ADORNING THE BODY
Among the most impressive photographs from New Guinea are those of men and women adorned. They depict men from the Highlands with expressively painted faces and imaginatively decorated wigs or women with elaborately decorated aprons, ornaments, and flower arrangements or with shell-decorated string bags adorning their backs (Illus. 2). Photographs more than a century old document the pride and self-assurance of men—sometimes described as warriors, sometimes as participants in a celebration—standing in groups with elaborate decorations for their hair, chests, and arms. There are photographs of widows with ash rubbed into their skin, which seems to fuse with the widows’ ornaments, very often consisting of grey Job’s Tears [Coix lacrimae] (Illus. 1). Adornments are as varied as the cultures of New Guinea. In neo-Melanesian Pidgin the word bilas refers not only to the individual decorative object designed according to local principles of composition, but also to the often perishable arrangements of leaves, flowers, stalks, and seed pods used for special occasions, which seem to fuse with face paint and feathers into human works of art. Bilas refers to permanent body decoration in the form of decorative scars and tattoos; it refers to the decoration of string bags and other objects; and to the rather random “found objects” of materials not traditionally considered decorative but that are spontaneously declared to be such because they seem new, unusual, rare, or
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Illus. 2

Cat. 138
Back ornament in the form of a kabel men string bag covered in hornbill feathers. PNG, Mountain Ok region, Telefomin group. H. 43 cm. Inv. 4099-12.

even a little "crazy", and hence, suited to making the wearer stand out from the usual standard for a moment or even a more extended period. Their playful use of adornment in everyday situations and the spontaneous joy they derive from adorning themselves, make it clear that the inhabitants of New Guinea see adornment as a reflection of individual notions of beauty, attractiveness, and appeal and as part of the individual personality.

Admittedly, this aspect pales in comparison to the large decorative arrangements compositions (illus. 12) employed for celebrations and rituals, behind which people appear to lose their individuality and simultaneously emerge all the more clearly in their social and spiritual personalities.

All parts of the body are decorated. Distinguishing between jewellery, clothing and decorative accessories seems pointless. Wigs, hair baskets, combs, and hairpins, often combined with elaborate arrangements of feathers, emphasise the size and physical profile of those who wear them. Headbands or nose and ear ornaments frame and accentuate the face; necks and chests are decorated with chains, bands, and pendant jewellery, often worn side by side or on top of each other (cats. 162-163). Large pectorals (cats. 142, 144-145), whose visual impact works at a distance, and ornaments worn on the back offer protection in a literal and metaphorical sense (illus. 5). Belts accentuate the centre or support clothing (cats. 157-159) and protective penis sheaths emphasise masculinity (cat. 153). Upper arms are decorated with
woven bands or armlets into which croton leaves or bone daggers can be inserted for additional decoration. Decorative bands or rattles are worn on the legs. Richly decorated string bags, worn by men on the chest or over the arm, are indispensable accessories in the Sepik coastal region (cat. 139), whereas among the Telefomin in the upper reaches of the Sepik River, they were used to decorate the back (cat. 138). Arrangements of flowers, valuable feathers, and bird skins add colourful accents to rituals and celebrations (illus. 10).

In New Guinea, adornment satisfies a personal pleasure in decoration and at the same time permits a presentation of self according to social norms. Men in particular express status and prestige by their choices. By wearing special ornaments they demand recognition and convey ideas of beauty and strength that transcend the individual (illus. 3). All important stages in a person’s life are marked by corresponding decorations or are connected with the right or duty to wear a particular ornament. Even small children are often elaborately adorned (illus. 13). The piercing of the nasal septum or the fitting of bands or armlets on the upper arm are important occasions in the life of a young person, often connected with a special level of initiation that is in turn indicated by the appropriate object. The successful completion of initiation is demonstrated by special ornaments and was a precondition for wearing war ornaments, to which magical qualities were attributed. Success in headhunting—conceptually
associated with procreative properties—was demonstrated by special penis decorations or the use of strips of pelt.

Women's ornaments seem to be less fixed in their range and meaning. At dance ceremonies, stretched string bags covered with shells are worn on the back (Illus. 2). Valuable shells worn on ritual occasions indicate the wealth of a clan or family. In dowries, the distinction between ornament and "money" blurs. In the Sepik region, objects such as belts decorated with cone shells fulfil both functions (cat. 158). The dowry of the Lumi is also used alternatively as a decoration for the chest or as a belt. Young brides in the central Sepik region wear headdresses covered with shells when they first enter their husband's home (cat. 152). These testify to the wealth of their family and a small emblem, the wearer's membership in a clan or totem. The ornaments prescribed for widows communicate her isolation from society after a death and, when discarded, the end of the mourning period (Illus. 1).

