

# Conservation Intertwines With Artifacts in Show

By VIVIEN RAYNOR

**I**N supermarkets, THE BRONX are listed on cartons of soy drinks as an ingredient. Those at the Lehman College Art Gallery here are the real, unprocessed thing: shiny, white seeds resembling beads, dotting reticules woven of strands cut from bark. This context suggests that the legendary sufferer has still another reason for weeping.

In a way, he does, for the reticules come from a region where progress is closing in, and they are among the artifacts in a show with a name that I hesitate to mention. After all, "Saving the Rain Forest: Art and Conservation in Papua New Guinea" is the kind of title that used to stir consciences, but now, with fur coats in and public spiritedness on the way out, it may seem like nothing more than a throwback to the days of lily-livered liberalism. Nor does it help that the show comes with the blessing of environmental organizations like Greenpeace Pacific.

Yet, it is a mild-mannered affair, which was organized by Jamie James, a former Wildlife Conservation International Fellow, and is combined with a display of Asmat ancestor shields assembled by Tobias Schneebaum, acting as guest curator for both the American Federation of Arts and the American Museum of Asmat Art in St. Paul. Mr. Schneebaum turned anthropologist two or three decades ago, having made his reputation as a painter on the Manhattan scene.

An island second only to Greenland in size, New Guinea lies between the Equator and the tip of Queensland, Australia, in the Malay Archipelago, formerly the East Indies. The territory's colonial career began with its discovery by the Portuguese in 1510 and continued under, variously, the British, Germans, Dutch and Australians until it was invaded by the Japanese in World War II. Today this land mass with the outline of a dinosaur is half Indonesia and half Papua New Guinea, a country that gained independence within the British Commonwealth in 1975.

The shields — magnificent oblongs that turn out to be low reliefs on closer inspection — are Indonesian. Otherwise, the show focuses on works from the eastern, or Papuan, half of the island, drawing attention by means of wall labels to the all-too-familiar side effect of independence.



A comparison of conditions in the two countries would have been useful, but the closest the show gets to that is a humdrum anthropological label about the Asmat.

If Papua New Guinea's chances of weathering the storm of progress are better than those of most former colonies, as seems to be the case, the reason is partly the educational system established during the Australian administration and partly the inhabitants' interest in hanging on to their traditions. On the other hand, it is a place rich in minerals and timber and by all accounts it swarms with miners and loggers tempting farmers to exchange the land by which they subsist for ready cash — with predictable results.

Fortunately, resistance to the foreign interlopers is growing, but there remains the problem of a growing population, a diminishing number of jobs, pollution — the whole nine yards. Whether art and crafts can save the day, Papua New Guineans produce them in abundance. They are encouraged to do so by organizations ranging from the Research and Conservation Foundation of Papua New Guinea to the Peace Corps and include the inhabitants of the Crater

Mountain Wildlife Management Area. Among the creatures espoused by this community is the bird of paradise, which was almost wiped out by plumed hats at the turn of the last century and faces extinction again at the turn of this one, but for reasons unspecified.

It is hard to imagine Woodstocks arising in a culture that not long ago practiced head hunting and harder still to envision them in an awe-inspiring mountainous landscape, which looks well forested in photographs. Melanesian work tends to be more intimidating than its African counterpart, which may explain the Surrealists' preference for it. The show contains no ferocious masks, no grotesque figures — nothing remotely alarming, but it is far from cute.

The aforementioned reticules are as functional as their coarse French equivalent and every bit as indispensable to daily life. There is a deep wooden dish painted black with a border of brown, white and yellow triangles, which is obviously perfect for holding food cooked on hot stones in a pit. Even the painted tapa cloths have their purposes, some practical, others ritualistic. Still, the most beautiful of them clearly have a fu-

ture as esthetic objects.

Made by pounding the inner bark of the paper mulberry tree, each is a beige rectangle filled with a geometric maze of terra cotta-colored bands edged with tiny black teeth. The technique is meticulous, and the patterns are perfectly balanced; the emblems are spontaneous in a way that recalls the art of Australian Aborigines. At the same time, however, they recall nothing so much as the graffiti of the late Keith Haring. Art moves in mysterious ways.

So does the show, for the interests it represents are legion. Naturally, the Papua New Guineans head the list, but they are jostled by conservationists, researchers, academics, and so forth. The result presupposes viewers willing to take on a convoluted issue without the help of adequate photographs, maps or, for that matter, a disinterested essay. Fancying myself a connoisseur of ecological horror stories, I was irritated by the confusion but not discouraged by it and hope others will feel the same way. A show that connects art with real life, however haphazardly, is not to be sneezed at. This one continues through May 20. The information number is (718) 960-8731.

A tapa cloth by Nathalie Rarama, left; an ancestor shield, below left, carver unknown from the Asmat people, Pirien village, and an ancestor shield, carved by Mbanmari, the Asmat people, Vakam village. Both are 20th century and made of wood.

