



Canoe shield mask

Not on display

Title/Description: Canoe shield mask

Born: 1800 - 1950

Object Type: Mask

Materials: Pigment, Wood

Measurements: h. 400 x w. 194 x d. 55 mm

Accession Number: 161

Historic Period: 19th century, 20th Century - Early

Production Place: Melanesia, Middle Sepik River, New Guinea, Oceania, Pacific

Cultural Group: Iatmul

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

The shield mask is mainly used for protection. When people wear traditional costumes for fighting and dancing, they generally use the mask to hide their face, to disguise their identity. When the mask is created, its purpose is demonstrated on the mask by the way the designs are laid out on the wood and carved. The addition of the paint on the shield mask can give an altogether different look as well. The patterns, designs and the selection of colours indicate that the shield mask was carved by a master carver and would have been collected during the late 19 century. Shields like this were also sometimes attached to the back of canoe prows.

Pax Jakupa, February 2023

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

Not all Sepik masks were worn in danced masquerades. Other types, made from basketry as well as wood, were incorporated into the facades of men's ceremonial houses or, as in this case, were attached behind canoe prows. The Iatmul built long canoes for river transport and for trading and war expeditions. Success in trade and exchanges or in war was dependent as much on supernatural favour as on mortal efficiency, and canoes, the principal vehicle for such important activities, were fitted with elaborate prow pieces depicting crocodiles and other predatory creatures. Behind the prow was slotted a bark or palm spathe shield, generally having three upper extensions and a wood mask fixed to the front. A similar mask is in Basle (Kaufmann, 1980: no. 81, collected by Speiser in 1930) and complete examples are illustrated in Wardwell (1967: no. I 15) and Kelm (1966: I: 496).

Although providing some physical protection from arrows, the shield acts as a mount for the mask,

which represents the spirit associated with the canoe. This spirit protects its occupants and threatens their opponents. In many areas of the Pacific canoes were associated with respected ancestors and in some cases were built as a kind of memorial image of a particular ancestor, who acted as its tutelary spirit. This mask has a lug at the back by which it was secured to the shield. The nose septum and ears, now broken, were pierced for fibre pendants. The recessed areas are applied with white pigment, while the raised lines and surfaces all have traces of red.

Steven Hooper, 1997

Entry taken from *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, Vol. 2: Pacific, African and Native North American Art*, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997) pp. 49.

Exhibitions

'Pablo Picasso: The Legacy of Youth', Sainsbury Centre, Norwich, 13/3/2022 - 17/7/2022

Provenance

Formerly in the collections of Madeleine Rousseau and possibly Stephen Chauvet.

Acquired by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury in 1951.

Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
