AN INTRODUCTION
In 1522 the Victoria, the only ship to return from the first expedition to circumnavigate the globe, brought the remains of five magnificent birds to Europe. Their bright, oddly coloured and ethereal plumage was not the only cause for surprise. What was extraordinary was that they had no feet or wings. A legend was born, whereby this apodan bird lived aloft, flying towards the sun and feeding off the dew. The Portuguese named it the Passaro del sol, bird of the sun. The Dutch named it the Avis paradisaeus, bird of paradise\(^1\) (illus. 2). It was seen as the witness of a magical country, a land that gave onto the gates of heaven and all its promises. The country’s name: New Guinea. This image of a marvellous land, a lost paradise, grew stronger over the centuries. The country seemed to be a fortress and travellers who explored New Guinea
were never far from trouble or surprises. The first German scientific expeditions thus discovered, as they travelled up the Sepik River, impressive man's ceremonial houses or "men's houses" that seemed to float like huge cathedrals in the middle of majestic walkways (illus. 1). A few decades later, the Australian expedition that first crossed the island from north to south was amazed to discover fertile, populated valleys in what had been considered uninhabitable mountains, home to groups that had taken the art of ornamentation to its extreme.

The only victims of these explorations were the birds of paradise. It was discovered that they indeed have legs and that, for the Papuans who hunted them, they were far from specimens of natural science; they were seen as finery, objects of trade, and symbols of wealth. But this wonderfully true story is a fitting demonstration of the ambiguity of New Guinea art. By transforming an object of nature into an object of art, the New Guineans confounded our logic.

**History and Styles**

The history of New Guinea is as complex today as it was in the past. The island is currently divided into two. To the west the former Dutch colony, known today as Papua province or Irian Jaya, has been a province of the Indonesian state since 1969. The east was split between two colonial powers in 1884. The British annexed Papua in the south, while the Germans took possession of New Guinea in the north. In the wake of the First World War, Germany lost its colonies and the two territories were placed under Australian mandate by the League of Nations. Reunited, they gained independence in 1975 under the name of Papua New Guinea.

The history of the populating of New Guinea is much older. The first populations settled there about 40,000 years ago, initially along the coasts. Little is known about this conquest. It was led by small groups of hunter-gatherers who, moving slowly, took over a territory and used up its resources before moving on to another area. The populations gradually moved inland, where very early traces of horticulture and pig farming (illus. 5, 7) have been found. Some researchers date this practice back to 9000 BC; others to 6000 BC. In any event, this revolutionary step by mankind heralded considerable societal changes. Several thousand years would pass, however, before another fundamental change took place. Towards 1500 BC, new objects appeared, the most remarkable being pottery pieces with the characteristic decorations that have been recorded all along the coastlines and on the islands. Archaeologists have named these pottery pieces Lapita and link their appearance to the arrival of new migrant groups who spoke Austronesian languages.

The debate over the origins and filiation of the different groups who settled on the island of New Guinea is far from closed. The first languages spoken in New Guinea are considered to be the oldest in Melanesia. But the complexity of their structure renders any classification hypothetical. Having once been united under the term Papuan languages, they are today designated as non-Austronesian languages. This designation by the negative conveys the enormous difficulty in establishing commonality and relationships to the same linguistic family. In
comparison, the Austronesian languages are much simpler structures and linguists are in agreement when it comes to acknowledging their relation to a common group, placing their origin somewhere in Southeast Asia.

Linguists speak of 1200 languages for a population which, at the time it came into contact with Europe, numbered no more than 2,000,000 inhabitants spread over 775,000 square kilometres. This diversity of languages is one factor in the astonishing diversity of cultures. A second factor should probably be sought in the history of these peoples. The West has long seen “primitive” societies as fixed societies with no histories. Owing to studies
Map of New Guinea. The different style areas.

