



Shield

Date

20th Century

Medium

Wood and pigment

Description

This shield comes from the Abau people residing in the Green River region of Papua New Guinea, and it dates to the 20th century. The quality and strength of this shield's graphics are outstanding. In war, Abau warriors surrounded the enemy's village structures. Protected behind the wide shields they would set fire to the grass roofs and then shoot any person who fled the burning shelter. 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.