



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

Papua's Asmat Art Beckons

By Trisha Sertori
Images courtesy of Detlef Ilgner

Papua 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).

