

# GALLERY GUIDE

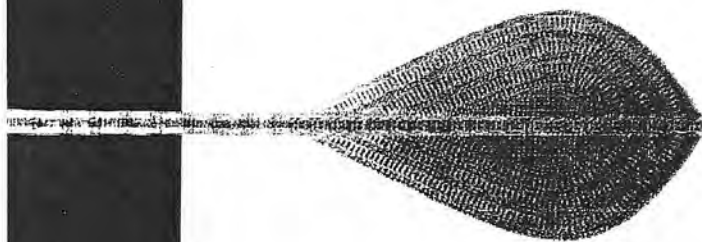
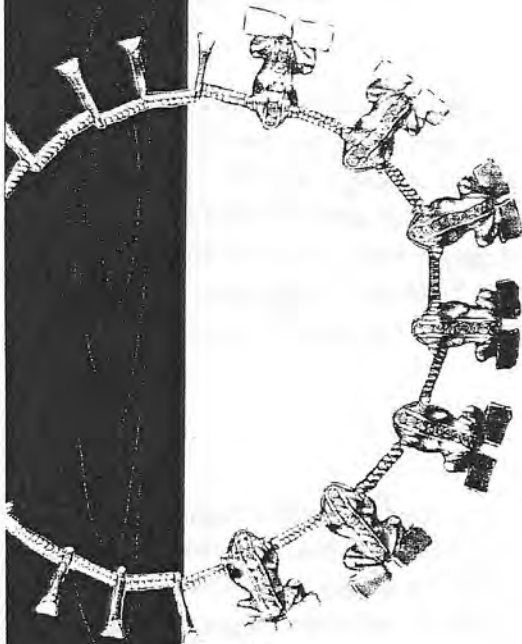
## Traditional and Tribal Arts

### Introduction

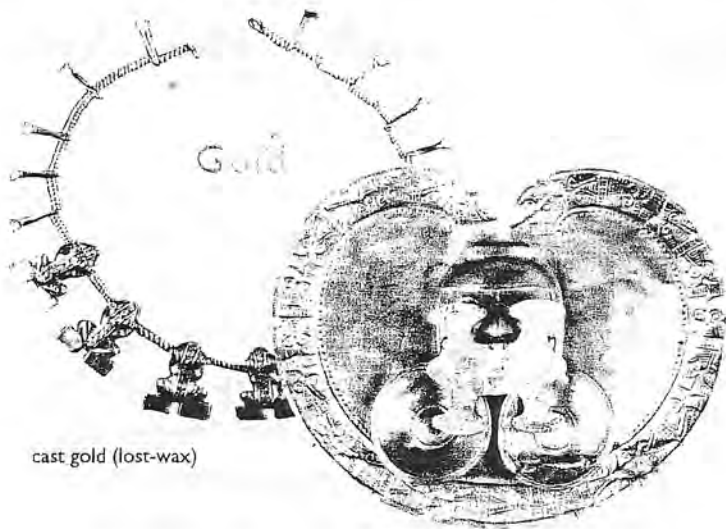
WHEREAS Western art has developed through an evolving depiction of the visible world, tribal and traditional art focuses on the invisible realm of human experience. Here its primary role is to embody spiritual forces and define social relationships. For such purposes, realistic art is considered ineffective and even undesirable.

Many of the objects displayed here would not be seen, except for special ritual occasions. Rather than resting on museum shelves, they would be used in specific ceremonies (marking the coming of age, connecting with ancestors, planting and harvesting, etc.). As such, they served an active role as spiritual "tools." It is important to keep in mind that these works were created according to strict cultural traditions rather than as an individual artist's desire for self-expression.

While we cannot enter into the cultural experience that created these objects, we can still appreciate them as works of art. This involves focusing on the way each culture has created its own distinct visual language from the elements (line, shape, etc) and principles (balance, pattern, etc.) of art.



