Between one to two centuries ago, populations, probably from the banks of the Sepik River, migrated towards the southern foothills of the Prince Alexander Range (running along the north coast of Papua New Guinea). As they were progressing northward, they exchanged social, cultural, and technical elements with those whose territory they were conquering, notably, the Arapesh. They eventually settled in villages composed of constellations of hamlets, spread along the ridges of the foothills. They developed an elaborated agriculture, based on the cultivation of taros, yams, bananas, and edible cane. Beautiful gardens in the secondary forest on the steep slopes provided the base for subsistence, along with hunting, breeding of domestic pigs, and the processing of sago palm pith, producing the sago starch dish, widespread in the geographic area.

It was in the early 1910s that the inhabitants of this region first encountered Europeans through the German Richard Thurnwald (1913), a member of the famous German expedition up the Kaiserin Augusta Fluss (the German name for the Sepik River). Scientific explorers were soon replaced in the 1920s by labour recruiters for cocoa plantations, followed by the establishment of the Australian administration at the Maprik station, in the wake of the discovery of alluvial gold in the area. The same period saw the beginnings of ethnography in the area, with Margaret Mead being the first to mention the “Abelam” (a derogatory term used by their neighbours), bringing attention to some of the most spectacular aspects of their visual domains. However, it was Phylis Kaberry, an American anthropologist, who published the first ethnography of the Abelam, distinguishing three dialects, Mamu- Kamu- (the Wosera), and Samu-kundi; and describing their intricate social context (Kaberry 1941a; 1941b; 1941c; 1941d; 1942). In the years following World War II (during which the Maprik area was the theatre of fighting between Japanese and Allied troops), the growing interest for New Guinea art brought into focus the Abelam productions, through the seminal works of scholars such as Anthony Forge (1962; 1966) and Gerd Koch (1968). Soon, the Abelam became famous for their flourishing and colourful production of sculptures, paintings, and architecture in relation to a distinctive social context. This social setting attracted the attention of 1970s and 1980s anthropological research on ritual architecture (Hauser-Schäublin 1989a), local resolution conflicts (Scaglion 1976), male-female relationships (Losche
Cat. 20
Wosera male figure surmounted by a hornbill, collected by Dr. Schauinsland of the Überseemuseum in Bremen in 1906. H.: 123 cm. Inv. 4080-1.

1982), land (Huber-Greub 1988), and the social context of art production (McGuigan 1992). During the six decades after World War II, as in many other parts of New Guinea, conversion to diverse forms of Christianity and the cash-crop economy (coffee, cocoa, and, more recently, vanilla) have introduced new forms of religious beliefs, subsistence, and a new way of life through increasing relationships with growing urban centres. Rice, tinned food, soda, alcohol, pop music, literacy, popular and religious Christian imagery have been integrated into more local forms to various degrees, be it in terms of materials for artistic creations or social or ritual practices, while at the same time pre-contact activities were transformed or abandoned.

Abelam art was connected with three interrelated main aspects of the social context and raises at least two associated issues in terms of our interpretation of New Guinea aesthetics, arts, and identity. The three aspects were firstly, a social organisation based on a dualist division; secondly, the role of initiation ceremonies; and thirdly, the cultivation, harvest, and display of massive decorated tubers in relation to harvest ceremonies. The two interrelated issues were on the one hand, the relationship between art and oral tradition, and on the other hand, the local conception of visual art as an actual device that transforms reality.

Abelam social organisation is based on clans, regrouping different lineages. Each clan is associated with a series of emblematic spirits, among which the "Gwaaldu", the clan's mythical ancestor, who is considered both as founder of the clan and as the receptacle of the spirits of all the clan's dead. In addition, each clan possesses a whole list of totemic entities, declined into
Illus. 1
Woulemoi, the painter of the village of Kalabu, crouched over a panel that will adorn the façade of an Abelam ceremonial house (1980).
Photo Jörg Hauser (Göttingen).

