

Basic Detail Report



Fish Spirit Masilai

Date
20th Century

Primary Maker
Ben Sisia

Medium
Wood, natural pigment and shell

Description

Sculpture is the predominant art form on New Ireland, an eastern province of Papua New Guinea with a long tradition of artists carving from memory. This evil, fleshless fish spirit named Masilai is said to always be found swimming alone. Its depiction with vicious, thoroughly exposed fangs and a fierce gaze indicates a malicious intent. Early New Ireland sculptures were destroyed or sold to collectors after they served their singular purpose as ceremonial items—mythical representations that strengthened relationships and functioned in the memorial rites for the dead. The tradition of Malagan carving is continued today and has changed little in appearance from how it might have looked half a century ago.

Dimensions

a,b together: 15 × 40 5/8 × 6 11/16 in. (38.1 × 103.2 × 17 cm) b only: 4 × 10 in. (10.2 × 25.4 cm)