# Pre-Columbian America



cast gold (lost-wax)

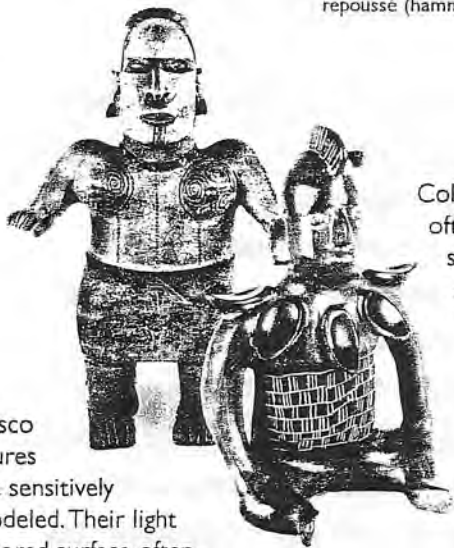
repoussé (hammered gold)

The civilizations of pre-Columbian America (cultures that existed before its "discovery" by Columbus in 1492) excelled in both metal-work and ceramics. Each culture had its own distinct style. The gold objects seen here are primarily from the Panama-Columbia region of central America. The ceramic figures are mainly from Mexico.

## Gold

Pre-Columbian gold work is remarkable both in its technical execution and design. Most objects were conceived of as jewelry or forms of personal adornment. Gold had no monetary value in pre-Columbian America. Rather it was valued only for its association with the sun god.

Pre-Columbian goldsmiths fashioned these objects in two ways. Some were cast using the "lost-wax" method. This involved making a mold and pouring in molten metal. The other approach was known as repoussé. The object was hammered out from a flat sheet of gold. Embossed designs were then created by pressing into the back of the metal with bone tools.



Colima vessels are often in the form of seated figures. Their simple bodies are highly stylized.

Jalisco figures are sensitively modeled. Their light colored surface often includes finely painted details.

## Ceramics

A great variety of ceramic figures are found throughout pre-Columbian America. They range from the simplified, stylized forms of Jalisco and Colima, to the detailed and realistic works of late Mayan civilization found in Jaina.

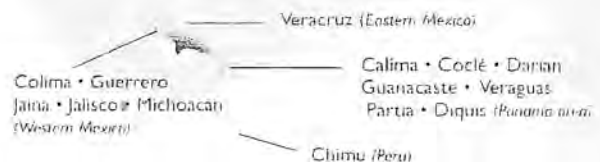
## Ceramics



The smiling features of Veracruz figures are unique in Pre-Columbian art.



Jaina figures are highly detailed and realistic.

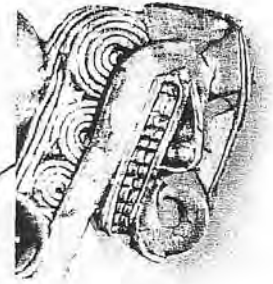


## Darien Figural Pendant

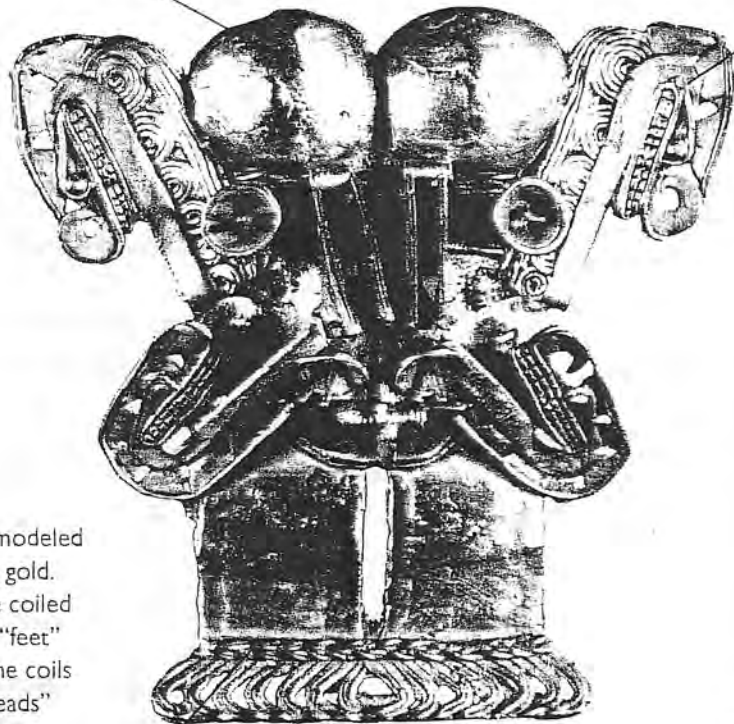
This figural pendant by the Darien culture is complex in both its technique and imagery. It was created from cast gold, with some of the more detailed parts added through soldering. While highly stylized, the imagery touches on important aspects of pre-Columbian culture more than 2500 years ago.



