



Splashboard (Lagim)

Date

early to mid 20th Century

Primary Maker

Massim

Medium

Wood and pigment

Description

Splashboards (lagim) are an important feature of the canoes used for Kula trade voyages in the Milne Bay Province of Papua New Guinea. Each canoe has two splashboards—one on the bow and one on the stern—which hold up the sideboards, increase the depth of the hull and keep the ocean water from splashing the people traveling in the canoe. Splashboards are cut from a single

piece of wood and are intricately incised with mirroring designs on the exterior. Splashboards from the Woodlark Islands (Muyua) tend to have volutes that curve upwards, giving the top of the splashboard an appearance that has been described as a lobe. Not much information can be found regarding the significance behind this particular splashboard form. In almost all splashboards from Muyua, we see the morning star—the most important navigational landmark for the Massim—carved in openwork at three points in the crown. Woodcarving knowledge in the Massim area can be classified into specific schools of carving based on the presence of distinct designs. On this particular lagim we find a design described as a line with looped end and a stem dropping away before rising again to end in another loop. Only carvers from the Kitavan school utilize this specific design in their woodwork. The presence of a distinct design does not marque an object to a definite area, as schools of carving are passed from woodcarver to apprentice. Splashboards are traditionally painted with black, white, and red pigments obtained from a burnt coconut, a red berry, chalk or coral. Red is the color seen most predominantly in these splashboards for its ability to elicit passionate and uncalculated responses. Canoes are status markers in Massim society, much like luxury vehicles, and splashboards are ornamental features that serve the purpose of beautifying the canoe and charming spectators when they arrive on the island during Kula trade voyages. It is thought that visually-pleasing canoe with intricate wood carvings would “soften” the minds of other Kula participants and make them relinquish their valuable gifts. Once the canoe wears out, the lagim is kept in memory by the owner and used as a material reference for practicing woodcarvers.

Dimensions

32 × 17 × 2 1/4 in. (81.3 × 43.2 × 5.7 cm)