



Papua's motifs, Isula and Koro, suggest a brooding elegance.

# Papua's Asmat Art Beckons

By Trisha Sertori  
Images courtesy of Detlef Ilgner

**P**apua is one of the world's last 'hearts of darkness'. Like the Congo and the Amazon basin, Papua is a sprawling sea of dense green lowlands spliced by brooding rivers rushing at the feet of mountains that thrust hard their frozen tips through graying clouds heavy with rain.

Plants and animals still unknown to the human world live and breed in much of this impenetrable and isolated landscape.

It is in the highlands and along the coastal strip of this wilderness that hundreds of tribes have lived upwards of 40,000 years undisturbed in their culture, religion and lifeways, so finely tuned to the forests around them.

Much of Papuan history was written in the carvings and weavings of the people. Spirit boats laden with ancestors, totem poles defining family lineage and masks used to teach religious beliefs in dance carried each tribe's history generation to generation over eons.

During the 1960's the New Order Indonesian government banned the creation of these carving and outlawing their future production, in the belief their disappearance would reduce inter tribal warfare and cannibalism. However one small and unexpectedly persistent chap from America, Bishop Alphonse Sowada, a priest who believed the spirit of a people dwelt in its arts, swayed the Indonesian government that little of Papuan art work was devoted to warfare. The works were, in fact, more often a celebration of life and ancestry. Sowada's arguments convinced the Indonesian Government to protect and preserve Papuan history and by 1981, with the help of supportive Indonesian bureaucrats,

Papua's annual Pesta Budaya, or the Asmat Art Festival had been established; a festival that now attracts collectors of Asmat fine art from around the globe.

The Asmat Art Festival is held in October in the Asmat region's main town, Agats. This is a sprawling city on stilts that hovers above mangrove swamps washed by tides as the townspeople tramp its wooden walkways that bridges the school, hospital, shops and houses, all floating above the incoming sea.

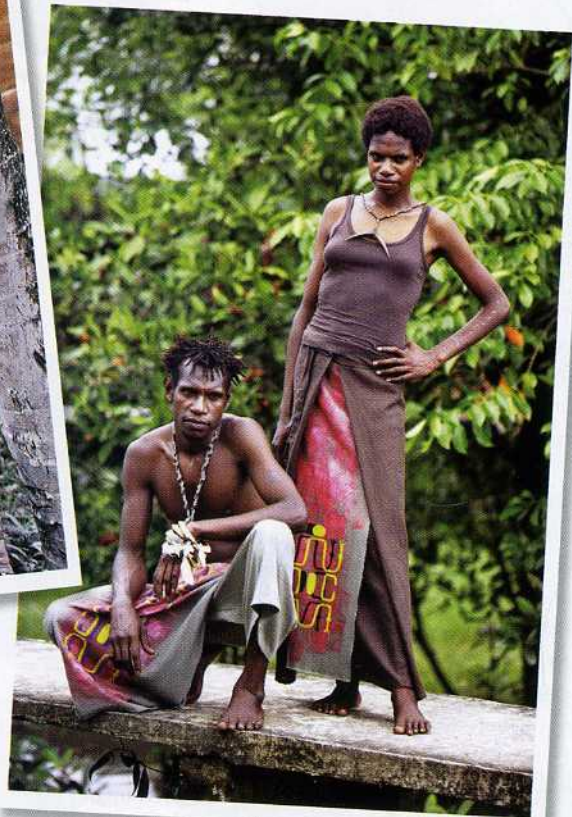
Sowada's terrier-like tenacity, many believe, saved Asmat carvings and all the history they carry. The annual carving competition and auction that is the foundation of the Asmat Art Festival has now introduced Papuan art to the world. One great supporter of Sowada and the art he fought to protect is German fashion designer and devoted collector of Asmat art, Ursula Konrad.



German artist Stephan a' Wengen teaches kindergarten kids the art of rubbing on this carved shield. The children are from the remote Papuan village of Sawa and are again studying art under Wengen this month (August).



**Above:** Husband and wife Papuan models, Helen and Petrus, prove fashion and jungle living is not mutually exclusive.  
**Righth:** Petrus and Ursula model the Asmat Art to Wear collection during last year's annual Asmat Art Festival in Agats, Papua. The festival will again be held in October 2008.



Konrad's passion for Asmat art began decades ago when she first visited Papua in the late 1970's. She has been a regular visitor to Papua ever since and has written several books on Asmat art and runs the Asmat Art Gallery in Moenchengladbach, dedicated to Asmat art.

The German gallery this year exhibited not only the men's carvings, but also broke new ground with a collection of Asmat fashion and accessories, first shown during the 2007 Asmat Festival. The collection was the brainchild of Konrad with assistance from an American, Mary Anne Murphy, also a regular Asmat visitor, and artist Stephan a' Wengen, who worked with Asmat women on the textiles for the collection and modeled by Papuans.

"We wanted to find a way for the women to also be involved in the festival – to give them the opportunity to earn an income," says Konrad of the lino cut printed garments of the collection.

"The image of the Asmat being wild headhunters began to change with the Asmat Art Festival. Many Asmat have studied outside Asmat and the spirit of the world-wide-web is for many youngsters as vivid as the spirit of the ancestors. Therefore it seemed the logical step to underline this development with the Asmat's own style of dress, to be modern without losing one's roots," says Konrad.

She points out that until the mid 20th century, most Papuans did not wear clothing, however were forced to wear



A Papuan bride, Ursula, wears a traditional feathered headdress and Asmat Art to Wear wedding gown.

clothes designed and structured in far off countries if they were to "be allowed to participate in the new way of life," now penetrating the marshes and mountains that had so long protected Papuans from the modern world.

This year it will be the children of Sawa village whose works will be on show beside the well known Asmat carvings.

"To give the kids an opportunity to explore their ideas about fashion, we are having a fashion workshop for school kids in the village of Sawa during July and August," says Konrad.

Artist a'Wengen, along with textile designers Theresia Treichel and Christiane Behr, Konrad, daughter Carolina Winkelmann with her girls Ella-Maria and Helene as third generation, are working with Asmat kids to create their own Asmat student's fashion collection which they will model during the Asmat Festival in October.

Under these expert hands the children of Sawa are learning to work with dyes and to print or draw their culturally inspired designs on fabric.



"We are also teaching the kids how they can use the traditional ornaments and symbols that protected the Asmat for millennia in a new context," says Konrad of a potential new form of Asmat art making that offers Papua's younger generation village based employment that keys their ancient culture into a future proud of that history.

"The aim of the workshop, like the Asmat Festival itself, is to preserve or rebuild Asmat pride in their culture; to help them find their place in the multi-cultural state of Indonesia and the world. Asmat artists, men and women, have a vital creative energy and the craftsmanship to express that energy," says Konrad.

**When:** The Asmat Festival 2008 runs from October 9 - 11  
**Where:** Agats township, Asmat, Papua.

**Getting there:** Garuda flies daily to Timika. From Timika it is a short light aircraft flight and canoe trip to Agats or there are several island cruises that visit Agats for the festival. Check your travel agencies for information. ➤