



Writing so subtle...

When painted barkcloths from New Guinea were exhibited in Paris and New York in the 1920s, the consequences for western art were significant. But, as **Michel Thieme** explains, the meeting of cultures may not have been mutually beneficial.

1 (left) *Maro* (detail of 5), Humboldt Bay or Lake Sentani, Papua, Indonesia, collected before 1931 Painted barkcloth (*tapa*). Author's collection

2 Humboldt Bay man and woman. She is wearing a decorated *maro* loincloth. Drawing by C.B.H. Von Rosenberg, draughtsman for the 1858 Dutch Etna expedition to New Guinea. After Virginia-Lee Webb et al., *Ancestors of the Lake: Art of Lake Sentani and Humboldt Bay, New Guinea*, 2011

‘**T**here is nothing that can be said about these *tapa*... save that they exceed all normal bounds. They present the signs of a writing so subtle, so spiritual, so abstract that the mind suffers a shock that goes beyond our senses’ reach and is finally teased into meditations that wiser heads describe as *maladive*. Perhaps there is nothing in it... In these lines sustained by strange colors, there is a metaphysical sense that may open new casements for us... Let us not hesitate to rest our elbows there. The day will come – very soon, perhaps it is already here – when in some decorators’ studios, there will be sensitive Frenchmen who can interpret images of such beauty and take them as grafts for a new European garden.’

That is what André Portier and François Poncetton wrote in the introduction to their 1931 book *Décorations Océanienne*. They suggested that Westerners would be inspired by these paintings, made by people who in some romantic minds were ‘noble savages’. Their surmise turned out to be right. *Maro* – the local name for painted barkcloths from the Lake Sentani and Humboldt Bay area of northwestern New Guinea, today the Indonesian province of Papua (Irian Jaya) – played an important role at several influential exhibitions in Paris and New York in the late twenties and the early thirties of the last century (the golden age of surrealism). The moment when western and tribal art struck sparks off each other proved to be an important juncture in the history of *maro*, both for their Papuan creators and for European collectors and artists.



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Making and decorating *tapa* or barkcloth is a practice that can be found all over the islands of the Pacific Ocean. To manufacture *tapa*, the inner bark from a ficus or paper-mulberry tree is removed, dried in the sun, then soaked in water and hammered on a flat surface causing the fibres to spread out. The sustained beating of the bark creates strips of cloth of more-or-less even thickness. These strips are beaten together to form a large sheet, the edges of which are trimmed. The decorations are applied with several colours: white, made from lime; red, made from reddish stone; and black, made from soot



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or charcoal. The pigments are mixed with tree resin and water.

According to the accounts of European collectors, who collected them up to the mid-20th century, *maro* were made and painted by women and worn as loincloths by married women and initiated girls only. The first *maro* known to have been collected was brought back in 1858 by the initial Dutch expedition to the north and south coasts of former Dutch New Guinea, the so-called Etna expedition. Decorations on the 'early' *maro*, those collected between 1858 and the early 1920s, consisted primarily of spiral designs, sometimes integrated with stylised fish and birds.

In 1926 the Swiss ethnologist, photographer and collector Paul Wirz acquired a *maro* that he photographed in situ. It had been used as an embellishment for a woman's grave. This *maro* is now part of the collection of the Museum der Kulturen in Basel. Wirz published an account of



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his collecting trip in 1928, and this may have inspired the Frenchman Jacques Viot to travel to the north coast of Dutch New Guinea to collect tribal art for the Parisian art dealer Pierre Loeb. Viot knew that there were not many treasures left to collect in the Polynesian islands; however, the hunting grounds in New Guinea seemed to be more promising.

Among other artworks, Viot collected a number of *maro*. These were the artworks that caused a big sensation on the Parisian and New York art scene when they were displayed in several exhibitions. They resembled the art of the modernist avant-garde, much in the news in those days. The *maro* appeared to show the same type of abstractions as could be seen in the work of surrealists. *Maro* were anonymous art and seemed to echo stories of a culture that, in its development, was still close to the origins of the human race. That made them irresistibly exotic.



Photograph by Patrick Crises/Scala, Florence

3 *Maro*, Lake Sentani, Papua, Indonesia, mid-19th century. Painted barkcloth (*tapa*), 0.87 × 0.36m (2'10" × 1'2"). The first *maro* known to have entered a Western collection, this woman's loincloth was collected during the 1858 Etna expedition to Dutch New Guinea and is now preserved in the Ethnographic Museum in Leiden. The traditional painting probably represents a fishing net. The design signifies the unbreakable nexus of social relationships and the mutual harmony among them. Such motifs, with wavy lines and double spirals, are not only found on barkcloth but also on all kinds of Lake

