

Korewori. Magic art from the rainforest

Art from the Korewori – this title clearly expresses the exhibition theme. Some 100 wood carvings, created by different generations of sculptors living alongside the upper reaches of the Korewori river in New Guinea, testify to the outstanding quality and expressive power of two distinct carving traditions.

A feature common to both of these traditions is that they reduce the human body to morphological elements which we associate, if at all, with 20th century art. In keeping with other approaches apparent in the art of Oceania, the sculptors have considered not just the contours but also the inner being of the subject represented. In the case of the older carvings, the wood was still being worked using an axe or stone-bladed adze in combination with scraping tools made from animal tusks. The oldest of these carvings were made some 200 to 400 years ago.

The creators of these carvings lived in New Guinea within communities which primarily roamed throughout vast tracts of the tropical rainforest, hunting the sparse population of wild animals – cassowaries, pigs, tree kangaroos and large phalangers. In their conception of the world, these people used the carvings to intensify contact with those spirit beings who determined each male's success as a hunter.

According to one tradition - that of the Yimam - highly stylised, seemingly transparent hunter-helper figures, known as *yipwon*, were carved for this purpose. The profiles of such carvings are distinguished by symmetrically disposed hooks. Located in the centre of each row of hooks is a knob which represents the being's vital centre, its heart. These hook figures stand at the entrance to the central exhibition space.

In another tradition - that of the Ewa - which occupies the focal point of this exhibition, the individualization of the contact between the specific hunter and the spirit being who governs that hunter's success has clearly created the precondition for the immense differentiation in forms of expression. There is tremendous variation in the posture and inner form of the hunter-helper figures, known as *aripa*, these being male figures worked in profile and standing on one leg. What is more, these hunter-helper figures are also joined by other very different carvings, the substance of which varies enormously as regards form, content and function. Here we can comprehend the great freedom that each carver was accorded for his interpretation of traditional elements. Dream images supported him in his endeavours. The

hunter-helper figures stood in the sacred part of the men's house. Following the death of its owner, a figure would be moved to a secluded cave to preserve it.

Double-headed figures are rare. Three-dimensional female – and a small number of male – figures are known. However, the sharpest contrast to the one-legged male hunter-helper figures are the more two-dimensional sculptures, akin to planks, which emphasize the width of the female silhouette. These were dedicated to mythical women who, in all the tales handed down by oral tradition, were closely linked to the origin of a specific clan. Compared with these, the wood carvings, which are of the greatest importance from the point of view of content, appear less spectacular in terms of form: They represent small heads, each mounted on a spike. As regards content, these heads represent the concept of the “mother of the men's house”. On specific feast days they would be piled up in the men's house together with parts of various plants in order to create a life-size figure. Other mother figures represented the spiritual contact between the hunter and the spirit of the tree kangaroo, the black cuscus or the cassowary, the pig or important species of birds. In common with the hunter-helper figures of the dead, these were also erected in niches among the rocks.

In the neighbouring territories of the middle reaches of the Korewori and the Sepik, the most striking ancestral beings take the form of spirit crocodiles also carved out of wood. The dorsal ridges of these creatures are resolved into rows of hooks with interspersed faces and the carved beaks of birds. They therefore strongly resemble the form of the hunter-helper figures (*yipwon*) of the Yimam (on display in the lobby as well as in the “Melanesian Art” room on the ground floor).

The headwater region of the Korewori river gives rise to two principal arms: the main river, also called the Nai (or Sun) river, and its large left tributary, Wogupmeri, also called Bogonemali. Another important tributary, the Moi river rises in the heart of the settlement area of the Inyai-Ewa. Dense rainforest covers the entire region. People settle in widely dispersed villages or in small communities scattered throughout the entire inhabited area, each community being allocated to individual clans. Close to the central village there are also a few plantations where tubers such as taros, *Dioscorea esculenta* yams, sweet potatoes and, above all, bananas and fresh vegetables are cultivated.

While the men were primarily engaged in hunting, the women were mainly responsible for collecting wild foods. Men and women worked together to beat out the sago pith and wash the sago starch out of the fragments of pith. This would be done in a recurring rhythm of five

intensive working days during which they produced the basic provisions that would last them for three or more weeks.

For over 50 years, this way of life has been severely threatened by diseases introduced from outside and by the irresponsible use of the forest. The Ewa, in particular, soon lost faith in the power of the figures traditionally used to ensure their hunting success and personal health. Around forty years ago, they consequently without much thought started to sell their ancient carvings to dealers. The Basel museum was able to acquire this impressive collection in 1971, thanks to generous donations made by private benefactors and to a special grant approved by the cantonal parliament.

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