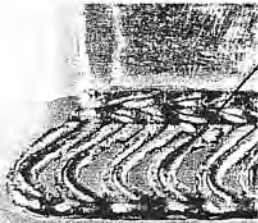
The large hemispheres probably represent a pair of hallucinogenic mushrooms that were used in Darien ceremonies.



The "alligator head" ornament (here seen facing downward) had ritual significance. It was a common design in pre-Columbian art and can be seen in some of the other objects on display as well.



These pendants were modeled in wax and then cast in gold. Thin wax threads were coiled together to create the "feet" of the sculpture and the coils around the "alligator heads" (above right).



Compare this earlier Darien ornament to the one above. The masked figure is more realistic and can be seen holding a staff in each hand. The legs and feet of the figure are also more realistic.



## Design

Pre-Columbian designs are often symmetrical. Here the artist created a visual energy by using interlocking bands of curved and pointed shapes. This gives the background (negative spaces) a dynamic presence. It also provides an overall unity to the design.



Polychrome Pedestal with Small Bowl, Coclé (top view)

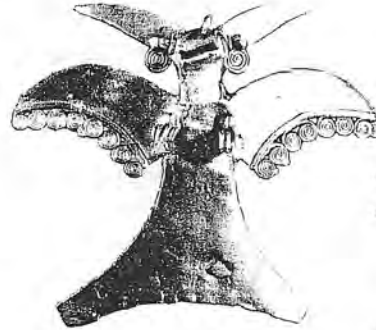


Karl Wirsum. "Skull Daze" lithograph (detail)

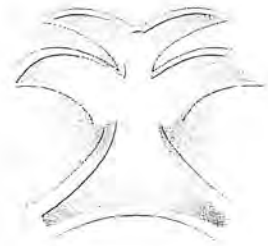
Contemporary artists have used principles of pre-Columbian design to create complex, energetic images.

## Shape

A strong feel for shape gives pre-Columbian gold its distinctive character. Shapes based on arcs and crescents are frequently used as the basic design element. They give the symmetrical objects a dynamic quality.



Repeated crescent shapes create a dynamic design.



## Positive & Negative Space

Strong sculptural designs depend on the solid (positive) shapes animating the spaces (negative) around the object.

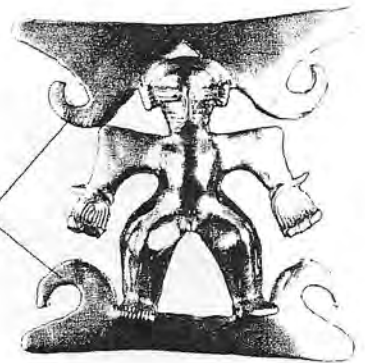


The artist creates the object so that the negative spaces have distinct shapes themselves.

negative spaces

positive (solid) space

"Hook" shapes create strong negative spaces at the edges of the object.



Without the "hooks" both the object and the negative spaces become static.