Sentani woodcarving. This *maro* would probably have been worn wound around the waist, encircled by a belt. Only married women wore barkcloth, while unmarried girls went unclothed. Such cloths thus marked the passage to a married state. Widows wore a barkcloth cape as a sign of mourning, and the dead were wrapped in barkcloth for burial. A small hut was built on top of the grave, and sometimes a barkcloth was hung up beside the hut (see Hali 169, 2011, p.123), especially when the dead person was a young woman. Rijksmuseum voor Volkenkunde, Leiden, RMV 53-76

4 *Maro*, Lake Sentani, Papua, Indonesia, probably 1920s. Painted barkcloth (*tapa*), 1.76 × 0.90m (5'9" × 2'11"). Collected by Jacques Viot and donated by Pierre Loeb, Musée du quai Branly, Paris, 71.1933.64.1



Photograph by Jan van Esch

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A debate raged at that time regarding relationships between modern and classical art. It was partly fuelled by tribal art that was, for the first time, displayed like western paintings: framed and mounted directly on to the wall. Europeans had seen *tapa* before from, for example, Fiji, Tonga and Samoa. But these had mainly been exhibited as ‘wallpaper’ in the back of showcases with other artefacts in front. The newly displayed *maro* were paintings that showed an abstraction of forms and lines that seemed to echo the dreams, myths, magic and visual metaphors of a far-away, almost extinct culture.

The surrealists were fascinated by Oceanic art (tribal art from the Pacific region) in general and by *maro* specifically. The concept of *maro* paintings fitted in seamlessly with surrealist tendencies. André Breton, who had assumed leadership of the movement, had a large collection of Oceanic art. Henri Matisse, Joan Miró and Max Ernst are all known to have had *maro* in their collections. The same goes for Johannes Hendrikus Moesman; though according to Her de Vries, a personal friend of the late Dutch surrealist for more than thirty-five years, Moesman never made any art that was directly inspired by or looked anything like the tribal art that he owned. Comparing *maro* with some of the art made by Joan Miró, however,

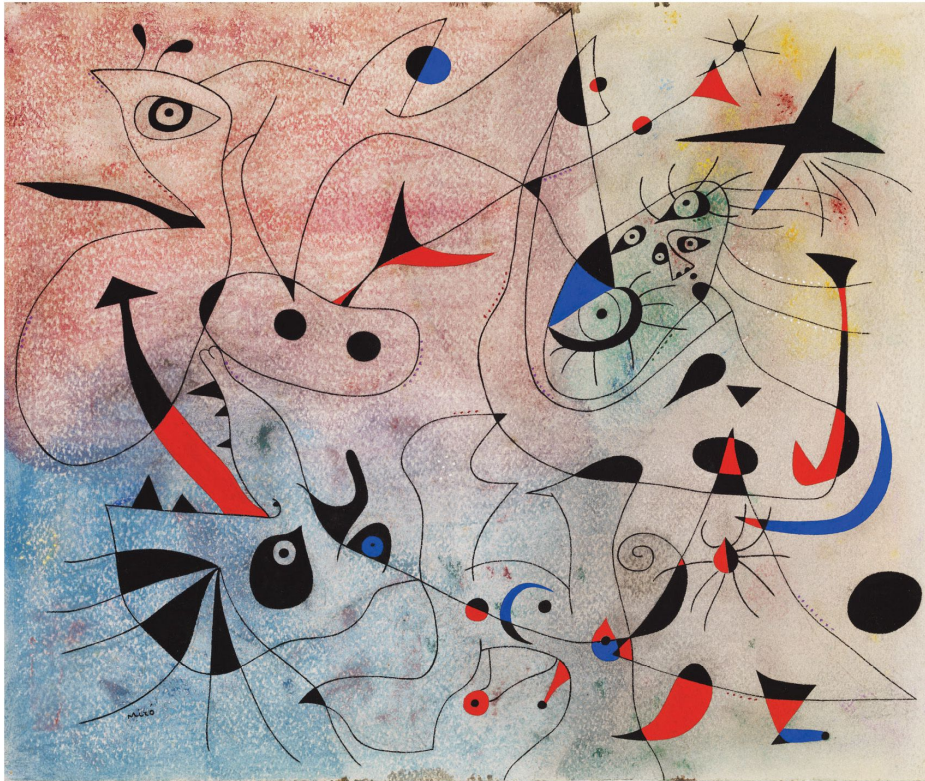
it is hard not to see similarities in line flow, play with line thicknesses, use of colour and surface grain in the background.

