

Oceania (New Ireland, Papua New Guinea, Melanesian region)

Malagan Frieze, 19th century

Wood, shell, and pigment

H.39 x W.16 x D.5 ¼ inches

Gift of Bruce B. Dayton, 85.94

Theme

The images of birds and foliage in this New Ireland sculpture provide evidence that the artist, like O'Keeffe, drew inspiration from nature. The objects of New Ireland, however, come into being less by the individual choice of the artist than as a result of a process in which the artist draws upon the traditions, the expectations and the material support of a complex social system.

Background

New Ireland is the second largest island in Northwest Melanesia. Tropical rain forests cover much of the island, and a wide variety of birds, reptiles, and sea animals abound. In New Ireland thought, these creatures serve a symbolic function. Society is ordered by two major moieties (groups) (MOY-ah-tee), Hawks and Eagles, and further divided into clans, which are associated with snakes, birds, and fish. The animals selected correlate to the social structure, but at the same time represent the natural order of earth, air, and sea. In both the culture and art of New Ireland, social structure is viewed as parallel to the natural order.

Most societies have ceremonies which mark important transitions in life and that is true in New Ireland. The rites that are carried out at the time of death are central to the social and aesthetic life of the community.¹ Mortuary festivals concern large social units and can last for years. Almost everything in New Ireland society is bound to the preparation for or dependent on the outcome of this activity.

On the northern coast of New Ireland, elaborate sculptures are made for the mortuary festivals. Snakes, birds, and fish often appear in ceremonial objects such as the New Ireland frieze. They are called *malagan* sculptures and are made for the memorial services, also called *malagan*, which take place after a person's death.

¹ When a person died, they wrapped the body in trade cloth, placed it in a tree's branches, and hooked a bamboo tube from the body to the ground to drain fluids from the body. The tree had the religious symbolism of another "realm." Then they collected the bones and buried them in a cave or in the ground (sometimes in the ground under their houses).

Frieze Decoration from a Malagan Ceremony

The subject of this *malagan* sculpture is one of the favorite themes of sculpture in New Ireland art—a struggle between birds and snakes. The animals refer to the clans or social order of society as well as the natural order of air (birds) and earth (snakes). The struggle is a common feature of sculpture and dance, representing this opposition of air and earth.

Even knowing that the subject is birds and snakes, it is difficult to immediately identify the individual images within the design. In fact, the design of this frieze might remind us of our picture-puzzles that invite us to find hidden images within them. Three birds and a snake are interwoven into the foliage without a clear distinction between them. The two white-faced chickens in the center may be identified by their snail-shell eyes and black beaks. The larger chicken hovers over the smaller one. Above the chickens, a slender black frigate bird (a tropical sea bird with long tail feathers) forms the upper edge of the frieze. The frigate bird is engaged in a struggle with a black snake whose tail is caught in its beak. The snake undulates through the foliage and curves through the beak of the largest chicken.

If this design seems complex to us, it is because the sculpture is intended to invite speculation. Chickens (particularly roosters) play an important role in the imagery of religious objects in New Ireland. The feathers of chickens are a prized decorative element. New Ireland artists choose from a very small number of species for their images and exclude many others from among the common fauna. The chicken is among a type of animal given the name *Masalai* (mahz-ah-lie) in New Ireland. *Masalai* are animals whose characteristics overlap and confuse categories. For example, chickens are birds, are creatures that are less inhabitants of the air than of the earth. Transformation, or the ability of one animal to shift to another, is what gives meaning and power to these images. Many times stories are connected to them, although we do not usually know what they are.

The complexity of design is created in part by the patterns that are formed through color and repetition of lines. Notice how the patterns on the foliage do not differ greatly from the patterns on the feathers of the birds. The foliage patterns superimposed on the beaks of the birds obscure the distinction between the foliage and birds. In fact, the forms nearly blend together because of the patterning. One bird form flows into another. Likewise, there is a blurring of the positive space (the birds themselves) and the negative space (the areas in between forms). This further contributes to the ambiguous quality of the object.

Although the sculpture might appear to be constructed of several components assembled together, it is in fact carved of a single piece of wood. The piercing and hollowing out of the wood around the forms create the various shapes. The basic colors of black, white, and reddish-brown are applied in sharp contrast to one another, delineating certain shapes (such as the faces and eyes of the birds) and obscuring others (such as the bodies of the birds and the foliage).

