

Two-Dimensional Dancing

Date : April 9, 2007

Amanda Thai, Junior undergraduate majoring in Anthropology and Gender Studies, NYU. *Coaxing the Spirits to Dance* is an exhibition of Papuan Gulf art displayed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The exhibition is ensconced in the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas gallery on the first floor, as a cool grey box amongst the relatively chaotic three-dimensionality of the gallery itself. The main emphasis of the display is the masks, boards and objects collected from Papua New Guinea, kept in glass cases and complimented with text below and photographs. This choice of representation sets the atmosphere of the exhibit, and reveals the contrasting nature between the exhibit and the pieces on display.

There are five cultural groups from the Gulf province represented: the Elema speaking group in the east, the Purari Delta group, the Urama Islanders, the Era River group, and the Kerawa group in the west which includes Goaribari Island. However, these groups so distinctly identified in the opening paragraph are grouped together in the exhibit, with glass cases showing spirit boards from multiple groups right next to each other. The photographs below the cases pictures examples of the objects above. This manner of presenting the pieces indicates a belief in the importance of the broad function of the art object over the art object itself. In doing so, it simultaneously uproots these art objects from the subtle nuances of their own specific surroundings and groups them

indiscriminately within the Margaret Meadian ethnographic present 'Papuan Gulf'.

The use of photography also indicates this encompassing approach. The opening paragraph states that the "history of photography in Papuan Gulf essentially parallels that of sustained colonial contact, because it was primarily nonlocal visitors who made the photographs." By using photographs in this exhibit to describe the objects displayed above them, and then further removing these objects from their specific cultural contexts creates a very colonizing view of the material. The supplementary text does not aid to refute this perception. The majority of texts focus on the photographers and their backgrounds more than they do the cultural significances of the objects themselves. While some highlight certain physical attributes of a certain piece, a casual browser of the exhibit leaves knowing more about the Western travelers who took the pictures and the techniques they used to do so instead of the importance of the objects on display.

One of the many photographs in the exhibit shows a man holding up two kakame – clan spirit statues. One of these statues is displayed behind the photograph, and an examination between the two indicates that the statue itself is lacking a loincloth present in the photograph. There is no additional explanation to the loincloth's disappearance. The treatment of the kakame reveals the exhibit's failure to accurately present the objects in their cultural contexts. A description of another photograph states that the photograph's subject's "personal ornament indicate that [the photograph's subject] is probably a young girl." As personal ornaments are used to distinguish the gender of the subject, the kakame's ornamentation then, in the shape of its loincloth could have much cultural significance as well. The lack of a loincloth may mean something entirely difference from the presence of a loincloth. Unfortunately, a visitor would never know if this was the case. The exhibit instead chooses to mention that the man holding the two statues in the photograph remains unnamed – peculiar because the photographer usually lists the names of his friends. Nothing is said of either kakame or its significance.

However, the kakame is only one piece of the exhibit. The glass cases that dominate the space characterize the inadequateness of the presentation to fully appreciate the nature and form of the objects. Many of the pieces set in the glass cases are masks or items with ritual significance. The back wall of the exhibit displays two boards, both with holes or ledges on the bottom used as holds for holders to "raise above their heads" during dances. As the title of the exhibit indicates, these items are intended to move with dancers in rituals 'coaxing the spirits to dance'. Their creators embodied spirits within the form of the objects themselves, and these spirits lived through the shape and lines of the object. Footage of four keveke dancers at Kinomere Island shows the way these objects are meant to be used and perceived in their cultures. The objects are meant to be experienced, not only viewed. Taken out of context and placed in within glass cases, visitors of the exhibit are barred from ever experiencing these objects in the way they are originally intended to be experienced. The glass boxes distance the viewers from these objects in an alien way from how these objects are meant to interact with its surroundings, and doing so actually changes the nature of the objects themselves. These objects on the Papuan Gulf had a spiritual life, ever-changing as dancers carry them through multiple dances and rituals. As soon as they are locked in cool, sterile glass cases, the very nature of the objects change from metaphysical spirits to the bounded lines and contours of high art.

While the exhibit treats these objects with utmost respect – each object carefully labeled and catalogued, the exhibit respects these objects as Western art, in ways that Western art should be respected, rather than as Papuan objects. Even the labels are Western oriented, as they do not describe the maker or purpose of the object, but rather the Western photographer and the history of the photograph. Text accompanying the footage of keveke dancers described the documenter, James Francis Hurley being admonished for rearranging scenes for a more dramatic shot, yet that he “officially collected objects and photographed places that no longer survive in any other way.” The text perfectly describes what the exhibit actually does if it does not allow the visitor to fully comprehend Papuan Gulf objects as such, and that is to allow reflection on the Western societies that have visited the Papuan Gulf. Did the objects really survive, if they are eventually rearranged and displayed as Western art is displayed?

Coaxing the Spirits to Dance at the Metropolitan Museum of Art reaffirms a familiar concept in Western mentalities of art as paintings and sculptures. Once created, art is immovable and frameable. Art is easily captured in a single photograph and hung up neatly on walls. Art is collected and institutionalized. The objects in the exhibit, once installed become these western art pieces and are forced to conform to what is acceptable as art by Western art institutions. They are no longer worn or used by participants but observed distantly by observers. The glass separating the masks and shields of the Papuan Gulf from the audience is physical evidence of this break, and the photographs are legacy of the change these objects underwent in the translation. A description of the exhibit by the Metropolitan Museum of Art writes of “historical photographs” within the exhibit. Viewing the exhibit itself, one must ask the question of whose history do these photographs embody? Surely, the history of the Papuan Gulf is not the main focus here, and one would have to coax a lot harder for the spirits to truly dance.

Works Cited

- 2007. *Coaxing the Spirits to Dance: Art of the Papuan Gulf*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art.