



Dance shield

Not on display

Title/Description: Dance shield

Born: 1800 - 1950

Object Type: shield

Materials: Pigment, Wood

Measurements: h. 650 x w. 234 x d. 20 mm

Accession Number: 168

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

Production Place: New Guinea, Oceania, Pacific, Trobriand Islands

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

Ceremonial feasts here in Papua New Guinea are a very important element of our cultural practice and identity. They are a practice that has been passed down through generations and continues today. We use the dancing shield, which we call *gafi*, during dancing ceremonies and feasts to attract people's attention. Dancing shields hold different kinds of power during performance.

We build dancing shields using the bark of the tree and several other objects from within the bush and paint it with pigments. Red and black paints are traditionally used to highlight the carved patterns and designs of the sculpture. The white pigment is the lime that is also used as part of decoration, but it is more than just paint. The white line makes the design powerful and special, and signifies that magic is being performed. The pigment protects whoever is using the dancing shield during a performance. Men wear white on their face too and young men used it to attract the attention of women they wish to marry.

Pax Jakupa, February 2023

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

Dancing features prominently in the feasts and presentations associated with the yam harvest in the Trobriand Islands. Malinowski (1922: 56-7) recorded that dancing was done 'only at one time in the year, in connection with the harvest festivities, called *milamila*, at which season also the spirits of the dead return from Tuma, the nether-world, to the villages from which they hail. Sometimes the dancing season lasts only for a few weeks or even days, sometimes it is extended into a special dancing period called *usigola*... A performance consists always of a dance executed in a ring to the accompaniment of singing and drum-beating, both of which are done by a group of people standing in the middle. Some dances are done with the carved dancing shield.' Malinowski also illustrated men using dance shields of this type (*kaydebu*; *ibid.*: pls. XIII, xiv).

The elaborate curvilinear designs are distinctive to the Trobriands and neighbouring islands in the Massim area of south-east New Guinea. They appear on many important items, like canoe prows, and in certain respects are said to refer to the frigate bird, which has a hooked beak and is a successful fisher. The carved panels are painted red and black and the recessed areas are filled with lime.

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) p. 60.

Provenance

Acquired by the Sainsbury Family in 1939. Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
