

Basic Detail Report



Shield

Date

20th Century

Primary Maker

Asmat

Medium

Wood and pigment

Description

The Asmat people are well known for their elaborate war shields, each of which is carved from a single mangrove root and named after an ancestor important to the owner. The abstracted flying fox and fruit bat motifs covering the face of this shield are traditional icons of head-hunting due to the symbolic connection between fruit and the head in Asmat culture. 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

68 1/2 × 27 1/4 × 3 1/4 in. (174 × 69.2 × 8.3 cm)