1. Teluk Cenderawasih
2. Sentani Lake and Humboldt Bay
3. Sepik River and Abelam Area
4. Astrolabe Bay
5. Huon Gulf
6. Massim Area
7. Gulf of Papua
8. Torres Strait
9. Marind-anim Area
10. Asmat Area
11. Kamoro Area
carried out in several regions, it is now known that, over time, groups which often comprised only a few hundred individuals split up, moved about, and then reformed, thus creating not only "new" languages but also new traditions, new ceremonies, and therefore, new objects (illus. 6). As they moved about, these groups adapted to contrasting natural environments. From the central highland valleys to the swamps along the coastal borders, from the hill regions to the plains, from the small volcanic islands to the coral islands, the diversity of ecological niches in New Guinea is endless. And each of these niches supposes a specific mode of production and economic organisation. While the economy of the populations of the Highlands is based on sweet potato cultivation and pig breeding, the economy of lowland populations is reliant on sago palm
exploitation and fishing. This ecological and economic diversity is matched by varied systems of cosmological representation. Generalisations about the societies in New Guinea are, therefore, always hypothetical. What is customary in one region will not feature in the next; the same goes for objects. One need only read through the following pages and note the form or complexity of the motifs to understand that few countries in the world display as much inventiveness of form and use. In these conditions and in the present state of our knowledge and findings, the majority of anthropologists refuse to attribute the origin of a form or motif to any particular population group. With the exception of the Lake Sentani region, we lack reliable archaeological data to do so.6

Faced with this complexity, several authors have formed the corpus of characteristics that are common to New Guinea arts. Among the most frequently evoked features are the representations that mix animal and human figures. Nothing could be more natural. The populations of Papua New Guinea rely on nature and farming for subsistence. The natural world is at the heart of their symbolic systems and representations. The themes displayed can therefore not be read without referring to the animal or plant world. This same plant world supplies the bulk of materials used to make objects (illus. 7). One of the characteristics of Melanesian art that is particularly present in New Guinea is the inordinate use of the most unexpected materials and assemblages. Wood, barks, plant fabrics, leaves, lichens, feathers, insect wings, bones, sap or birdlime, the list is
endless (illus. 8); as are the forms and effects obtained by combined use of these materials. The most extraordinary creations are often ephemeral structures that cannot be collected (illus. 11, 12). These dizzying inventions defy the laws of creation, particularly as no construction is based on complex technology. The populations of New Guinea know nothing about the potter’s wheel, the weaver’s loom, or metallurgy, but this ignorance has certainly not stopped them from creating structures as complex as the large men’s houses in the Gulf of Papua region or the Sepik Valley.

Due to all this inventiveness, displaying multiple formal solutions and endless variations of form, the stylistic map of New Guinea is hard to draw. One has now been established for the large areas and this division is the one referred to in this catalogue. It is still difficult, however, to take it any further. For this field is all about problems of scale and chosen criteria. While it is easy to determine the stylistic traits of certain regions, such as Lake Sentani or Astrolabe Bay, others raise challenging issues of border and delimitation. The style map of the Sepik region established by Alfred Bühler in the 1960s was perfected by several specialists, including Douglas Newton and Christian Kaufmann. Nevertheless, the borders of certain zones, such as the lower Sepik region, are hard to trace. The tricky game of style zones can come up against other imperatives too. In the Huon Gulf, as Pieter Ter Keurs notes, initiation cycles could have served as models for the whole northern coast region without knowing if the same objects were used throughout the region. An identical phenomenon is found in Humboldt Bay, where men’s houses

*Illus. 8*

Three young Marind-anim men. The one standing is wearing a large dogtooth necklace and a headdress with long fibre stalks attached.
Papua Province, Indonesia, Marind-anim cultural area.
Photo Paul Wirz, 1916.
© Archives Museum der Kulturen, Basel.
and certain indispensable objects were imported after being bought in the Vanimo region. Similarly, in the Gulf of Papua region, where, as Joshua Bell notes, objects that present obvious similarities in form, motifs, and materials could be used in different rituals. Not forgetting certain masks from the Torres Strait which were probably made in the neighbouring Gulf of Papua region. They all reveal the complexity of the exchange networks. We have to resign ourselves to acknowledging that beyond a certain level, stylistic borders are impossible to establish. They seem to obey laws that govern very loose categories.