Horizontal friezes were often placed on poles for display during *malagan* ceremonies or carried in dance. Although, we don't know the precise usage of this one, we know that it was set on something, possibly a pole, but it could also have been pegged to the head of a standing figure.

The success of a *malagan* ceremony depends upon the carving as well as feasting and dance. At the end of a ceremony, the host's material resources are depleted, but that person's stature in society is enhanced. After the close of the ceremony, the sculptures are allowed to perish but the stature remains.

An anthropologist once asked the old men of a village what they would like her to tell people about *malagan* sculpture. They instructed her to say, that they were not just carved, painted pieces of wood, but that work and wealth went into them. In other words, the sculptures are not just objects but symbols of social cooperation and economic activity of the society in which they are produced.

Technique

The production of *malagan* sculpture was in the past and is today inseparable from the ritual of mortuary festivals of New Ireland. *Malagan* sculpture is made during the first phase of a festival which can last for months or even years. *Malagan* designs are owned by older male members of a clan. When an individual wishes to host a ceremony to honor a deceased person, the rights to use a certain design must be acquired. The host then commissions a carver and supervises the process. Payment for the use of the design is made during the presentation or closing ceremony.

The traditional method of producing a *malagan* sculpture began with the cutting and drying of a tree (*alstonia*—similar to European linden). On the seventh day, carving commenced with a feast. Prior to 1850, the roughing out of the sculpture was done with an ax with a shell or stone blade, while finer carving was accomplished with pieces of shell. Since that time, nearly all carving, including that of the *malagan* frieze, has been done with metal tools introduced by Europeans. Likewise, metal drills have replaced those made with shark teeth for piercing. The sculpture was then dried for about two months over fire. Polishing, which is marked by another feast, was done with sharkskin.

At this point, an enclosure was built for the *malagan*. Traditionally, *malagan* sculptures were painted with pigments made from lime powder, charcoal ash or vegetable material using a brush made from the stalk of a fibrous leaf. This *malagan* frieze was painted with traditional pigments, but today oil pigments are commonly used. The eyes, which are made of the valve of a sea snail, were placed into the sculpture last; it is this step that empowered the figure.

On the final day of the *malagan* ceremony, which took weeks or months, the enclosure was torn down and the sculpture was exhibited. Once a ceremony was completed, the *malagan* sculptures no longer possessed power and were allowed to perish. It is fortunate that this particular frieze has survived.

Artist

New Ireland artists seldom make their living solely by art. They engage in other activities (farming, fishing) but they are generally people who have both a deeper religious knowledge and specialized skills that are developed through a casual apprenticeship system. Some artists' reputations are known at long distance (which in New

Ireland terms means 50-100 miles), and they are sometimes hired to work far from home. New Ireland artists are respected not only for their artistic skills but also as valued members of their society.

Suggested Questions

1. There are four animals on this wooden frieze sculpture. Can you find all four? How many eyes do you see? How many heads? How many birds are biting the snake?
2. Which animals in this frieze can fly? How do the animals get around? Besides air and earth (ground), where else can animals live? What animals live there? How do they get around?
3. These animals are ones that the artist sees in New Ireland. They inspire artists to make works of art. You live in Minnesota. If you could carve a frieze, what animals would you use to represent earth, sky and water?
4. What kinds of lines are repeated in this sculpture? Where do you see these lines? Why do you think he repeats lines so often? How many different design patterns can you find?
5. Is this sculpture solid or are there open spaces in it? Find some of the open (negative) spaces. Do they make the sculpture more or less interesting? Why?
6. Are the eyes of the two chickens carved out of wood? Why do you think the artist would use a different material (shells) for these eyes? **Find New Ireland on the map.** Why would the artist be able to find so many shells to use?
7. Is this sculpture solid or are there open spaces in it? Find some of the open (negative) spaces. Do they make the sculpture more or less interesting? Why?
8. What shape seems to be used most often? Find at least five examples of that shape. Is it a geometric or an organic shape?
9. Find at least two ways the artist has found to suggest feathers.
10. Why does the artist choose to connect these animals in his frieze? Point out the different ways he connects them. Can you think of ways air, land, and water animals are connected in our ecology? (*Food chain, carrying seeds, etc.*)

Bibliography

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