

# Their interest in art has developed into a lifelong dedication to the future of the Asmat people

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Sometime early in 1971, we received word that a zoological team from Germany was coming to Asmat to do research. Ursula and Gunter Konrad and Kurt Kellermann arrived in July of that year after completing the lengthy bureaucratic procedures required for research in Asmat.

We soon learned that Gunter had only a year's study to complete for his medical degree, that Ursula's education was in fashion design, and that Kurt had come with them to assist as a taxidermist. They stayed in Asmat for months and traveled far into the interior of the country. They were the first to explore the (then) uncontacted Brazza River region, where they had a near brush with death when rushing rapids swept their dugout, powered by an outboard motor, and split it apart. In the southern part of Asmat they set up an enclosed blind, made of thatch, in the top of a tree to film the mating dance of the bird of paradise. Doing so took six weeks of patient, daily observation and resulted in a film which is still acclaimed as the best of its kind ever produced. Wherever they went, they collected a host of zoological specimens and we all learned more than we ever expected to about the jungle's mammal, reptile, bird and insect fauna. Did you know, for example, that there are nine species of the bird of paradise? Can you imagine



Ursula and friend

twenty species of poisonous snakes slithering through the Asmat jungle?

The openness of the Asmat people also delighted them, as did their art. The Konrads purchased a sizable amount of artifacts, especially war shields of the Brazza. These they divided into three lots: one for themselves, the other two to be donated to our museum and to the Cenderawashi University Museum in Jayapura. They have, ever since, remained generous friends of the mission and of the Asmat people.

After returning to Germany, Gunter completed his medical degree and, after his internship, spent five years specializing in urology and microsurgery. He developed the first sound-wave (ESW) kidney-stone

crusher for the University Hospital of Homburg-Saar. As a microsurgeon, he developed new techniques in pediatric urology, for which he has gained an international reputation. In 1985, he became the chief urologist and chairman of the urological unit of the Franciscan Hospital in Monchengladbach. Elected to the International Microsurgical Society in 1986, he still serves on the advisory board of the society and as a corresponding member of the American Urological Association.

The Asmat people and the work of the missionaries continued to frequently lure Ursula and Gunter back to Asmat. In 1979, they brought their two daughters, Carolina and five-year-old Katarina, to the jungle for the first time.

The wonderful art of the Asmat have led the Konrads to develop a mission to them. They believed that if people in authority were to make decisions compatible with and guaranteeing Asmat's future, the people and their land needed to be promoted on both national and international levels. They continued to collect Asmat artifacts and to publish articles about the culture. Once they had collected a sufficient amount of art, they organized an exhibition of Asmat art in Hofheim (near Frankfurt) and a second, later, in Heidelberg. For both, Ursula played the major role in designing the exhibits' displays. For the Heidelberg exhibit, they convinced

the city council to underwrite the building of a new wing to its museum and to finance an Asmat research department, under the direction of the city's famous University. They also involved the highest levels of the Indonesian Government in both exhibitions. To date, they have collaborated in sixteen Asmat exhibitions organized by various museums in Europe, which they have been asked to supplement with pieces from their own collection (as one might expect, since they have the world's largest and most complete collection of Asmat artifacts).

Their efforts have most definitely borne fruit. Aware of the Konrads' work, the Indonesian Government soon began to promote Asmat art and to initiate European and U.S. tours by groups of Asmat people who demonstrated their traditional feasts and dances.

Ursula and Gunter are now organizing another exhibition, in conjunction with the Berlin Museum, to commemorate Indonesia's fiftieth birthday, in 1995, as a modern nation. Thanks to their efforts, Merauke's Regional Civil Administrator, the Governor of Irian Jaya, other officials, and a small group of Asmat people will travel to Berlin for the event. "This must be done," they say, "for the sake of Asmat's future." For their dedicated mission to Asmat, the Konrads deserve gratitude, honor and praise. □