of black pigment around her eyes are a common form of body decoration. This sculpture was made as a remembrance of a person who had recently died.

Crocodile, 1978

Santambor village, Safan region

Wood, pigment

Carved crocodiles form part of the rich tradition of memorial sculpture among the Asmat. Like *bis* (ancestor-spirit) poles and *wuramon* (soulships), they provide a means of both commemorating and releasing the soul of a person who has died—usually someone killed by a crocodile. The carvings are commissioned for ceremonies connected to this purpose. The crocodiles are highly stylized, with thin, elongated bodies and narrow jaws and limbs evoking those of a praying mantis. Their overall shape is similar to that of a dugout canoe, the traditional carrier of souls to the next world.

Spear, 1998

Wood, feathers, sago fronds

Carved in one piece from a shaft of strong, light wood, the characteristic Asmat spear is elegantly adorned with designs appropriate to its function. The openwork panel about a third of the way up the shaft of this example features eight tightly coiled tails of the cuscus, an animal hunted by the Asmat and a common motif on this type of object. The four pairs of rounded tail symbols are balanced by the four pairs of barbs placed just above the spear point. The barbs appear aerodynamic in their sweep and shape, visually—and perhaps even physically—directing this weapon toward its target.

Sai

Spear, before 1980

Ocenep village, Safan region

Wood

Spear, before 2005

Wood, feathers, sago fronds, coix seeds, quills

Amandos Amonos (main carver)

Wuramon (Soulship), before 1984

Yamas Yeni village, Joerat region

Wood, lime, ochre, soot, cassowary feathers, coix seeds, quills

Wuramon are visually arresting because of their considerable size and distinctive iconography.

Symbols generally associated with head-hunting, such as bird beaks and cuscus tails, are evident on the prow and stern of this vessel, but the passengers represent beings not found in any other Asmat art form. These water spirits, symbolic of initiation and passage to the world of the dead, are bent over and seem to gaze through the canoe to a river below. Flowing water is a gateway to the next world, and the bottomless canoe frees these beings to focus on the way ahead. Their bodies are white—the color of spirits—highlighted with red ochre, indicating scarifications and body paint. Red stripes painted on the sides of the canoe are believed to increase its speed. Originally, all the figures would have been ornamented with black feathers, and many still retain their seed earrings; these decorations signify the spirit figures' prestige and enhance the work's aesthetic appeal.

Wuramon are the largest and most complex of all Asmat wood sculptures—*tours de force* of the carver's art.

Mat, 2007

Plant fibers, pigment

Purchased by Virgil Petermeier with funds from Spirits of Summer 2007 at the Art Auction in October 2007

Panel, 1985

Wood, coix seeds, sago fronds

Panel, before 1981

Sawa or Erma village, Unir Sirau region

Wood, ochre, lime, soot

The bright pigments on this panel suggest it was made in the 1970s, when adding color to such objects was popular. The central carved image of a man is painted black, with facial features, navel, and scarification marks indicated in red. Surrounding him are traditional Asmat symbolic motifs, such as birds' heads, flying-fox feet, spirit elbows, snakes, centipedes, and shell nose ornaments. The comparatively large size and lively gesture of the human figure illustrate how, around the time this piece was carved, Asmat artists were beginning to respond to market demands by incorporating new ideas into their work.

Panel, before 1981

Sawa or Erma village, Unir Sirau region

Wood, lime, ochre, soot

Panel, 1997

Wood

Originally, Asmat panels were ornamented only with shallowly carved symbolic motifs. By the 1970s, however, artists had begun applying decorative color to their incised designs. Beginning in the 1980s, a new stylistic variation developed in which the artist first buried the wood in acidic mud to darken it and then carved sections of the surface away to reveal the lighter wood underneath—creating a striking contrast. The ornate scrolling motifs on this work from 1997 form an almost lacelike border consisting of a pair of birds (probably pelicans), shell nose ornaments, and praying mantises. Carved in relief in the rounded center of the panel is a seated human figure. The inclusion of three-dimensional elements in sculpture forms that previously were two-dimensional is another recent development in Asmat art.

