Carving and Painting, Materials and Techniques

In 1993 when assembling a collection of woodcarvings for the Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, I had the good fortune to record the process of the manufacturing of shields in the village of Amanarrai in central Asmat (Smidt 1995: pp. 12-16). Shields are either made of buttress roots from large trees in the jungle or from mangrove trees.¹

Roughly Shaping the Shield with an Axe

The work starts early in the morning as several woodcarvers travel by canoe to a place in the bush, not far from the village. After selecting a suitable tree, rough incisions are made with an axe to mark an outline of the desired size of the board to be cut from the buttress root (illus. 3). An arm length (between the upper arm and the beginning of the fingers) is taken as the width of the board. The sketched contours are then hewn out by the carver, assisted by one or two male relatives. After approximately half-an-hour, the cutout piece, which is still loosely attached, can be completely removed by pressing down on it. While still in the bush, the woodcarver carves the rough form of the shield, leaving a recess on the rear, which is later shaped into a handle.

Trimming with Long-Hafted Chisels and Adzes, and Carving the Motifs with Small Chisels and Knives

Further work is done in front of the men’s ceremonial house. It takes about a day to work the board. With a long-hafted chisel (so that the woodcarver is able to apply ample force with both hands and arms), the board is trimmed down to the desired shape and thickness (about one centimetre) and then the surface is smoothed.

Planning the Design

The carver considers beforehand how to arrange the motifs within the general framework of the design (illus. 5). Sometimes he temporarily arranges several leaf stems on the board to delineate the arrangement of the motifs. The procedure is to start near the upper edge and work downward; or to start at the top, followed by a start at the bottom, gradually working from both directions until the designs connect somewhere in the middle. As a general principle, the outlines of the motifs are “sketched”, that is thinly cut in the wood before the grooves are deepened and hollowed out (illus. 6).
Illus. 1
Pari the sculptor (third from left) and men from Pupis village in the Asmat area display their shields. Photo Jac. Hoogerbrugge, 1967. ABM-archives barbiermueller.
Pigments
The Asmat artist uses three colors: white (lime), red (ochre), and black (charcoal) (illus. 7-8). Even today, one hardly ever departs from this traditional color scheme. The pigments are applied with small sticks, tufts of fiber, tattered leaves, or by hand. When applying the white pigment, several little piles of powdery lime are distributed on the wooden surface. These piles, mixed with water, are then gradually smeared over the surface of the shield. First, the back of the shield is done. On a white background, black and red zigzag stripes are drawn on both sides of the vertical axis to indicate the "track of the python". After this, the front of the shield is decorated (illus. 8). Some artists start with white, others with red. The grooves of the designs are filled with red pigment, the color of blood and thus, life. The ridges are done in black, usually as the last step in the process, but the reverse may also occur. Around the motifs carved in high relief, the surface of the shield is painted white and the top part is painted in red and black.²

Releasing the Spirits
Even in the case of shields made for sale, a ritual is enacted to release the spirits. Standing in a row, the makers hold the shields in their raised arms. A leader of the ceremonial house, standing somewhere in the middle, shoots an arrow into the air. By doing this the spirits of the ancestors after whom the shields are named are released. This prevents them from bothering their descendants and even becoming dangerous by making people sick.
Illus. 2

Symbolism of Shields
Each shield is a representation of a human figure which has a number of limbs being recognizably, or not so recognizably, indicated (Zegwaard and Sowada n.d.: p. 2). The head is often clearly visible at the top end of the shield (cats. 185, 186). The ridge at the back, including the grip—carved along the vertical axis—represents the spine. "The other body parts, in particular, the bones and joints, sometimes also the weak parts, are only rarely rendered completely. The navel is almost always there" (ibid.).
Cat. 188
Shield, Indonesia, Papua Province, Asmat area, Eastern region, Yair, Bras, or Yupmakain (formerly Citak) group.
H: 166 cm. Inv. 42504.

These body parts carved on the shield are surrounded by "symbolic references to the spirit world and the transfer [of the dead] to the world of the spirits" (ibid.). References to certain animals such as flying fox bats are often included. In myths, people change into various kinds of animals. These are symbolic references to "the dead after whom the shield is named, on his way from human life to an existence in the realm of the spirits" (ibid.). It would appear that shields, apart from their practical protective function in warfare, served in the first place to ensure the shield bearers of the support of their ancestors and to give them exceptional power and courage. Furthermore, the headhunting symbols carved in the shields would scare the enemy to such an extent that he would drop his weapons and could easily be taken captive. Shields were a precious property because of their symbolic and emotional value. In the central Asmat region, various kinds of damage could be inflicted on the shield as a token of grief upon its owner's death: its protuberance was cut off or a crack (illus. 2) was made in the shield or it was broken and laid on top of the corpse, which was rolled in mats. In the northwestern Asmat region, however, a shield was seldom
broken when the owner died. Here, shields were usually passed down from father to son (Konrad, Konrad, and Schneebaum 1981: pp. 43-48).

