

Lehman College Art Gallery Workshop/Tour Spring 1997

Teacher Materials for "Ancestor Shields of the Asmat"

Phillip D. Kautz, Education Coordinator

The Workshop/Tour program welcomes class groups from all over the Bronx to our college gallery. In the studio, teachers, para-professionals, and parents are asked to help attend to the needs of the students and should *not* expect to do the hands-on project themselves, since students may unfavorably compare their own art work to that done by adults.

These concepts and vocabulary words may help familiarize students with some of the ideas and themes in the exhibition. The use of these materials may be relative to the students' age and development, which is best determined by the classroom teacher.

The art works in this exhibition are from the Asmat people of Indonesia. The Asmat live in a dense rain forest on the eastern half of the island of New Guinea, which is called Irian Jaya. The Asmat people live in villages and collect their food in the nearby swamps and forests. The people in the different villages used to fight with each other a lot. The shields in this exhibition were used for hunting and warfare and were made to honor the spirit of a deceased ancestor.

Concepts:

Art works can be made from natural materials that are all around the places we live.

Watchful spirits keep us safe and help us in our lives.

Ancestors are worthy of special honors in art works that have symbolic content.

Ancestors may be remembered for their outstanding characteristics and achievements.

Symbols are used to communicate ideas without the use of words.

People depend on their habitat/ecosystem for food, housing, transportation and culture.

There are concepts of religion and spirituality that may be very different from our own beliefs.

Vocabulary:

ancestor: one from whom an individual is descended.

ceremony: a formal act or series of acts prescribed by law, ritual, or convention.

design: the arrangement of elements that make up a structure or work of art; a decorative pattern.

ecosystem: the complex of a community and its environment functioning as a unit in nature.

ethnic: people grouped together by shared customs, language, or social views.

motif: a dominant idea or central theme in a work of art.

protection: the state of being guarded from injury or harm.

rain forest: a tropical woodland with heavy rains and lofty trees that form a continuous canopy.

shield: a broad piece of defensive armor carried on the arm.

spirit: the animating principle or life-giving force.

symbol: a letter, character, or sign that represents operations, elements, sounds or other ideas.

tribe: a social group comprising numerous families, clans, or generations.

vengeance: punishment inflicted in retaliation for an injury or offense.

village: a settlement usually smaller than a town.

wood carving: an object or thing that has been shaped by hand with sharpened tools.

Follow-up and related school subjects:

What are some of the ways that we try to increase our strength, speed and power?

How do we maintain contact or familiarity with our ancestors? How do we honor our ancestors?

Social Studies/Civics: In our culture, are there community-based forms of competition that substitute for more violent forms of conflict?

Language Arts: Create a symbol system for the important ideas and things in your class.

This exhibition was organized by the American Federation of the Arts in collaboration with the American Museum of Asmat Art, Saint Paul MN, with the support of a grant from the Henry Luce Foundation, Inc.

List of Films/Videos

© Program for Art on Film, 2875 Broadway, New York, NY 10025

Asmat: The Cannibal Craftsmen on New Guinea

Series Title: World About Us, The

51 minutes/color/16mm/video/1981?/Great Britain?/English

Dir. Bill Leimback, Jean Pierre Dutilleux

Documentary of the burial rituals of the Asmat, the stone age tribe discovered by Dutch missionaries in New Guinea in 1956. Focuses on village carvers sculpting ancestor poles out of giant mangrove trees. These are headhunters and cannibals, "but also gentle people and skillful artists," who remained relatively secluded and undisturbed until 1961 when anthropologist Michael Rockefeller's (1938-1961) arrival and sudden disappearance focused attention on the area. From The World About Us series.

Collection: MMA

Dance of the Warriors

Series Title: Ring of Fire: An Indonesian Odyssey; No. 2

58 minutes/color/video/1988/Great Britain/English

Dir. Lorne Blair; Prod. Lorne Blair, Lawrence Blair

Prod. Agency: Blair Bros. Production, Inc., WGBH Educational Foundation

Source (U.S.): Mystic Fire Video, Inc.

Source (U.S.): Pacific Arts Video (Video sales)

One in a four-part series of programs documenting the ten-year voyage of Lorne and Lawrence Blair through the islands of Indonesia. In this segment, the Blairs travel to the island of Sumba, where the local inhabitants weave magical textiles; visit Asmat headhunters in New Guinea; document giant carnivorous lizards in Komodo; and build a hut among the farmers, mystics, and artists of Bali. Ring of Fire series, No. 2 of four.

Comments: Excellent adventure video. Entertaining and well presented. (Staff)

Collection: MMA

Matjemosh: A Woodcarver

27 minutes/color/16 mm/1964/Netherlands/English

Dir. Adrian A. Gerbrands

Prod. Agency: Stichting Film En Wetenschap; Universitaire Film, Utrecht, Netherlands

Source (U.S.): University of California Extension Center

Source (U.S.): Rental-see Educational Film & Video Locator

Intl. Source: British Film Institute (GB)

Ethnographic documentary shows Matjemosh, a woodcarver of the Asmat tribe on the southwest coast of New Guinea, creating several works of art and speaking about his life, his beliefs, and his craft. He uses a stone hammer and iron chisel to make wooden carvings of his ancestors and decorate bamboo signal horns of the kind his ancestors used to blow on headhunting raids. Shows the process of making a drum: finding the right tree, digging out

the pith, hollowing the inside into the traditional conical shape, polishing the outside with a shell, and finishing with a handle composed of a praying mantis with human hands and feet. Includes scenes of everyday life in the village of Amanamkai.

Commentary by Dr. Adrian A. Gerbrands, Assoc. Dir., National Museum of Ethnology, Leiden.

Collection: MMA

The Metropolitan Museum of Art's Michael C. Rockefeller Wing of Primitive Art Videodisc
variable running time/color/videodisc/1983/United States/English

Dir. Gene Fairly; Prod. Thomas Newman, Robb Creese, Anne Marie Garti

Exec. Prod. Douglas Newton, Robb Creese

Prod. Agency: The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Source (U.S.): The Metropolitan Museum of Art (in-house viewing)

Interactive videodisc in the Michael C. Rockefeller Wing of Primitive Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art which allows visitors to gather more information about items exhibited. Provides twenty-four one-minute film segments on aspects of four cultures represented in the galleries: the Asmat of New Guinea, the Aztec of Mexico, the Cameroon of West Africa, and the Northwest Coast Indians of North America. Covers such topics as traditional architecture, the role of art in daily life, and specific uses of masks and ceremonial costumes. Uses slides, photographs, authentic sound recordings, and rare ethnographic film footage.

Collection: MMA

Rituals of the Asmat Tribe

30 minutes/color/video/199?/country unknown/English?

Source (U.S.): Films for the Humanities & Sciences

Visits the Asmat tribes in West Irian, Indonesia, a surviving Stone Age culture known for headhunting. Attends and explains tribal rituals and points out modern influences.

Source list

Films for the Humanities & Sciences
P.O. Box 2053
Princeton, NJ 08543-2053
tel. (800) 257-4126; (609) 275-1400
fax (609) 275-3767

The Metropolitan Museum of Art
1000 Fifth Avenue
New York, NY 10028
tel. (212) 879-5500, ext. 2358 (media)
fax (212) 570-3879

Mystic Fire Video, Inc.
P.O. Box 422
Prince Street Station
New York, NY 10012
tel. (800) 292-9001; (212) 941-0999
fax (212) 941-1443

University of California Extension Center
2000 Center Street, 4th floor
Berkeley, CA 94704
tel. (510) 642-5578
fax (510) 643-9271