Panel, before 2004

Wood, ochre, lime

AMAA@UST 1168

In the 1950s, a Dutch missionary named Willem van Dongen gave flat boards to wood-carvers in the northern region of Asmat and suggested they make objects for sale that would be smaller—and thus easier to transport—than their traditional art forms. The resulting panels bore the same designs as those historically found on shields, paddles, and the gunwales of canoes. In addition to abstract motifs such as *bipane* (double-curved shell nose ornament) and *was* (cuscus tail), the carved sections of this panel contain figures of people, birds, lizards, and snakes. At one point in its history, this panel was painted in red and white pigments, traces of which remain. The hole

punched through at the top for hanging indicates that the piece was meant to be decorative rather than functional.

Mbinam

Shield, before 1981

Vakam village, Yupmakcain region

Wood, kaolin, ochre, soot

Canoe prow, 1980

Wood, ochre, lime

Canoe prow, before 1974

Wood, ochre, lime

Crosier Collection–Asmat Art Holy Cross Priory, Onamia, Minnesota

There is a strong connection between canoe prows and *ajour*, the contemporary openwork carvings inspired by them. The design of this prow encompasses two figures facing each other, elbows and feet nearly touching, with a hornbill's head between them. It is a classic theme shared with *ajour* and seen repeatedly and in many variations in that art form.

Paddle, before 2004

Wood

Paddles have been an essential possession for the Asmat because, historically, dugout canoes were their primary means of transportation. Used by both men and women, women's paddles are generally shorter, since women paddled sitting down. Given its height, this example was made for a man, who would have paddled standing up. The blade features an unusually elaborate carved decoration with many designs related to hunting, such as flying-fox feet, snakes, and cuscus tails.

Ajour, before 2004

Wood, ochre, lime

Shield, before 1981

Iroko village, Emari Ducur region

Wood, lime, ochre, soot

Shield, 1970

Wood, lime, ochre

Gift of Don Wilson

Although this shield was made as recently as 1970, its design and ornamentation are fairly traditional. The elongated shape and rich profusion of symbols are typical of the northwest area, and the shield may come from that part of Asmat (the region where the Asmat people live). In the northwest style, the artist filled nearly all the available space with various decorative motifs. Some symbols have universal meaning in Asmat art, but most artists also draw on their personal aesthetic language. The meaning of the multiple patterns on this work may have been known to the carver's village community—or perhaps only to himself.

Spirit mask, before 1980

Pupis or Sawa village, Emari Ducur or Unir Sirau region

Sago leaf, wood, lime, soot, cassowary and white cockatoo feathers

Titus Tine

Shield, before 1981

Ipem village, Aramatak region

Wood, lime, raw and burnt ochre, soot

Shield, early 20th century

Yupmakcain region

Wood, burnt and raw ochre, lime, soot

The Ethel Morrison Van Derlip Trust Fund

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This shield is a rare and beautiful example of Asmat art from the time before the region had regular contact with the larger world. The top represents the abstracted face of the ancestor the shield is named after, with the cheeks indicated in raw, yellowish ochre and the forehead painted red. The body of the piece is filled with incised double-curved designs that likely represent powerful ancestral spirits and that, despite their elegance, are definitely intended to intimidate enemies. With its obvious visual links to later examples, this shield demonstrates the enduring aesthetic style of Asmat culture.

Paskalis Aor

Drum, 1998

Buepis village, Safan region

Wood, lizard skin, rattan, beeswax

Julianus Asayur

Drum, before 2000

Pirien village, Safan region

Wood, rattan, lizard skin, beeswax

Bis pole, 1970

Buepis village, Safan region

Mangrove-tree wood, sago fronds, lime, ochre, charcoal

Bis poles are vivid artistic embodiments of the Asmat conception of life and death. They incorporate many common images, such as memorial depictions of deceased family members and abstract symbols representing the natural world. This example is stylistically modern with its multiplicity of figures in active poses. Originally, *bis* poles were tangible promises to avenge the death of the people portrayed. Although the Asmat no longer practice revenge killing, these objects remain an important part of their culture and an eloquent expression of their aesthetic.