Illus. 2
Abelam ceremonial house, korambo. Iulupu region.
Photo Alfred Bühler, 1956. © Archives Museum der Kulturen, Basel. (Fb1 101518.)
Illus. 3
During initiation ceremonies, pigs are displayed before being exchanged between ritual partners. Abelan village of Malmba, 1978-1979. Photo Jörg Hauser (Göttingen).

birds, trees, insects, as well as water and land spirits. Although often identified by Abelan speakers on paintings and carvings, most of the spirits have no specific identity, with the exception of the main ancestor of the clan, the "Gwaahdu who does possess a specific name and plays an essential role in rituals, notably during the initiations. He is also identified as some of the main figures represented in the front of the elaborated ceremonial house (kurambu in Abulé, Abelan language. Haus Tambaran in Tok Pisin, cf. cat. 21 and illus. 2, 4), and in carvings (cats. 20, 22, 26-27).

The village's inhabitants are also divided into ceremonial moieties called ara, regardless of the clans, compared by Abelan contemporary speakers with the
Cat. 21 (above)
Teket frieze from an Abelam ceremonial house, collected in Maprik in 1974 by Dr. Fred Gerrits.
L.: 297 cm.
Inv. 40B0-11.

Illus. 4
Lower façade of the tambaran (ceremonial) house of Bongora. A man sitting in the foreground gives a sense of the gigantic scale of this architecture (see illus. 2). Photo Fred Gerrits.
two teams of a football game. Each male of one ara possesses a ceremonial partner, saabēra, in the other moiety, with whom he is officially engaged in competitive exchanges of pigs (cf. illus. 3) and decorated long yams. The other role of this ceremonial partner saabēra was to participate actively in the initiation of his partner's male child. Organised in four stages over the lifetime of a generation, the cycle of initiations was one of the main occasions for the production of paintings, carvings, and body decorations, and involved not only the village itself but also members of the neighbouring area (Smidt and McGuigan 1984; McGuigan 1989; 1992). During these initiations, young men were secluded and hidden from the rest of the village in a fenced area situated at the back of the kurambu over a period extending for several months. They were fed, taught by their father's saabēra, and shown visual materialisations of the spiritual world. Whereas most of them were composed of temporary structures made of flowers or even foam, others, more durable, such as wood-carvings, paintings, and masks, have reached Western collections.
The most spectacular forms included the *kura*mbu itself (Illus. 24), an A-shaped, fifteen-metres-high building (Hauser-Schäublin 1989a) with a façade covered by paintings and outlined by a frieze of carving (cat. 21), and with a series of visual representations displayed in the *kura*mbu, where the initiate was sent towards the end of his seclusion. The ceremonial house was divided into several chambers each displaying different aspects of the *Gwaaldu*. These chambers included painted sago spathes, wood sculptures (cats. 20, 22, 26-27), and composite representations of the "Gwaaldu" (Smidt and McGuigan 1984; Kaeppler et al. 1993). The final stage of the initiation was an important moment, both socially and visually: the sumptuously decorated initiates were released from their seclusion during a public ceremony, held in the front of the *kura*mbu, which involved the use of masks (cat. 25), songs, and music (cat. 165).

Cultivation, at the centre of the village activities, is organised around three main types of gardens: firstly, cash crops (coffee, cocoa, and vanilla) providing income for school fees, petrol, and store goods; secondly, the short yam gardens in which men and women collaborate in the cultivation of vegetables, taro, and banana varieties; thirdly, long yam gardens, where access is allowed only to men who follow strong taboos composed of food and sexual restrictions. Both short and long yam cultivation demonstrate the skill and botanical knowledge of the gardeners. But the growing of long yams (*waapi*) requires most of the men's efforts and the use of activities interweaving technical, magical, and social elements, involving cooperation, competition, and acquisition of magical substances used both as "fertilisers" and paint for the visual representations. All these operations are directed in order to obtain the longest tuber possible, reaching up to three metres. Perhaps one of the most striking artistic expressions of the Abelam, these long yams can be considered as artefacts, decorated in a similar fashion to the young initiates and presented during the annual harvest ceremony (Illus. 7-8). The decoration involves colourful compositions of roosters, cassowary and bird of paradise feathers, *Tridacna* shell, and headdresses and masks made either of wickerwork or wood (cats. 23-24). Once presented, the long yams, symbols of the
procreativity of the man and his clan, become highly prized symbolic valuables. They are exchanged during the competitive exchanges between saabéra, or used as forms of compensation for marriages or deaths or for the settlement of disputes.

