



# Introduction to Pacific Collections: Material Culture of Papua New Guinea



**The following summary provides an overview of material you are likely to come across in Scottish collections. These are written according to island region.**

### **Papua New Guinea**

The island of New Guinea is the second largest on earth after Greenland. The nation of Papua New Guinea, which is culturally part of Melanesia, occupies the eastern half of New Guinea along with a number of island groups including New Britain, New Ireland and Bougainville, which is geographically part of the Solomon Islands chain. The western half of New Guinea is known as West Papua and is a province of Indonesia. There are very few items from West Papua in Scottish collections.

Archaeological evidence shows that human habitation of New Guinea began around 45,000 years ago with people moving east from Indonesia. Today Papua New Guinea includes the following provinces: Central; Simbu (Chimbu); Eastern Highlands; East New Britain; East Sepik; Enga; Gulf; Madang; Manus; Milne Bay; Morobe; New Ireland; Oro (Northern); Autonomous Region of Bougainville; Southern Highlands; Western (Fly); Western Highlands; West New Britain; Sandaun (West Sepik); National Capital District; Hela; and Jiwaka.

The first Europeans to visit were Spanish and Portuguese explorers in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Spanish explorer Yñigo Ortiz de Retez named the whole island New Guinea in 1545. It wasn't until the 19<sup>th</sup> century that Europeans began to properly explore the area with surveys such as those of HMS *Basilisk* around 1873-4. Due to the size of Papua New Guinea and the terrain there were still some areas of Highlands still unexplored by outsiders up until the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century.

In 1884 South East New Guinea was made a protectorate by Britain and named British New Guinea. The north was annexed by Germany. Britain passed control of their territory to the Commonwealth state of Australia in 1906, and in 1921 Australia took over governance of German New Guinea. Papua New Guinea, as it was named in 1971, gained full independence from Australia in 1975. From the period of independence up to the present day the country has undergone a series of political upheavals, conflicts and natural disasters

Given the size of the country it is unsurprising that there is such a diverse range of material culture found there. This also applies to the raw materials from which they are made. While not completely unique to Papua New Guinea, there are materials found in artefacts that aren't as commonly used elsewhere including: cassowary feathers; bird of paradise feathers; *Abrus* seeds (red and black seeds); gold lip shell; and Job's tears (small white seeds). The majority of material from Papua New Guinea in Scottish museums is from South East New Guinea (the area previously British New Guinea) and was collected in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This reflects the activity of Scots in the area. There are some items in Scottish museums from New Ireland and the Sepik. Less common are artefacts from the Highlands, New Britain, and the Western Islands including Kaniet Islands and Wuvulu. As the largest number of items are from South East New Guinea, this introduction focuses on aspects of material from that broad area. It is recommended that publications and resources are consulted for further information on material from all areas of Papua New Guinea.

### South East New Guinea

The area that was formerly British New Guinea includes today's provinces of: Oro; Central; Gulf; Western (Fly); and Milne Bay. The latter includes the Trobriand Islands, the Louisiade archipelago, and D'Entrecasteaux Islands. The cultural style associated with Milne Bay area is often called Massim and is characterised by a distinctive style of wood carving which incorporates scrolled lines, bird and human figures made into dark wood, usually infilled with lime. This type of carving can be seen on the following artefacts:

### Lime spatulas

These are used in the process of chewing betel, a nut with mild narcotic qualities chewed worldwide. Lime made of crushed shells is scooped into the mouth with betel and the two react together. Wooden lime spatulas from Milne Bay are made of dark wood which often appears black in colour. They have a flattened spatulate end and a carved handle. The design of the handle can take the form of bird or human figures. Male figures are more prevalent than female. Examples also exist in the form of a canoe or an animal. One form, referred to as clapper style, resembles the head of a snake or lizard and is characterised by a hollowed out handle. It is thought these were associated with magic and tapped while casting charms. There are also examples in which the handle is solely carved into scrolled shapes. In all of these styles the surface will be incised with scroll work and will sometimes incorporate a narrow stylised snake. Incised carvings are filled with white pigment.



Three lime spatula of wood: a female figure; a praying mantis; and a scrolled handle. Milne Bay province, Papua New Guinea, 19<sup>th</sup> century, *National Museums Scotland* (A.1883.91.40; A.1883.91.42; A.1954.194)

Lime spatula of wood in clapper style, tip of spatula shows heavy use, Milne Bay province, Papua New Guinea, *University of Aberdeen Museums* (ABDUA: 217)

Lime spatulas can be made from the leg bone of a cassowary, usually with linear decoration etched into the outer surface and a spatula end inserted into the hollow shaft of the bone. Less commonly seen in collections are spatulas of polished whale or dugong bone, turtle shell and greenstone. Sometimes seeds or strings of shell or glass beads can be found knotted on the handle of a spatula.



Two lime spatula of carved cassowary leg bone. Both have attachments, the one on the right has seed pods and stings of white jobs tears (small white *Coix lachryma* seeds) and the spatula on the left has seeds, crab claws, and red trade cloth, South East Papua New Guinea, *University of Aberdeen Museums (ABDUA: 314; ABDUA: 315)*

The size and design of spatulas made them portable and collectable. From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century onwards they were popular items of trade for Europeans and as such there are many unused examples in collections. If previously used, the spatula end will appear worn and discoloured, although some may have been cleaned within the lifetime of the artefact.