Ajour, before 1987

Wood, ochre, lime

Like the newer ancestor poles, *ajour* have become increasingly elaborate in recent years as Asmat artists incorporate more figures in a wider range of poses. This carving is almost like an ancestor

group in its complexity, with four pairs of figures balancing opposite one another in the rectangular frame. The facial details have been highlighted with pigment, adding drama and liveliness.

Canoe prow, before 1974

Wood, ochre, lime

Canoe prows are almost always decoratively carved and are often made as part of the canoe itself. But some, like this one, are created separately for later attachment. Associated with head-hunting and the ancestors, prow designs protect and strengthen the boat and its passengers during times of warfare or danger. The undulating forms on this prow represent wading birds or the praying mantis, a popular hunting symbol.

Ajour, before 2004

Wood

Robert Acu

Ancestor figures, before 2000

Yaun Yufri village, Joerat region

Wood, ochre, lime

In both style and execution, this contemporary sculpture by Robert Acu exemplifies a trend toward naturalism in Asmat art. With great artistry Acu has evoked a sense of forward motion, of paddlers propelling a canoe through the water. Even the posture and lolling tongue of the dog augment the work's energy. Curving symbols are carved along the gunwales, and the dugout's body is painted with red stripes over a white base—a detail believed to increase the vessel's speed.

Paddle, before 2003

Wood

Asmat artists ornament utilitarian objects as well as ceremonial ones. Canoe paddles often have carving on the shaft or blade—usually depictions of human figures or symbols such as hornbill heads, which connect the object with hunting, warfare, or the ancestors. On the shaft of this elaborate paddle, hornbill heads rest under the men's chins, the top one facing up to bite the chin of the uppermost man and the bottom one holding a severed head in its beak—a clear reference to head-hunting. On the blade, S-shaped *was* (cuscus tail) symbols are incised in two ornamental bands. Regular contact with water has darkened the paddle so that its shaft shades from dark at the base to the original lighter tone of wood toward the top.

Paddle, 1994

Wood

Mat, 2007

Plant fibers, pigment

Purchased by Virgil Petermeier with funds from Spirits of Summer 2007 at the Art Auction in October 2007

Ajour, before 1981

Atsj village, Becembub region

Wood

Ajour, before 1981

Atsj village, Becembub region

Wood

Ajour, before 1981

Atsj village, Becembub region

Wood

The sculptor of this piece added some elements to the basic, roughly rectangular *ajour* format of human figures and birds' heads. Between the figures, he included rounded motifs that visually soften the object's angularity. Like the birds' heads, these are more than mere ornamental frills. Both the S-shaped *was* (cuscus tail) and the C-curved *bipane* (shell nose ornament) are symbolic references to specific ancestors or spirits. The exact interpretation, however, rests with the artist, since the meanings of various motifs—drawn from the rich and flexible aesthetic language of Asmat art—can be highly personal.

Ajour, before 1981

Atsj village, Becembub region

Wood

This simple yet elegant carving is a classic example of the *ajour*, a contemporary art form inspired by a canoe-prow design from the coastal village of Atsj. It depicts a pair of figures seated facing each other, separated by two slender hornbill heads. The figures' posture suggests that of the praying mantis, or of the archetypal first Asmat, who were believed to have been carved of wood, their elbows joined to their knees, before being liberated by music to dance and move about freely.

Shield, before 1981

Dairam River

Wood, lime, ochre, soot

Curves of various sizes, shapes, and orientation dominate the visual vocabulary of many Asmat artists. A combination of multiple curves makes this shield an aesthetically pleasing whole. The primary motif, painted red above a white ground, is water swirling down a sago-palm trough, shown here in three opposing pairs. Flowing lines of small circles bend along the outer edges of the inner swirls to evoke splashes of water. The overall effect is of motion barely contained within the physical boundaries of the piece. Shield decoration is meant to radiate enough power and energy to repel danger, and the elegant, curving forms incised here make the object appear especially formidable.