**Design Structure of Shields in Relation to Essential Aspects of Asmat Culture**

Asmat shields have been the subject of a formal stylistic analysis by A. Boeren.\(^3\) He began with a number of characteristics (1995: p. 262):

1. The shape of the shield;
2. The ornaments that form the decoration on the front;
3. The level of symmetry in the ornamentation;
4. The utilization of available space;
5. The frames bordering the ornamentation;
6. Sculptures at the top of the shield;
7. The use of colour;
8. The depth of the carved relief;
9. Ornaments on the back of the shield.

Boeren’s inventive formal analysis enabled him to discover an inherent structure in the overall design pattern that he describes in terms of “rules of combination” and “rules of transformation”
Illus. 3
The Asmat shield is carved out of the trunk of a mangrove buttress root.

Illus. 4 (lower photo)
Once the bark has been stripped off the rough piece of wood, the future shield is taken to the village by canoe. Photo Dirk Smidt, 1993. © Dirk Smidt and Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden.
When the shield has acquired its definitive form, the design starts out as rough outlines of motifs that will soon cover the entire surface. Photo Dirk Smidt, 1993. © Dirk Smidt and Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden.

Illes. 6 (lower photo) The sculptors follow the preparatory “drawing” and start gouging the wood to create a relief design on the front of the shield. Photo Dirk Smidt, 1993. © Dirk Smidt et Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden.
ILLUS. 7
The orange-red hue of an Asmat shield is the result of a mixture of powdered ochre and water. Photo Dirk Smidt, 1993. © Dirk Smidt and Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden.

ILLUS. 8
The design is painted with ochre, a stark contrast with the white lime-coated background. Photo Dirk Smidt, 1993. © Dirk Smidt and Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden.

(ibid.: pp. 267-272). A striking example of transformation is illustrated by Boeren. Two abstract animal motifs may partly overlap to become an "independent ornament": a stylized hocker figure (cats. 186-187) (ibid., pp. 267-272, fig. 86).  

Besides this, Boeren has indicated that a comparison between the designs on Asmat shields and other aspects of Asmat culture can produce interesting analogies. He sees parallels between the ideas of headhunting and representations of headhunting symbols on the shields. In this regard, the link between the generations is essential: on the one hand, the obligation of the younger generation to avenge the death of the older persons; and, on the other hand, the connection and repetition of ornaments on the shields. As the continuity of society is secured by the mutual obligation of headhunting
between the generations (and the relationship between headhunting and initiation), there also exists a continuity in the designs on the shields. That continuity "consists of a series of identical elements, mutually connected by rules of mirroring and repetition" (Boeren 1985a: p. 185). His tentative conclusion is: "...that the Asmat woodcarvers as a collective body in their creations, translate the relations of continuity and interchangeability, [which] characterise the ideas in relationship to headhunting, into spatial relations of combination and transformation between types of ornament. They hereby bring about not only a synthesis between different elements of form, but also between ways of thinking and ornamentation" (ibid.).

The hidden structure to be discovered in the design world of Asmat shields did not prevent Boeren from being observant of the "dynamics of the Asmat art of woodcarving". However, while acknowledging a certain freedom of the artists, he insists that they are bound to certain structural rules.

Notes
1 Cats. 186-187, also cats. 130, 185, 188-190.
2 The total painting and painting process for a large shield may take five to six days.
3 The results of his research based on a thorough analysis of form and motifs of 60 shields from various collections are summarized in two publications (Boeren 1985 and 1990).
4 Much earlier, without applying such a thorough formal analysis as Boeren developed, Gerbrands noted a similar phenomenon of transformation showing how a hocker figure [squatting figure] could consist of two praying mantis figures overlapping each other (see Gerbrands 1967a: p. 34, figs. A-B). See also cat. 187 in this work.
5 By looking for similarities or connections between a specific style of art and other aspects of culture (especially social structure), Boeren is a follower of the structuralist school in cultural anthropology. This approach is based on the assumption that the phenomenal or visible reality is founded on a not immediately perceptible organizing principle, or structure, comparable to the grammar of a language.