

New Ireland

by Michael Gunn

ART of the SOUTH PACIFIC



FIG. 1 (Above):
Group of twelve men wearing masks that were identified in 2003 by a number of people on New Hanover Island as masks used in a *kipang* performance.

Photo taken by Paul Schneider, 1886–1887.
Courtesy of the Linden Museum, Stuttgart, Germany [A.C. Pl. 875].

FIG. 2 (Above right):
Climax of a *malagan* ceremony. Mapua village, Tabar Islands, northern New Ireland.

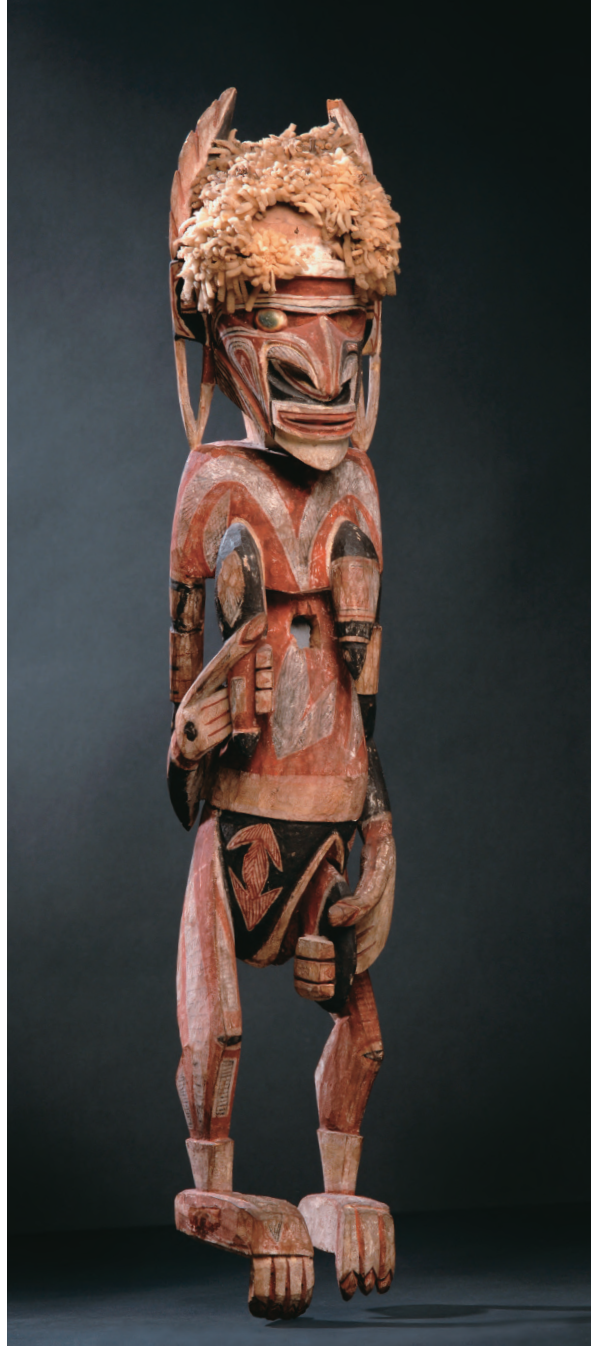
Photo taken by Edgar Walden during the 1907–09 Deutsche Marine Expedition.
Courtesy of the Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin, Germany. [VIII B 3756/VIII C 434].

Mention the art of New Ireland and many people think of *malagan* (or *malanggan*), a tradition of distinctive wooden sculptures carved in a delicate, lace-like pattern and painted with designs that appear symbolic. Many of these masks and figures reached European and American museums and art collectors in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Because these pieces were well-carved and beautifully painted, they appealed to those who appreciated fine workmanship and esoteric symbolism. The imagery on these sculptures was clearly based upon the human form but also included many elements from and references to aspects of the natural world. The asymmetrical painted facial designs seemed to portray the personality of people who lived very different lives than those of Westerners—people who lived in close interaction with nature in violent times.

