

Basic Detail Report



Shield

Date

late 20th Century

Medium

Wood, rattan and commercial paint

Description

The Phantom, the “Man who Never Dies,” predated Superman by two years to be the first superhero comic strip ever made. Between 1972 and 1977 it was translated into Tok Pisin and published in Wantok, a weekly periodical distributed throughout much of Papua New Guinea. As hero who uses his intelligence, strength, and reputation rather than superpowers, Phantom quickly became a national icon. In the 1980s and ‘90s a period of intertribal war broke out in the Western Highlands Province and many old shields were repainted with the Phantom to draw upon his strength and instill fear in would-be opponents. 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

63 1/2 × 24 3/4 × 3 in. (161.3 × 62.9 × 7.6 cm)