The Abelam visual domain is composed of colourful figures in both two and three dimensions, and resorts to a corpus of semi-geometrical forms repeated over the different media—paintings, sculptures, ornaments, carvings—although never completely similar. Spirals, triangles, pointed ovals, zigzags, lozenges, rectangles, circles, and curvilinear motifs using symmetry and rotations, are combined to create representations of ancestors, spirits, or totemic species (cats. 20-21, 27) or to create less identifiable compositions of semi-geometric and curvilinear designs (cat. 28). Using a dark background, colours are often set in strong contrasts of black/white and red/yellow, to create a visual vibrancy, a quality enhanced by the use of paints bought in town stores (cf. the blue used on the drum in cat. 165). The Abelam evaluate this energy as essential for the power of the picture, which must be bright and vivid to be effective on the audience. While certain figures present human-like traits, others, such as the painted “Gwaa’du on the front of the kura’bu, display traits that combined insects, avian, and humanoid elements (illus. 2). The basic organisation of human-like figures will present an oval face, crowned and underlined by a crescent-like shape, representing the headdress and the beards (cats. 21, 27). Noses, designed as pointed-down arrows are outlined with red. White lines outlined with white spots and combined with dentes

Cat. 23
Yam mask presenting an avian-like face surmounted by a diadem. The special wickerwork techniques used by the Abelam display exceptional skill. H.: 48 cm. Inv. 4080-6.
or hatched motifs, will delimitate fields of yellow and red. Avian-like figures are also recurrent elements, birds being associated with clans, spirits, and other forms of spiritual power (cat. 20). While some wooden sculpture will directly represent a hornbill or cassowary, other production will only evoke bird-like traits, such as the basketry masks (cats. 23-25). Materials used include woods, leaves, string obtained from vines, feathers, flowers, and shells (obtained via a network of exchange reaching the coast); today, in combination with new materials acquired from stores, such as colourful plastic wrappings, nylon strings, industrial paints, pieces of cloths, tin, or cardboard.

The specificity of Abelam productions have become an important key study of anthropological discussions...

Illus. 6 (left to right)

Illus. 7

Illus. 8
Large yam, maambutap, decorated and presented at the village of Nyamikum in 2003. The top of the yam is covered in a wooden mask. Photo author’s own.
on art. On the one hand, the Abelam visual domains present a strong stylistic unity, identifiable at two levels: firstly, in the defined corpus of semi-geometric designs that are identified as ferns, swirls in the water, eyes, or female genitalia; the second level, where the motifs are combined to form figures, people will identify ancestors, spirits, or entities. On the other hand, there are no elaborate verbal interpretations of the iconography presented in the paintings, carvings, or masks, with no proper narrative or mythology and no overall explanations associated with any of the productions. The contrast between an obvious lack of exegesis and a strong stylistic coherence, reverberating throughout the types of media—figures, long yam decoration, paintings, drums, or ornaments—has allowed scholars to question the Western-based assumption of the automatic relationship between visual representations and verbal meanings. Drawing on a limited corpus of basic designs, the analysis of their composition does not lead to any identification of visual code, but rather, directs us towards a world of polysemic associations. Such polysemy, echoing in the fundamental role of metaphorical poetry in public orations, forces the audience to, themselves, work out any meaning of what they are experiencing, without necessarily feeling neither the need nor the ability to verbalise the content.

Cat. 25

Buapa (Baba) mask combining several wickerwork techniques capable of producing this astonishing overlapping in the piece. The face of the mask is rendered by a star motif highly prized by the Abelam and painted on polychrome sculptures.

H.: 42 cm. Inv. 4080-8.
Cat. 26
Large Abelam figure in light wood. Three birds carved on its back seem perched on its shoulders. H.: 192 cm. Inv. 4080-12.

