Basic Detail Report

Lime Spatula (Kena)

Date
mid 20th Century

Primary Maker
Massim

Medium
Ebony

Description

This lime spatula was collected from the Laughlan Islands in the Milne Bay Province of Papua New Guinea and dates back to the mid-20th Century. Lime spatulas, also known as kena, are commonly made of whalebone, cassowary bone, human bone, ebony, wood, or turtle shell. Depending on the intended purpose, a lime spatula may be decorated with shells or incisions. The object presented here is a particular type of made of ebony and features openwork carvings indicative to other lime spatulas from the Massim area. A lime spatula is commonly employed as a tool for the preparation of betel nut chewing—a mild stimulate used in many parts of Southeast Asia. The practice involves using a lime spatula to bring lime made of burnt coral to the mouth, where it is chewed with a mixture of betel nut and betel pepper leaves. The consumption of the blend reduces hunger, produces a sense of well-being, and increases the capacity of work. During traditional ceremonies, a new kena may be crafted and decorated for the reserved use of a chief or shaman. According to some researchers, lime spatulas such as this one would not have been used for betel nut chewing. Instead, they are part of the ritual gifts used in the inter-island expeditions of Kula trade voyages. These excursions required women and men to sail on outrigger canoes in search of valuables such as decorated lime spatulas and other ritual commodities. These items would be used in their mortuary or bride price requirements as currency. Lime spatulas decorated with layers shells were considered valuable and would convey the high rank of the person who gifts it away during these rituals. Lime spatulas held a deep significance and hallowed respect, signifying status, chiefdom, ownership and historical record. Today, lime spatulas are most frequently used as heirlooms and reminders of deceased family members.

Dimensions

10 1/2 × 7/8 × 7/8 in. (26.7 × 2.2 × 2.2 cm)