Objects, Forms, Materials
While numerous populations of New Guinea show little inclination for sculpture or painting (which does not mean that they know nothing about artistic creation, simply, that their creations take on other forms), others are prolific in their creations. They have even been referred to as "large workshops". Not only do the artists transform every object, even every-
day items, into works of art, covering every available surface with signs and drawings, but they have an astounding propensity to transmute one form into another. The Barbier-Mueller museum owns a remarkable series of dishes that illustrate this faculty for invention. While the forms often evoke canoes (Huon Gulf or Sentani Lake), they can also suggest a shield (Asmat, cat. 131) or the body of an animal (konwar area, cat. 7). A complex iconography unfurls on the outer surfaces: crocodiles with human heads (Huon Gulf, cat. 61), the interweaving of a hook motif (Asmat, cat. 131), or spirals (Lake Sentani, cat. 16). As for the handles, they are carved into a human figure, (Asmat, cat. 131), a dog's head (konwar area, cat. 7), or a crocodile head (Sepik, cat. 49).

Even more astonishing is the clever play on the metamorphosis of the figures. The little Sepik pigment cup (cat. 49) is a fine example. At first glance one identifies a crocodile. But a more attentive analysis demonstrates that things are not that simple. That curved tooth which appears at the front of the jaw and that ear behind the eye make you think of a pig's head? The first analysis is put to flight. Crocodile or pig? It is hard to decide. The figures are too intermingled. You have to make do with reading a hybrid form, part crocodile, part pig. Sometimes this dual reading becomes even more subtle, as a second look at the example of the Asmat dish (cat. 131) will show. How to interpret the hollow of the dish with its two appendices? Some authors evoke a stomach, others a much more intimate part of the female anatomy. We are careful not to say either way. But all this amply proves that New Guinea art plays at once on the accumulation of signs and on their capacity to transform one form into another.

Objects from New Guinea never have a simple reading. They play on meanings and forms. Eliminating or understanding their ambiguity requires in-depth knowledge of the symbolic worlds of each New Guinean society.

We lack the keys to interpret these forms. Aside from the fact that our knowledge of certain regions is limited, anthropologists have been confronted with
problems of interpretation. In the field, replies to their questions are deceiving. Local specialists rarely go beyond a simple inventory of signs, refusing to explain their origin or link them to a history or a myth. When anthropologists investigate more deeply, they are faced with this laconic, unequivocal statement: “Because our ancestors did it this way.”

We have had to get used to it. While works in the West put stories into images, in New Guinea, each figure seems to acquire meaning through simple invocation. Artists, whose task is to give form to the fundamental conceptions of the cultural group in which they are often the most learned members, have refused all critical analysis. What meaning can therefore be given to the process of compilation? The birds of paradise offer the beginnings of a solution. The populations of the Highlands have developed an art of adornment for which it would be very difficult to find an equivalent in other regions of the world. During the major exchange ceremonies that can bring together populations of a whole valley, the men wear ornaments made of feathers and shells that verge on the extravagant (illus. 11). In themselves, however, these feathers mean nothing. They are products of nature and their accumulation displays the wealth and prestige of their owners. Beyond this display of power, the inhabitants of the Highlands also judge the aspect of the feathers which the different groups wear in a competitive spirit (illus. 12). The feathers must shine, radiant in the sunlight. Woe betide the group whose adornments are lackluster! It would be seen as unquestionable proof that they are in a position of weakness, beset by infighting, or in a situation
where several group members have broken the ethical codes. Bright feathers, on the other hand, convey a unified, strong group capable of producing and reproducing. A feather tells no story. It is a sign, it indicates a state. The feathers assert the group's power. This analysis has created a fundamental breakthrough in our understanding of New Guinean art. Signs and objects no longer need to be read as iconographic elements, they should be considered for the effects that they produce. In other words, art should be conceived as a means of action upon the world, no longer as the symbolic transcription of the world. When applied, for example, to the bows of the dugout canoes that take part in the kula exchanges in the Trobriand Islands, this method of analysis enables us to understand the complexity of the iconography and the effects sought via the use and arrangement of signs.

