



Shield (Wörrumbi)

Date

1950-1969

Primary Maker

Mendi

Medium

Wood, pigment and fiber rope

Description

Leaping from its white field like a modernist painting, the bold, red figure on this shield from the Mendi Valley represents its former owner. Wörrumbi, the vernacular word for this type of shield, were only used when groups engaged in formal battles, not for everyday skirmishes or raids. 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

53 7/8 × 15 3/4 × 1 1/16 in. (136.8 × 40 × 2.7 cm)