



Shield (Wörrumbi)

Date

mid 20th Century

Primary Maker

Mendi

Medium

Wood and pigment

Description

This war shield, colloquially referred to as Wörrumbi, was made by the Mendi people residing in Papua New Guinea's Southern Highlands Province. Historically, the wars waged in the Highlands of New Guinea ranged from mock battles between neighboring groups to bitter feuds constantly at risk of erupting into bloodshed. The relative intensity of each of these conflicts necessitated varying types of weaponry, so even within the narrow confines of New Guinea's Mendi Valley three different shield types were used. The Wörrumbi featured here was used for

open combat, and its shape and size have made it the most popular regional design, even following the outlawing of battle. A wörrumbi is carried slung over the shoulder with a plant fiber cord so that a bow or a spear could still be used. The type of wood used, worr or fel, determined the weight of the shield and whether the bone- or palm-tipped arrows used in the highlands would become embedded in an enemy combatant's shield or shatter on impact. The shield also features residual reddish-orange, yellow, and white pigmentation. It is believed that shields channel the power of one's ancestors to give one strength and protection in combat through their bright pigmentation and often the presence of abstracted anthropomorphic designs. Furthermore, the pigmentation was as much a component of psychological warfare as anything else. In full scale battles, it was not men so much as a solid wall of white and red pigment promising to crash upon its foes like a wave.

Dimensions

49 1/4 × 16 1/2 × 3/4 in. (125.1 × 41.9 × 1.9 cm)