By the late 1920s the use of *maro* as a garment had diminished in New Guinea, since most of the barkcloth had been replaced by Western attire. The style of decoration on *maro* collected from this time up to the Second World War is somewhat different, and it is these figurative ‘revival’ designs that were embraced by western artists. Instead of the pattern-like spiral designs, there are vivid representations of creatures resembling fish, reptiles, spirits, totems or symbols. These are surrounded by scenery composed of mysterious plants and strange objects, much like a celebrated drawing that had been produced ‘entirely from his own inspiration’ by a youth of the Humboldt Bay village of Tobati. This had been collected in 1903 by the Dutch anthropologist and Royal Dutch Navy surgeon G.A.J. van der Sande, who had supplied the lad with pencil and paper (8).

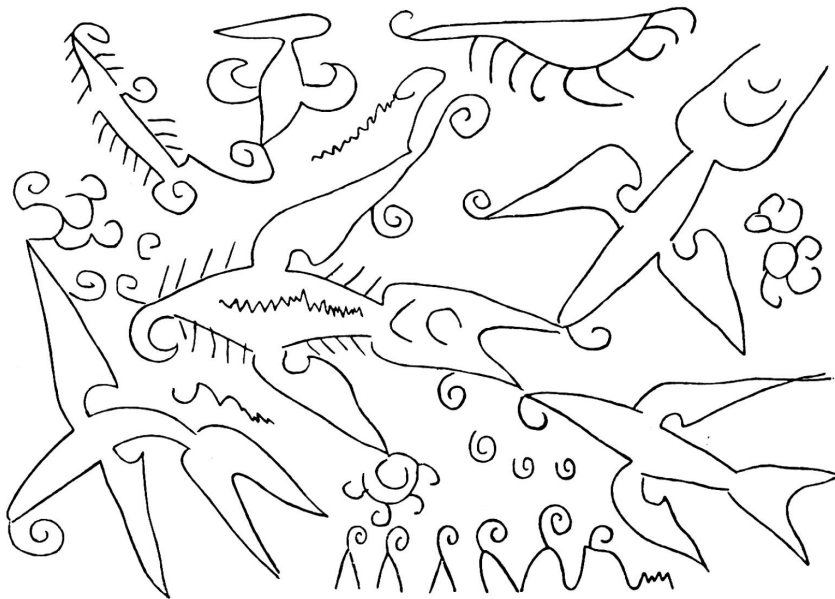
The decorations on *maro*, as well as on clay pots and other objects, were called *homo* by the people of the Humboldt Bay and Lake Sentani region. This can be translated as ‘writing’ which gives information about the village, family, clan and owner of the *maro*. The *homo* designs were



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5 *Maro*, Humboldt Bay or Lake Sentani, Papua, Indonesia, Collected before 1931. Painted barkcloth (*tapa*), 1.55 × 1.00m (5'1" × 3'3"). Author's collection

6 Johannes Hendrikus Moesman in 1955 with the *maro* shown in (5), now in the author's collection, hanging on the wall of his Utrecht studio. Moesman (1909-1988) was a Dutch surrealist painter and draughtsman who gained some international recognition in the 1960s when, after his work was brought to the attention of André Breton's circle in Paris, it was shown in various international surrealist exhibitions. After John Steen, *Moesman. Monografie, catalogus van schilderijen en objecten*, 1998, p.50

7 *L'étoile matinale* (*Morning star*) from the *Constellations* series by Joan Miró, 1940. Gouache and oil wash on paper. Artists such as Henri Matisse, Max Ernst and Joan Miró are known to have owned examples of *maro*, and it is not difficult to see parallels between their patterns and works such as the *Constellations*. Fundació Joan Miró, Barcelona, Gift of Pilar Juncosa de Miró, © Succession Miró/ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London 2013

8 Drawing by a youth from the Humboldt Bay village of Tobati, collected in 1903 by the Royal Dutch Navy surgeon G.A.J. van der Sande, who provided the young man with pencil and paper. Bearing a close affinity to works of modern art such as Joan Miró's *Constellation* series, it demonstrates that the figurative imagery seen on *maro* of the inter-war years was part of the region's traditional pictorial vocabulary. Retrospectively this drawing looks like a prototype for designs on the *maro* from the early revival period. Published Van der Sande, 1907, p.258, fig.177. After Suzanne Greub, *Art of Northwest New Guinea: from Geelvink Bay, Humboldt Bay, and Lake Sentani*, 1992, p.130



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9 Jacques Viot (1898-1973), who was largely responsible for introducing *maro* to the Parisian art world in the 1920s, with an unidentified Papuan man on Kouroudou Island, Cender-wasih Bay, Papua, 1929. Gilles Viot collection, after Webb et al., *Ancestors of the Lake*, 2011

10 'Oceanic Art' exhibition at the Pierre Matisse Gallery, New York, 1934, with three *maro* on display. Pierre Matisse Gallery Archives, Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, after Webb et al., *Ancestors of the Lake*, 2011

11 *Maro*, Lake Sentani, Papua, Indonesia, probably first quarter 20th century. Painted barkcloth (*tapa*). Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, Gift of Marcia and John Friede in honor of Diane B. Wilsey and Harry S. Parker, III, 2007.44.41