Most materials commonly used for traditional jewellery had, at the same time, money and/exchange value. They were and are an essential part of dowry payments and of exchanges between individual clans. This is true for the mother-of-pearl and the gold lip shells as well as for the large number of sea snail shells and shell fragments, some of which were circulated in manufactured forms. They were traded on expeditions along the coasts or from valley to valley, sometimes crossing enemy territories, so that their value increased with their distance from the coast. The same is true of curved pig teeth, canine teeth

Illus. 3
Dancer wearing a headdress crowned with hornbill beaks and bird of paradise feathers. A large pectoral ornament on his chest is covered in Abrus seeds. PNG, Milne Bay Province, Goodenough Bay, Rausowwa. Photo P. B. de Rautenfeld, 1925. Archives Museum der Kulturen, Basel. (F)Vb 5822.
of dogs, and pieces of turtle shell, all of which are widely used in coastal regions. In some cases, however, finished or “half-finished” decorative objects were traded, such as pectorals from Altape (cat. 144) and armlets from the Sepik coastal region (cat. 154). The former were worn along the entire northern coast, but the complex decoration was only produced in one small region, whereas the turtle shell armlets were either already decorated with carving in the coastal region or reworked and varied locally by the recipients along the Sepik. Other ideas for decoration were no doubt passed on along trading lines, even beyond the large trading networks of the Motu or the Tami and Siassi. Designs were no doubt copied and transformed and, in some cases, given a new local significance when they seemed to possess power or even merely looked attractive to the local community.

With the onset of the colonial period, materials newly available, such as shirt buttons (cat. 151), industrially produced beads or porcelain teeth, pieces of fabric, woollen threads, and later, plastic string or metal objects, began to be integrated into traditional forms of jewellery without fundamentally altering their appearance or meaning. They were substitutes similar to those in use traditionally when sufficient valuables were not available and had to be copied. Imports were appreciated as much as traditional valuables, but, at the most, for brief periods. Only in a few cases did they replace or displace them.
Necklaces made from industrially produced beads, for example, have become part of larger decorative ensembles or are now found at many markets in New Guinea (illus. 10), in combination with shells and synthetic threads as "urban" everyday ornaments. The separate decorative materials are combined and assembled into ornaments by tying, weaving, over-casting, and intertwining fibres and various strips of leaves and bark or by a combination of these techniques. Resins, often dyed black were employed to fix raw materials to a more stable base. Work in "soft" materials is generally attributed to women, who in many places produce the bags and mesh fabrics that often provide the foundations for ornaments. Only in the Sepik River region and in parts of the coastal region is a sturdy mesh fabric, reserved for ritual or valuable objects, produced by men. They use the same netting technique the women use for their large string bags, but tighten the individual loops, often omitting alternating rows.
The resulting mesh is fairly sturdy, but still flexible. The value of ornaments is determined by the materials used, by the artist’s design, and the perfection of its execution. Along the north coast, for example, the arrangement of valuables used for important ornaments reserved for men, was established by tradition and largely standardised. The selection of flawless snail or mussel shells, attentiveness in working with them, and the appropriate ritual work are all necessary to fulfill these standards perfectly and convey both power and aesthetics in the finished product. Objects whose flat surfaces—bark, coconut shell, or turtle shell, for example—lend themselves to decoration, offer the artists greater freedom of design. When making incised decorations, executed with burnis of bone, the full repertoire of forms of the regional style is available to artists. The ornaments executed—from tendril and flower patterns to stylised depictions of people and animals—reflect mythical and ritual meanings and have counterparts in paintings and carvings. Individual patterns, however, can be achieved by opposed or staggered arrangements of Nassa or cowrie shells or by variations of the geometric patterns of turtle shell mounted to large Cymbium shells.

The vast majority of the patterns and variations used is abstract or, in the case of specific necklaces with serially arranged dog’s teeth (cat. 163) or snail shells, almost graphic in nature. This is also true of the patterns of string bags, though they certainly
Cat. 150
Kolginit pectoral ornament. PNG.
Middle Sepik River. H.: 38 cm.
Inv. 4258.

Cat. 151
Ornamental element in the shape of a human head. Two pig teeth frame the face, which has eyes made of buttons. PNG, Sepik River region. H.: 14.5 cm.
Formerly Josef Mueller collection.
Inv. 4274-3.

