



Mask with crest

Not on display

Title/Description: Mask with crest

Born: 1880 c.

Measurements: l. 381 x h. 268 x w. 198 mm

Accession Number: 939

Historic Period: Late 19th century

This type of mask is generally known as *tatanua*, which originally comes from the Nalik language of northern central New Ireland. *Tatanua* were worn when costumed male dancers from one village or

clan performed for the assembled company as part of the climax of *malagan* rites - a complex series of ceremonies and the visual art forms associated with them. [1]

While a *malagan* (or *malangan*) ceremony is always held in the name of one or more people who have died in recent years, it is not merely a mortuary rite. Many other interactions take place during the event, including announcements, repayment of debts, recognition of obligations, resolution of disputes, and many other customary activities.

The masks would be worn and revealed during funerary rites, so their display was restricted and only seen during special occasions, and only for a short time. Afterwards they were destroyed, otherwise they could cause harm to the living. The aim of the funerary rites was to pay homage to the deceased and to bid farewell, so that their spirits wouldn't linger and cause potential harm. (An experiment was conducted in New Ireland where they tried to set up a museum with *malangan* sculptures on display, but because people died in the process, it was considered too dangerous to have a museum locally.) [2]

This was the intended, temporary use of this mask...but its life story didn't in fact end there. Museum objects have an extended life, beyond the original intention for them. An alternative to destroying the masks, was to have them collected and taken away, which explains why there are so many *malangan* sculptures in museums. This mask therefore tells a further story about how Europeans collected such masks, with the intention of preserving and showcasing them to a European market. Collectors in turn passed objects onto museums, whose intention is to preserve and showcase other cultures.

So, what is the role of museums today in holding and exhibiting such objects publicly? Such objects are powerful entities that have very specific needs, which are problematic challenges in the museum space. We are obliged to explain how and why such an object came to be here, and how far removed it is from its original purpose. But such an object also asks us to open up the question of how, and indeed *if*, it is possible to display complex objects. How do you feel discovering this object displayed/hidden at the end of a tunnel at ground level, rather than being objectified in a glass display case in the usual way? Certainly, such an unusual take on display makes us think about the life story of the object, from birth to its present location in the museum.

Katharine Malcolm, May 2023

[1] Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, Vol. 2: Pacific, African and Native North American Art, Steven Hooper (ed.), (Yale University Press, 1997) p. 313.

[2] Conversation in person with Karen Jacobs, May 2023, referencing Karen Sykes' article, 'Negotiations in Culture', in *Transactions and Creations*, Hirsch and Strathern (eds.), 2004.

Further Reading

Karen Sykes, 'Negotiations in Culture', in *Transactions and Creations*, Hirsch and Strathern (eds.), 2004.