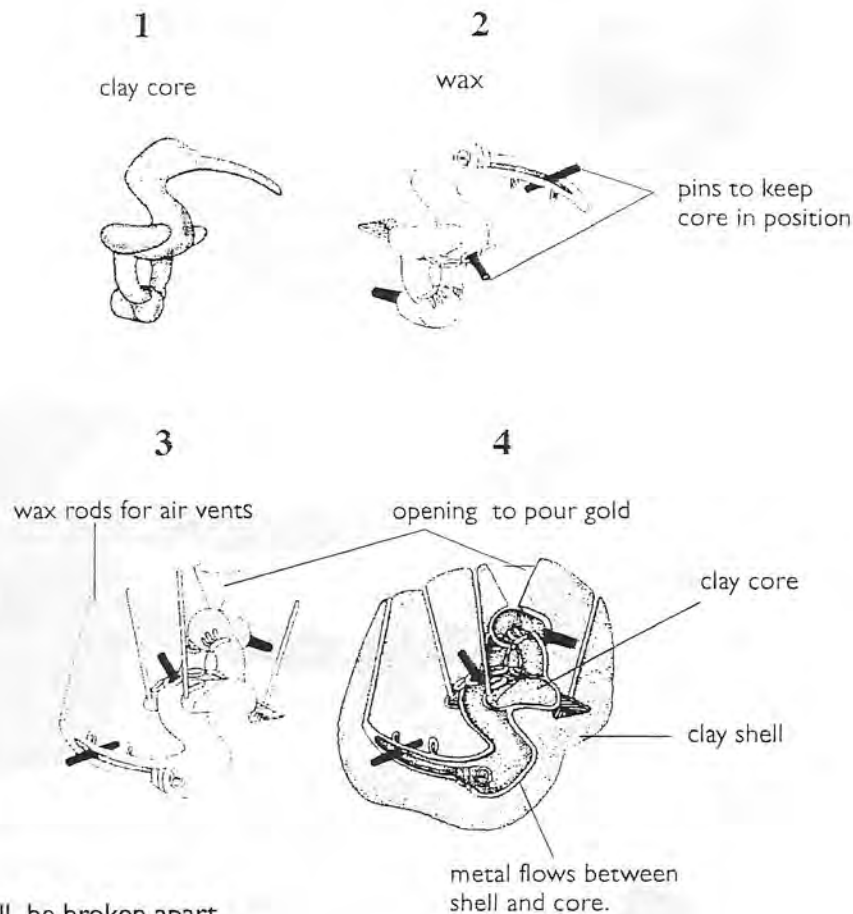
## Gold Casting in Ancient America



Pre-Columbian artisans were exceptional in their metal working abilities. Like the Europeans, they used the “lost-wax” method of casting. This made it possible to create hollow castings that were both lightweight and very detailed.

### Creating a lost-wax gold casting:

1. The basic form of the object is created in clay. This will form the core of the mold.
2. The clay form is repeatedly dipped in wax until a uniform coating of wax is created. Surface details are then added in wax. The dark bars are pins that will keep the clay core perfectly positioned in the finished mold.
3. To allow the gold to flow quickly to all areas, the object will be cast upside down in the mold. A wax cone is added through which the gold will be poured. Four wax rods will create the spaces for air to escape.
4. The wax object is now entirely covered with clay. When the clay hardens, it creates the shell of the mold. The wax is then melted out, creating a cavity between the shell and core of the mold. This empty space is filled with molten gold.
5. Once the gold hardens, the clay shell and core will be broken apart and the object removed. The gold that filled the cup and air vents will be cut off and the object smoothed and polished.



### A European artist and pre-Columbian gold

While visiting Brussels in 1520, the great Renaissance artist Albrecht Dürer had a chance to view a display of pre-Columbian gold brought to the Spanish king. Dürer was deeply impressed, for he had been trained as a goldsmith in his youth. He wrote the following in his diary:

“Also did I see the things, which one brought to the King from the new golden land... And I have seen nothing in all my livelong days which so filled my heart with joy as these things.... wonderful artful things and I was astounded at the subtle genius of the people in foreign lands.”

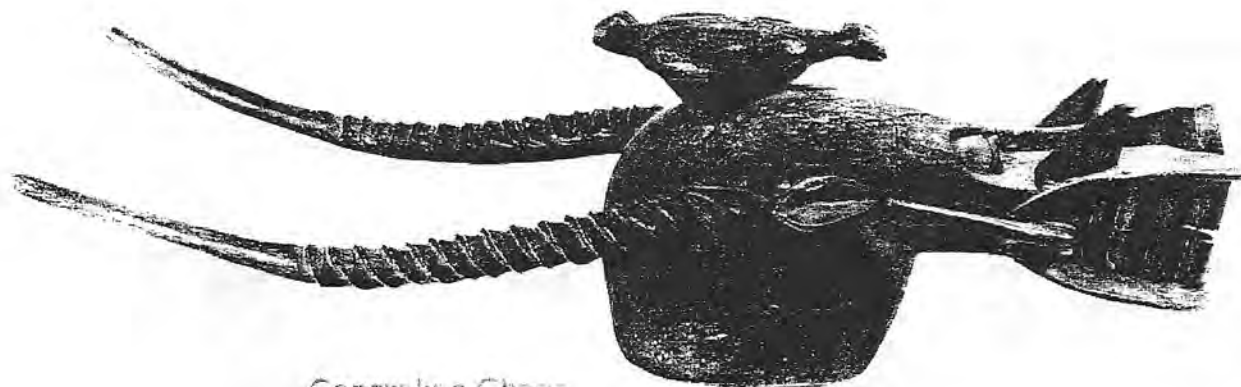
Albrecht Dürer, 1520



The powerful art of West and Central Africa play an essential role in the traditional societies that created them. Masks, sculptures and ritual objects are visual manifestations of cultural beliefs and ideals. Most are associated with the important events in the life of the individual and their community: birth, death, and coming of age. As such, they are often displayed only on special occasions or for ritual purposes.