Illus. 5

allude to natural forms, and the decoration of woven bags with worked-in patterns or appliqués work (cats. 139, 141). Here, the challenge for the artists lies in producing symmetry and balance and, perhaps, in conveying the basic social and aesthetic values associated with them.

Representations of independent human forms, by contrast, are rather rare in the decorative arts. Outstanding examples of this include the small hairpins from the northern coast (cat. 156), which are decorated with a silhouette-like overlay of turtle shell ranging in design from abstract patterns to distinct human or animal forms shown in squatting positions. What is presumably a human figure is also found on a woven bag (cat. 141) onto which the red,
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Illus. 6

Illus. 7
During the reclusion period, the new initiate's body is scarified with motifs evoking the scales of the ancestral crocodile. PNG, Middle Sepik River, latmul area, Karaku. Photo Felix Speiser, 1930. Archives Museum der Kulturen, Basel. (F)vb 710.

The squatting figure has been sewn on as a nearly circular emblem. Evident allusions to clan or founding ancestors or totems are found in the small decorative objects made of mesh fabric that depict human faces or animal heads, which are themselves decorated and adorned with valuable objects such as pig teeth (cats. 149-151). They were widespread in the Sepik and Maprik region and even today they are produced in the central Sepik region for initiation ceremonies. They too were once associated with headhunting or battle, but today are worn by both men and women in ritual contexts. Other objects that make prominent use of mesh fabric include the pectorals from the Huon Gulf region (cat. 142) and Astrolabe Bay, which are decorated with Ovula shells. Those from Astrolabe Bay (cat. 75) have a triangular form and vary in their design from completely abstract forms to clear depictions of faces, which may represent tutelary spirits of ancestors, as indeed the abstract forms may as well.

Decorative objects associated with battle and ritual status reveal an astonishing formal consistency—across a larger region and over a period of more than fifty years. This is particularly true of pectorals, whose pig teeth, Ovula shells, or dogtooth decora-
Cat. 152
Ambusab bridal headdress made of wickerwork covered in shells.
PNG, Middle Sepik River, Latmul area. L: 80 cm. Inv. 4274-6.

Cat. 153
Penis sheath. PNG, Upper Sepik River, May and Apel rivers.
L: 15.5 cm. Inv. 4099-11.

tions are also intended to have an effect from afar (cats. 75, 142, 144-146). In battle they were held in the teeth by a wooden rod attached to the back, so that the pig teeth or Ovula shells appear to emerge from the wearer's mouth. An ornament worn in this way—and they were reserved for initiated men—was intended to express aggressiveness and readiness for battle and to unnerve the enemy. If handled "correctly", these ornaments also had a protective function before a battle. They made the wearer fearless, invulnerable, or even invisible; hence, they represented the protection and aid of ancestors and spirits. Used alternatively as an
ornament in celebrations they were, like weapons, an indispensable part of a man’s self-presentation.

Within a given cultural group, adornment reinforces and confirms the individual’s status and prestige. Its outward effect, especially when worn for group events, was to convey power, energy, and a sense of the presence of ancestors. This is the goal of the events of many Highlands groups. Wearing ornaments for the head and face that at first glance seem identical (Illus 12); they appear in public during rituals, communal pig feasts, and dance competitions—with elaborate arrangements of feathers, with faces carefully painted, with bodies oiled, and wearing ornaments and festive loincloths. When the loincloths and feather ornaments of the dancers swing in the same rhythm, the oiled bodies gleam, and the performance comes off perfectly, this is seen as an indication of the goodwill of ancestors and supernatural powers, conveying to observers a sense of martial presence, ritual power, and sexual potency that endures far beyond the immediate performance. Often the specific ornaments recede into the background, even when they are made of highly valuable snail and mussel shells.

The combined effect of ornaments and body painting results in culturally specific images or animated sculptures. The Abelam are said to believe that “a handsomely decorated man is more beautiful than any sculpture”. Indeed, the visual correspondences between sculptures, which depict yam spirits and creative beings and adorned men, are striking: the painting of their faces, including the eyes, and
bodies is nearly identical. The ornaments of the Big Men—on sculptures emphasised by painting—are worn in combination with leaves and feathered sticks to produce a lively and moving effect. This impression is supplemented and accentuated by the kara-ut, an ornament with a distinct human form normally worn on the back (cat. 149). When held in the teeth, it combines the face of the wearer with the pig teeth of the ornament to form a creature that seems to be holding a human enemy in its fangs.