### **Sword clubs**

Wooden sword or paddle shaped clubs feature scrolled surface carving inlaid with white pigment similar to designs seen on lime spatulas. Some clubs resemble a European style cutlass but it is unclear whether this form was designed to emulate European style swords, possibly for trade. Some examples have attachments of leaves on the handle or even knotted through small holes along the centre of the blade.



Wooden club with distinctive scrolled surface decoration inlaid with lime, Trobriand Islands, Papua New Guinea, *University of Aberdeen Museums (ABDUA:981)*

### **Wooden bowls**

Wooden bowls with a decorated rim are particularly associated with the Trobriand Islands. Oval or round in shape, they have a scroll or dentate pattern around the edge inlaid with white lime pigment. On the exterior of the bowl there is sometimes one or two carved raised areas that resemble lugs but are not functional. These bowls should not be confused with bowls from Tami

Island which are usually oval in shape without a lip and are cut across the grain so that there is a twist in the bowl.

### Body adornments

Material from across Papua New Guinea is characterised by a diversity of raw materials. These are used to create a range of body adornments. Materials include: spondylus shell; clam shell; conus shell; boar tusk; cassowary feathers; *Abrus* seeds; and Job's tears (small white *Coix lacryma* seeds). The following are examples of adornments from South East New Guinea:



Neck ornament of cut shell discs with large piece of clam shell cut to imitate a boar tusk. Necklaces made with actual boar tusks (known as *doa*, *dona* or *doga*) which would have been much more valuable, South East Papua New Guinea probably Massim or SE coast, 19<sup>th</sup> century, *University of Aberdeen Museums (ABDUA: 63520)*

Arm ornament of Job's tears on a frame of woven plant fibre. Dress items of Job's tears were worn by women in mourning. South East Papua New Guinea, 19<sup>th</sup> century, *National Museums Scotland (A.1898.423)*



### Kula valuables

The Massim region is the location of the *kula* system which is a complex network of trade relations in which items are exchanged to form networks and enhance one's social status and power. A number of artefacts are exchanged in the *kula* system. The two key items are arm ornaments made of cut conus shells (*mwali*) and shell necklaces. Items exchanged in *kula* gain status and fame depending on who they are traded with.

*Mwali* of cut conus shell with attachments of seeds, trade beads and pearl shell, Trobriand Islands area, Papua New Guinea, 19<sup>th</sup> century, *University of Aberdeen Museums (ABDUA: 385)*





Ceremonial axe, the greenstone blade is a valuable which is exchanged in the *kula* system, D'Entrecasteaux Islands, Milne Bay province, Papua New Guinea, 19<sup>th</sup> century, *National Museums Scotland (A.1900.403)*

### Body adornments and warfare

Some body ornaments from South East New Guinea are associated with fighting and warfare, such as the *musikaka*. It takes the form of a cut piece of wood, turtle shell, or even metal that has curvilinear edges and attachments of boars tusk, red and black *Abrus* seeds, white Job's tears (*Coix lachryma* seeds), and cut shells. Examples exist that have additional attachments of feathers, nuts and barkcloth. It is thought *musikaka* were worn on the chest, and possibly held in the mouth during battle, by men in the area around Port Moresby. Some historical photographs show *musikaka* hanging from the rafters outside houses. It is thought that more rough examples were made as a trade item.



*Musikaka*, South East Papua New Guinea, 19<sup>th</sup> century, *University of Aberdeen Museums (ABDUA: 146)*

Also associated with warfare is a V-shaped ornament known as a *gibigibi* which was worn by men from the Collingwood Bay area, Oro province. It consists of a cane frame with a row of pig teeth attached, each end terminating in a boar tusk which would have pierced tips and be tied together. A bar across the 'V' would allow the ornament to be clenched in the mouth during fighting with the tusk ends in the air.

Face ornament or fighting mask (*gibigibi*), Papua New Guinea, 19<sup>th</sup> century, *University of Aberdeen Museums (ABDUA: 133)*



### Stone headed weapons

Stone-headed clubs from South East New Guinea have a long narrow wooden shaft which tapers down to a point. The head is a piece of worked stone with a hole in the centre, held in place by plaited rattan. The stone head will either be in the shape of a disc, star, triangle, or a variation of a shape resembling a pineapple. Some examples have feather attachments. They were popular with collectors in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Many of these clubs are attributed to the area around Port Moresby.



Top of a stone headed club with disc shaped head and attachments of feathers and human hair. The attachments indicate this would have been owned by a powerful individual. South East Papua New Guinea, 19<sup>th</sup> century, *National Museums Scotland (A.1915.311)*

### Further reading:

Beran, H. (1996) *Mutuaga: A Nineteenth-Century New Guinea Master Carver*. University of Wollongong Press

Craig, B et al (2010), *Living Spirits with Fixed Abodes: The Masterpieces Exhibition Papua New Guinea National Museum and Art Gallery*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press

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Malinowski, B (1922), *Argonauts of the western Pacific*. London: G. Routledge & sons, Ltd

Newton, D. (1975) *Massim: art of the Massim area, New Guinea*. New York: Museum of Primitive Art

MacKenzie, Maureen (1997), *Androgynous objects: string bags and gender in central New Guinea*. Routledge

Welsch, R. et al (2006), *Coaxing the Spirits to Dance: Art and Society in the Papuan Gulf*. Hood Museum of Art, Dartmouth College