For a Trobriand artist, a fine canoe bow must meet the customary canons. Trobriand sculptors pay close attention to the balance of figures and forms. They also have to make sure that they elegantly disperse the different signs that indicate, for example, butterflies or fishing eagles. Nothing links these elements, apart from the power they embody, the effect of which should, in turn, empower the expedition. The canoe must fly across the waters as swift and light as a butterfly; the expedition must bring back the coveted object of prestige, like a fishing eagle swooping infallibly on its prey. The equilibrium of the figures on the surfaces must spur fascination in he who sees them. They must seduce him, their magical action must force the prestigious and powerful owner to hand over the coveted object post
haste. The same notion of magical action can be found at work with the Abelam people, but it is deployed with different methods. As Ludovic Coupaye explains later, a work is considered aesthetically pleasing when it has a clear design, accurate forms, and when it produces an impression of vibration. This vibration, however, is only one element of the action upon viewers. The play on meaning is another. The diversity of the figures means metaphorically conveys the power of its sculpture and the ancestors to generate the world. Through this, men put the foundation of every society into images: the power to create and impregnate.

This way of using material obliges us to reconsider our own, sometimes too limited, approach, in order that the true value of the many subtleties of creation in a work from New Guinea may be appreciated. Analysis of one of the most important objects in the Barbier-Mueller collection can demonstrate this, both through the power of its sculpture and the importance it holds in society. The work in question is the men's house hook surmounted by a female figure (cat. 32). The sculpture is impressive. The body is taut, the round belly is thrown forward, as are the breasts. The legs are flexed, the position of the arms shows the tension of the figure. The contrast between the head and the body is striking. While the scarified body reveals the bumps and the raw material of the wood, the face is smooth. It is covered with modelled earth and sap. This eye-catching change in material is entirely intentional. Better still, it is significant. For this overmodeling carries within it the qualities of flesh and blood, indispensable elements for life given by mothers.

The wood is a substitute for bones and body structure and the vital forces of men.

This brief introduction is a mere overview of the wealth of a collection and the interpretations it raises. In the following chapters, readers will be able to delve into the maze of objects and their interpretation. But they will also have to take a good look at the objects presented to discover how carefully they have been made; how refined and balanced they are; how complex, astonishing, and provocative their interpretation can be. Never forgetting that these objects serve a power that belongs to men as much as to ancestors; ancestors who are feared shadows, both the power at the origin of the world and the possessors of the indispensable germative forces that every society must have to survive.

Notes
6. Anna Karina Hermens in this volume (Lake Sentani chapter).
7. For a presentation of this history see Kauflmann, C., “Postscript: the Relationship between Sepik Art and Ethnology”, in (ed.) Greub, Authority and Ornament: Art of the Sepik River, Basel, 1985, pp. 53-47.
8. Peter Ter Kuirs, in this volume (Huon Gulf chapter).
9. Hermens, in this volume (Lake Sentani chapter).
10. Joshua Bell, in this volume (Gulf of Papua chapter).
11. Anita Herle, in this volume (Torres Strait chapter).
Illus. 13
Swampy banks of the Sepik River in Papua New Guinea.


On the place of artists and the problem of canons (which we do not go into here) see Christian Kaufmann's study on the art of Melanesia in Kaeppelin, Kaufmann, Newton, L'Art de l'Océanie. Paris, Cité Del Castillo, 1993, in particular: pp. 547-552.


Shelly Campbell. The Art of Kuya. Oxford, Berg publication, 2002. See also Beram in this volume (Maeqim chapter) and the analysis of Alfred Gell.

Ludovic Couypaye, in this volume (Abelam chapter).