In the context of initiation ceremonies in the Middle Sepik area, lavishly decorated men conduct the all-night wal dance, in which they publicly play the part of the important ancestral spirit, before the initiates are given their scar tattoos the following day. The resulting decorative scars are attributed to the bite of the crocodile, which represents the creator spirit of the primordial era in physical form. These scars, interpreted as crocodile scales (illus. 7), are from that point on the inextinguishable sign of the initiates’ contact with the primordial era, which is emphasised and expanded in later public presentations of the initiates by “mobile” ornaments, that is, armlets, feather ornaments, and decorated chalk calabashes.

Along the Sepik River, as in most of New Guinea, specific ornaments are outward signs of a socially and ritually integrated, complete personality. These distinctive ornaments are elaborated upon when an ancestor is represented at an inauguration feast or a similar occasion. These already impressive appearances are exceeded by far when an ances-
Cat. 158
Wickerwork belt decorated with filed cone shells. PNG, Sepik River, April River. L: 65.5 cm. Inv. 4274-9.

Cat. 159
Wafu belt or pectoral entirely decorated with filed Nassa shells. PNG, Sandaun Province, Lumi group. L: 61 cm. Inv. 4274-8.

for himself is ritually present for special occasions. His skull—once kept, over-modelled and painted, in the men’s house—or a wooden substitute, and the suggestion of a body, almost disappear under an elaborate arrangement of ornaments: sticks covered with feathers; shell necklaces and belts adorned with snail shells, leaves, flowers, and face paint; all combine to produce a flamboyant, impres- sive, and perhaps unforgettable image in which the carefully arranged excess of ornaments and valu- ables contributes fundamentally to the impression of spiritual presence and creative energy. It becomes evident that ornaments are a constitutive part of the visual representation of ancestors and creator spirits, as is attested to even by the often “bare” masks and sculptures in our collec-
Illus. 12
A Big Man at a major gathering, adorned with feathers and shell ornaments, his face coated in coal, beating his kundu hourglass drum. PNG, Highlands, Mount Hagen. Photo Josette and Charles Lenars.

Illus. 13
Photo of a child at a festival. Like the adults, he wears a richly-decorated costume and a red feather headdress ringed with a band of green flower beetles. PNG, Highlands, Wahgi Valley. Photo Josette and Charles Lenars.

tions; in the Sepik region, by the cowrie or Nassau shells that have been inserted in masks (cat. 69); in the form of actual or carved ornaments (cat. 20) and depictions of scar tattoos on sculptures (cat. 32); and in the form of noses and ears decorated with fibres or braided ornaments for the arms and legs (cat. 70). The same observation applies, with variations, to other stylistic regions, with differences in the emphasis on particular decorative elements; even small depictions of human figures from the Huon Gulf region have extended, decorated ear-
lobes, whereas the sculptures of Astrolabe Bay have both extended and pierced earlobes and chin decorations that are probably identical to the “warrior’s ornaments” held in the wearer’s mouth. Asmat ancestor skulls are decorated with seeds and their characteristic nose ornaments; the noses on gope boards are pierced and often ornamented with fibres or a nose rod.

For the cultures of New Guinea, ornament is more than inessential decoration: it marks the individual as a socially and spiritually integrated person; represents wealth and influence, sexual attractiveness and potency, power, and—in an earlier age—a willingness to fight. As an amulet or magical construct, it establishes a symbolic bridge to helping-spirits and it is an outward sign of the spiritual contact with numinous forces. As an essential attribute it enables dancers and mask bearers to represent
other worldly beings in vivid form. When used for objects, it indicates the special quintessence of sacred flutes, boats, men's houses, and, among the Abelam, yam tubers. Ornament is present in everyday life and at celebrations. It is the attribute that defines both people and their ancestors and cultural beings and conveys identity and belonging.

Notes

1. In 1899, Hagen described the specialisation on particular products in the area around Bogadjim where, according to his observations, nothing was produced but fish, for which most objects of value, including jewellery and utensils, were traded (Hagen, 1899).

2. Reiche (1913, p. 88, cat. 22) illustrates as an example a headdress that resembles a Sepik belt with cone snail decorations. The cone shells were painted in red and surrounded white (cat. 156). More common is the replacement of one of the materials, pig tooth or shell, with others that are cut from conch shells in similar form.

3. How long warrior's decoration continued to be used along the northern coast as ritual decoration and status symbols after armed conflicts had ceased, cannot be determined precisely, but certainly that was the case until well after the colonial period. On the Rai coast, many older forms of ornament, apart from the warrior's decorations, continue to be used in the traditional way.


Illus. 15
Detail of a strip of green flower beetles set in a band of woven orchid stems. Photo Josette and Charles Lenars.