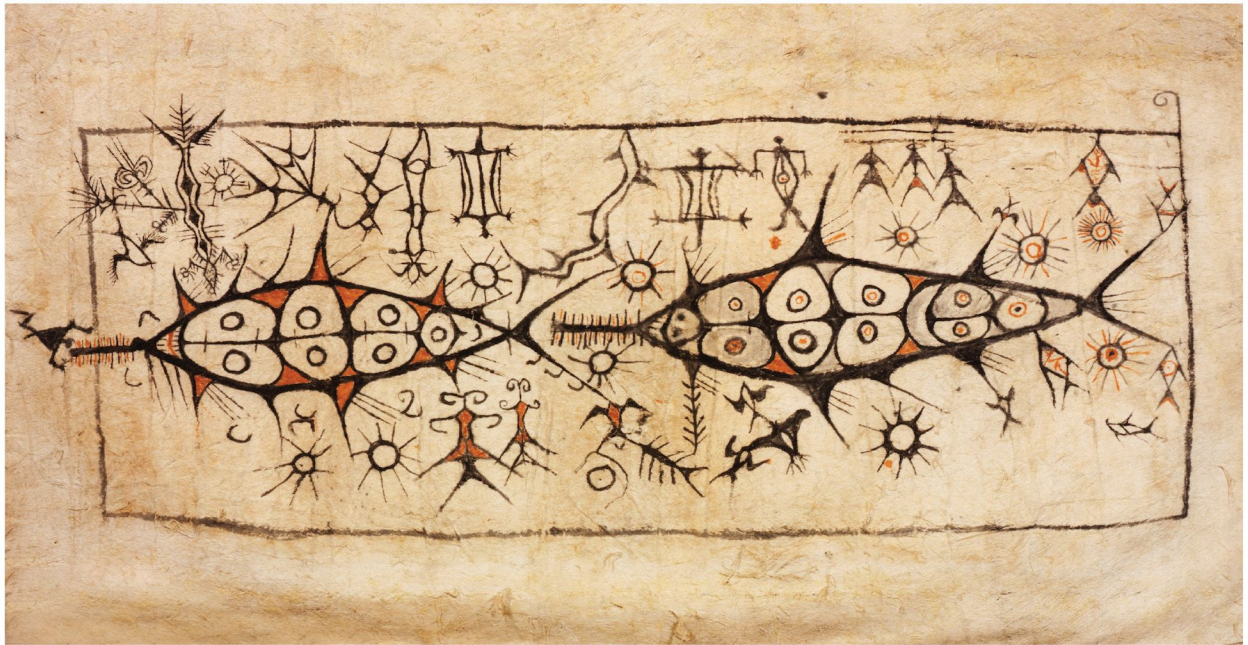
12 *Maro*, Humboldt Bay or Lake Sentani, Papua, Indonesia, probably first quarter 20th century. Painted barkcloth (*tapa*), 1.42 × 0.79m (4'8" × 2'7"). Ex-Sylvia and Pierre Loeb Collection, Paris, collected by Jacques Viot in 1929. Sotheby's, Paris, 5 April 2012, lot 13, estimate €25,000-40,000, sold for €192,750 (\$252,595)

passed on from generation to generation and have a totemic or mythological origin. Some of them referred to animals that were considered to be relatives of humans. They served as clan symbols and it was forbidden for members of those specific clans to kill and eat them.

The change of style from spiral 'patterns' to the more figurative scenes has to do with a renaissance of traditional culture among the people living in Tobati village. The spur was probably the participation of a group of thirty-five north coast artists in an arts festival at the Royal Batavian Society for Arts and Sciences in Jakarta in 1929. Confronted with more than 400 other artists and scores of other styles from all over the Indonesian Archipelago, the traditionally dressed women from Tobati were inspired to revive an art form that they knew from their memories: the painting of *maro*.

The revival lasted for a relatively short period, however. By the time of World War the production of *maro* had declined. In the 1950s collectors travelled to the area again and found no *maro* at first. Only when they showed the villagers photos from earlier publications did uninspired copies of these reproduced examples start to be manufactured. Furthermore it was no longer work done solely by women. Men were producing spiritless *maro* on demand to suit the taste of western collectors.

Nowadays *maro* from the early revival period of the late 1920s and 1930s are rare and very much sought after by collectors and museums. Since *maro* are textbook icons, everybody involved in the scene knows and recognises them. Recently, on 5 April 2012, a fine example from the private collection of the daughter of Pierre Loeb - the Parisian art dealer who had contracted Jacques Viot to collect for him in New Guinea in the late 1920s and 1930s - fetched an unprecedented sum at auction in Paris (12). ♣



Photograph by John Bigelow Taylor

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