



Canoe Prow

Date

early to mid 20th Century

Primary Maker

Murik

Medium

Wood and pigment

Description

Based on the design of this wooden canoe prow, it is most likely from the Murik Lakes, a series of lakes lying just west of where the Sepik River meets the ocean. Unlike the river dwellers of the Sepik, who rely on small canoes for travel, habitants of the coastal region rely on large ocean-going canoes for travel. Canoe prows from the Murik Lakes tend to feature an oval-shaped anthropomorphic figurehead at the top end, and a zoomorphic head at the opposite end of the prow. Geometric designs featured around the heads are also commonly found on canoe

prows from this region. Prows often represent spiritual beings or clan symbols, and sometimes evoke the properties of the being represented. Often times, the figures represented are used as protection for the voyagers within the canoe. In pre-colonial times, the completion of new canoe would undertake a launching rite, of which the canoes would be daubed with substance that were thought to transform it from an artificial object into a “cosmic agent of productivity.” Women and children paint the designs on the canoe with white lime paint. The canoe prows would also be daubed with three red substances: a mixture of red ochre and coconut oil to enhance sexual attractiveness, blood of purification expelled from the penis by urethral insertion to cleanse the canoe, and blood of a human sacrifice. There is little information regarding this final aspect of the launching rite, other than the victims would have most likely been captured women from a non-Murik village.

Dimensions

10 × 21 × 10 1/2 in. (25.4 × 53.3 × 26.7 cm)