#### Embedding Tradition

The Elu mask is used by the Ogoni people of Nigeria. These masks represent various characters in traditional stories and songs. The lower jaw of the mask is hinged, so that it may be animated when used.



#### Controlling Chaos

The "Firespitter" mask of the Senuso people is used to combat witchcraft and sorcery and thereby maintain social order. It combines aspects of several powerful animals—the jaws of a crocodile, the tusks of a warthog, and the horns of an antelope.



#### Holding a Child's Spirit

The Ibiyi figures play a special role in Yoruba culture. If a mother has twins and one of them dies, an Ibiyi is created to house the spirit of the dead child. The mother will attend to the Ibiyi much as she would a real child.

- ◆ Dogon (Mali)
- ◆ Mossi (Burkina Faso)
- ◆ Yoruba • Ogoni (Nigeria)
- ◆ Senuso (Ivory Coast)
- ◆ BaTeke (Congo)
- ◆ Mende (Sierra Leone)

## Form • Balance • Rhythm

**Form** refers to the basic three dimensional shapes that make up a sculpture. Often a sculpture will be made up of similar forms that are visually related. This gives the sculpture an overall sense of unity.



The head of the Dogon sculpture is based on thin, geometric forms.

The rectangular eye socket echos the box-like form of the mask beneath.



The forms in Yourba sculpture are more rounded and expansive.

The front view of the Dogon mask emphasizes the symmetrical balance of forms and spaces.



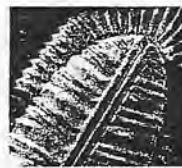
The side view emphasizes the angular rhythms of the contours and edges.

## Abstraction



The BaTeke mask is a stylized human face. The designs are important symbols of the Kidumu or male association. The edge that divides the top and bottom of the mask refers to the horizon.

## Pattern



African artists often use a variety of patterns in their work. These patterns create a visual energy and give African art a dynamic character. In many cases the patterns hold special meaning for a particular culture.

# The Sowo Mask

The Sowo mask is the embodiment of feminine beauty and spirituality for the Mende people of Sierra Leone. Used in initiation ceremonies of the Sande or “woman’s society,” it is the only mask in Africa that is used solely by women.

Each part of the mask speaks to an important aspect of the feminine that connects the individual to the community of women and to Mende culture as a whole.

The top of the mask is the most personal. It often consists of elaborate hair styles and symbolic adornments.

Horns often appear on masks. It is believed that horns hold the power and aura of the animal even after death.

In Mende culture, a large forehead is a sign of beauty and serenity. The forehead is believed to be a window to the personality and character of the individual. There is a Mende blessing, “May God make your forehead big.”

The eyes are small and downward looking, suggesting inward focus, poise, and self-knowledge.

The mouth is also small, for loose speech such as gossip and complaining is seen as damaging to community harmony and spiritual serenity.

An essential part of the masks are the rings. The Sowo mask was believed to come from the underwater realm of the feminine, and the rings are the ripples created when it emerged. These are viewed as marks of beauty.

B



A

The small horns (A) and rectangular packages (B) are talismans for strength and protection. In real life such objects are filled with special potions or passages from the Koran.

The ear and hearing are very important in Mende culture. It is believed that the ear remains alive after death and functions in both the material and spiritual worlds.





## Carving the Mask

When a woman reaches a certain status in the Sande society, she will commission a mask that is hers alone. The mask will embody a particular spirit. The carver must visualize the personality of the spirit and create the mask.



A tree limb is selected and cut to size. The carver then partially buries it to keep it stable while working. He will hollow out the limb to a uniform thickness of  $\frac{3}{4}$  of an inch.



Using an adze, the carver blocks in the basic elements of the mask. A knife is then used to refine the features.



