



Shield (Wörrumbi)

Date

mid 20th Century

Primary Maker

Mendi

Medium

Wood, pigments and fiber

Description

War was common in the Mendi society of Papua New Guinea's Southern Highlands until at least the middle of the 20th Century. In combat, the Mendi have had three distinct types of shields. Based on the form and general design of this shield it is a wörrumbi, a medium-sized, elongated ovoid bowman's shield. There were both lighter and heavier variants, but the wörrumbi was favored as it allowed for a happy medium of mobility and defense. This shield appears to be carved from a hardwood strong enough to shatter or deflect bone or palm arrows on

impact. Abstract, geometric designs as seen here are very common. The midrib seen here often travels the entire length of the shield and is called a mesha. Papuan shields were designed to protect warriors both physically and spiritually from the chaos of battle. Their bulky forms could easily deflect projectiles like arrows and spears, as well as block attacks from clubs. Carefully carved sculptural elements and painted designs helped warriors to magically draw strength and protection from their ancestors, the spirits of animals, and the land itself. When wars were declared, men repainted their shields with dazzlingly vibrant colors to distract and threaten their enemies. Their designs signaled the status of the carrier, his prowess as a warrior, and his connection to the spiritual world. War, a constant realigning of relationships between opposing tribal neighbors, is woven into the tapestry of daily life in New Guinea. Its three leading causes are all key factors in being the dominant group in a region: disputes over land borders, stolen pigs, and the ownership of women. Both the location and times of battles were scheduled, and the ensuing hostilities could often go on for months culminating in someone being hurt or killed in battle. Once all parties agreed that a fair battle had taken place and reparations were settled, usually in the form of pigs given to the family of the deceased, life would go on until another issue arose.

Dimensions

52 1/4 x 21 1/4 x 1 7/8 in. (132.7 x 54 x 4.8 cm)