Illustr. 10
One of the initiation rooms in the tomboran house in the village of Bongiora. Polychrome figures in the form of sculptures, reliefs, or painted panels, fill this secret space. Photo Fred Gerits (1972-1975).

Anthony Forge (1979), Diane Losche (1999), Noel McGuigan (1992), and recently, Howard Morphy (2005) have discussed what has been coined as the "ineffability" of the Abelam art. They have demonstrated that Abelam art cannot be seen as a communication system that refer to an extrinsic meaning (as does, for example, classical European paintings, which refers to themes coming from the Greek mythology and texts). It is rather a manifestation of invisible powers, the same ones that ensure human ability to produce food, to reproduce itself, or to be successful in war, love, or politics. Visual representations are thus seen as devices meant to affect and
transform their audience. The display of figures in the
dark chambers of the kurambu (illus. 10) was thus
said to operate a transformation in the initiate as he
goes through, while the figures of the façade of the
kurambu was said to affect the public, including vis-
itors from other villages. This property of Abelam
visual domain relies on the underlying conception
that paintings, carvings, dancers, and decorated
long yams are visible manifestations or indices
of invisible and hidden sources of power, namely,
spirits and ancestors.

However, a type of connection exists between visual
arts and verbal expression. Through its “indefinability”,
Abelam art is connected to an esoteric form of
knowledge—mayêra—which verbally manifests itself
as endless uses of metaphors (in Abelam aarja kurdi
or “veiled speech”) in songs, public speeches, and
spells. Aesthetical forms, such as metaphors, which
escape any definite explanation and are open to
shifting interpretations, are considered the more effi-
cient, notably because they require the active par-
ticipation of the audience. The power of Abelam art
comes from its veiled and escaping nature, which
engages and, thus, transforms its public’s percep-
tion of reality, as manifesting unseen procreative
powers.

In parallel, the ubiquity of this expressive power also
allows its efficacy to reverberate on other forms of
activities, such as gardening, war, love, ceremonial
exchanges, or social interactions. Body ornaments,
and the use of aesthetical expressions (songs,
colourful paints, etc.), in conjunction with practical
or technical processes, are used in order to invest themselves or their production with efficacy and power.

While, as in many other places in Papua New Guinea, colonialism and globalisation have deeply transformed local customs and behaviours, it has also raised a wider awareness of cultural identity vis-à-vis an increasing contact with the rest of the world. If anything, the introduction of vanilla cultivation after the 2000 hurricane Hudah that destroyed most of the production of Madagascar, confirms that the groups of the area cannot any longer be considered as isolated. Although, over the last thirty years, the Abelam seemed to have abandoned the organisation of the initiation cycles, the principal occasions for the production of sculptures and paintings; and while every

Cat. 28a
Bowl or spoon made out of a coconut shell and most probably used by men to drink yam soups in a ceremonial context. Diam.: 14.7 cm. Inv. 4080-14.

major hamlet seemed to have possessed a ceremonial house, only half a dozen currently remain in the Abelam area, and are viewed by villagers as a way to both affirm the strength of their identities and to attract tourists. Carvers, however, are still producing sculptures used to decorate public buildings, such as the seat of the local administration in Maprik and for local churches. Masks and ornaments are still made for public occasions, such as the long yam ceremonies, the National Independence Day, or art festivals gathering groups from the country. In such a context of dialogue between globalisation, tradition, and identities, Abelam art still acts as a device used to allow for the reproduction and the efficacy of cultural values.

Notes
1 Literally "house of spirits".
2 A Papua New Guinean official language.
Illus. 11
View of one of the hamlets of Nyamikum village.
Photo author's own (2003).

Cat. 28b (facing page)
Detail of the delicately incised outer surface
of the bowl in cat. 28a. Ringed by a zigzag motif,
the entire bowl is covered in spirals and pointed
oval shapes that join together to form the shape
of a scorpion. Four human faces in champlevé
are dispersed on the surface of the bowl.
Inv. 4080-14.