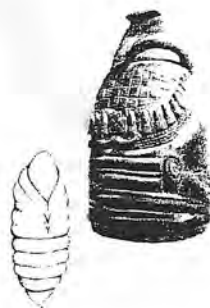
The final mask will be smoothed with rough leaves and then painted black or dark brown.



The form of the Sowo mask resembles the chrysalis of a butterfly. The transformation from chrysalis to butterfly is analogous to the girl's emergence from childhood into her adult identity in the Sande society.

## Masking Ceremony

The dancer's costume is attached to the holes in the bottom of the mask. It is made of thick cotton, then covered with raffia fiber. No part of the dancer's body may be exposed.

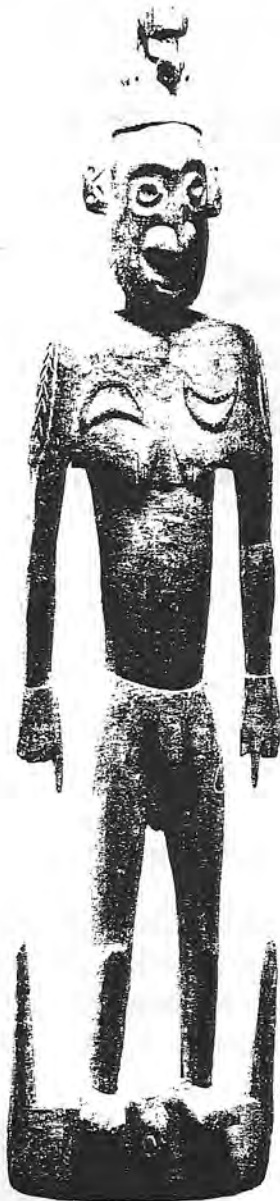


## Ancestors & Cult Figures

Ancestor worship is an important part of most Oceanic cultures. Masks (detail, below) were often made from skulls parts of ancestors. Sculptural cult figures were created in many forms.



Wooden suspension hooks were used to protect food from animals. Bundles of food were suspended from the vertical hooks at the figure's feet. Suspension hook figures such as this one had ritual uses as well.



As in Africa, Oceanic art is closely linked to ancestor worship and the spirit world. Traditionally, Oceania was made up of warrior cultures where head hunting played an integral part of social and spiritual practices. Weapons and other hand-held objects endure as some of the finest creations of Oceanic art.

## Nature

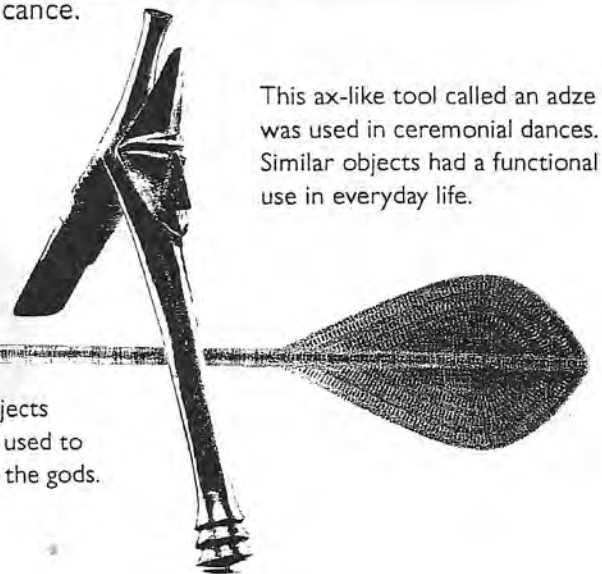
Much of Oceanic art is based on plant and animal forms. Birds such as the hornbill, frigate bird and albatross often appear as design elements.



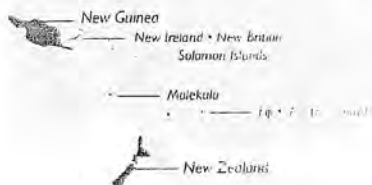
The graceful curves of the frigate bird decorate the small finger drums and the dance wand.

## Functional Forms, Ritual Uses

Many functional Oceanic objects such as paddles, clubs or suspension hooks also hold a ritual significance.



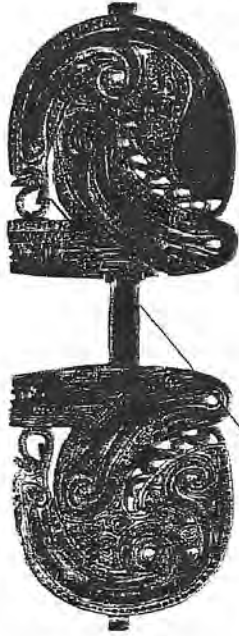
This ax-like tool called an adze was used in ceremonial dances. Similar objects had a functional use in everyday life.



Paddle-shaped objects such as this were used to offer sacrifices to the gods.

## Line & Movement

Line is a vital design element in Oceanic art. Particularly important are the curved, expansive lines that give objects a dynamic feeling of movement. Such lines may be used to create strong accents or combined into complex patterns.



The curved, interlocking patterns of the dance wand suggest the movement of waves and water.

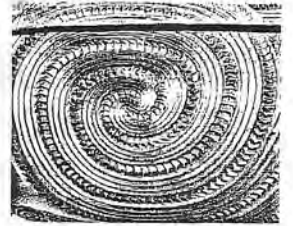


Paul Gauguin's woodcuts from Tahiti capture the rhythms and movements found in much Oceanic art.

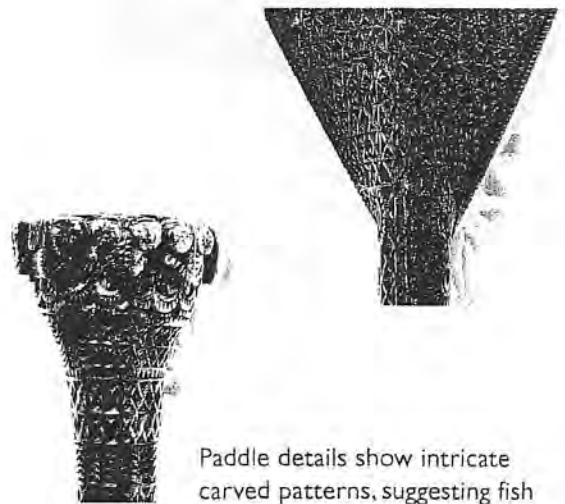
## Patterns

The patterns found in Oceanic art are rich in their complexity and feeling of movement. In addition to decoration, such patterns often have specific cultural importance. Many Maori designs used in tattoos and carvings hold specific meanings that can be "read" by members of that culture.

Spiral pattern on Maori feather box.



Maori figure with ceremonial tattoos.



Paddle details show intricate carved patterns, suggesting fish scales or the veins of leaves.

# Hair Orniment

from a Flute Stop Figure

## A Closer Look

This unique object is an ornament created by the Biwat people of New Guinea to be placed in the hair of a sculpted figure. The figure, called a flute stopper, was designed to fit in the end of large bamboo flutes. The hair ornament is a composite of several animal forms that have been combined in an intricate work of sculpture.



Pieces of shell are often used in Oceanic art. The eye of the ornament is a piece of inlaid shell.



The head of the ornament is a hornbill, a sacred bird throughout Oceania. It is related to the soul, ancestor and the spirit world.



The crocodile is a sacred animal to the Biwat people. It is revered as the Great Mother who created the world.

Color is important in New Guinea art. A sculpture becomes "hot" or comes to life only with the application of color. Red is identified with blood and thus with life.



The legs of the figure are those of the Cassowary, a large flightless bird with three distinct toes.



## Sacred Flutes



### Margaret Mead and the Biwat

The Biwat people became famous through the pioneering work of anthropologist Margaret Mead. She spent three months among the Biwat in 1932. Here Mead is seen "conducting" a group of Biwat flute players.



A Biwat drawing collected by Mead.

In the Biwat culture, bamboo flutes are important objects. The great sacred flutes are seen as the children of the great mother crocodile spirit. The guardian spirit is embodied through their sound. Up to 10 feet in length, they are used only for ceremonial purposes. Sculptural figures of spirits fit in the opening of the flutes, so that the vibrations would allow the spirit figure to "speak." These figures, called flute stoppers, have hair made of cassowary feathers. Ornaments such as the one seen here were placed in the hair of the flute stop figures.

Sacred flute players.  
The stoppers are in place and decorated with hibiscus blooms



Detail of a flute stop figure.  
These figures have large heads with "hair" made from cassowary feathers.



The ornament would be placed in the hair of the flute stop figure.