Many Westerners looked at these pieces and simply appreciated the appearance; others were hungry for explanation and remain so. In

approaching the project of curating a major exhibition of these artworks, we—Philippe Peltier from the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris and Michael Gunn from the Saint Louis Art Museum—did not want to develop or perpetuate an empty fantasy about the people who had made and used them. We were driven to learn more. In the case of masks, for example, how did the nineteenth-century inhabitants of New Ireland perceive them? Each is different and perhaps each represented an individual person, but why did the New Irelanders have the need to make a mask at all?

We consulted the available literature and were unsatisfied. Through our research, particularly in the publications that resulted from the Deutsche Marine Expedition (1907–1909), we knew that *malagan* objects had been collected from northern New Ireland and from the off-shore Tabar Islands. *Malagan* is a sacred tradition and ownership of objects associated with it was strictly controlled. *Malagan* is linked to four



specific art traditions: the primary northern art tradition of carved and painted wood; a bark-cloth mask tradition; a group of hardwood heads; and a series of woven disc objects. These masks, figures, and objects constitute about ninety percent of non-archaeological New Ireland objects found in Western museum collections.

We also knew that there were a number of other art-producing traditions in the southern part of New Ireland, but the distribution of these traditions was not clear. There were a number of strange anomalies, such as the objects collected under the name *kipang* or *kipong*, which include masks as well as other objects like canoe prows that seemed to have been produced all over New Ireland. In contrast to *malagan*, *kipang* is an

Left to right:

FIG. 3: *Malagan female figure. New Ireland.*

Wood, shell, lime, red ochre, paint, spongy marine material, hardwood spikes, and red resin. H: 73 cm. Australian Museum, Sydney.

FIG. 4: *Malagan male figure. New Ireland.*

Wood, shell, lime, red ochre, paint, modeling resin, bast, spongy marine material, and hardwood spikes. H: 73 cm. Australian Museum, Sydney.

FIG. 5: *Vertical malagan frieze. New Ireland.*

Wood, shell, pigment, pandanus husks, and parinarium resin. H: 110.9 cm. Etnografisch Museum, Antwerp, Belgium.

open cultural tradition that can be taken up by anybody willing to pay for the right to use it. When a *kipang* performance takes place, the dancers and other performers make masks using the art tradition of their particular region.

In addition to researching in existing literature, we also looked at the registration data associated with the New Ireland objects in museum collections and realized that, at the time these pieces were collected, Western scholars were really only interested in the object itself. A few field collectors occasionally recorded the name associated with an object and sometimes the name of the village where a piece was collected, but generally, very little was known. The more we researched, the more we realized that we would have to travel to New Ireland to try to locate the missing context of the art objects now in Western museums and private collections. This was a daunting prospect, since the period when most of the objects were collected was over 100 years ago.



In our search for context, we brought hundreds of photographs of art objects in Western museums with us to New Ireland. We traveled by truck and by canoe, visiting as many of the twenty-two different regions of the islands as we were able to reach. At each village we tried to find people who had an interest in their cultural traditions. We sat down with them and tried to explain what we were doing, what a museum was, and what an exhibition could be. Then we asked them to look through the photographs and comment on what they saw. By far, the majority of the individuals we interviewed were interested only in the objects that originated from the region where they lived.

One trend became clear quite early on: there is a wide range of regional variation in the cultural traditions of New Ireland. Though tradi-



tions were often broadly distributed, regional manifestations were quite varied and specific. For example, *malagan* as an art-producing cultural institution could be found from the far north of the main island, along both coasts south to the base of the Lelet Plateau, and on the Tabar Islands. But *malagan* in the Kara region was not the same as *malagan* in the Notsi region or on Tabar. Although the same art style was used for the majority of *malagan* objects created throughout the northern region, each object was made according to a “copyright” that was owned by an individual or a subclan. Some of these copyrights were widely distributed over a number of subclans and even over a number of regions, while others were restricted to one subclan at one location.

Despite our initial optimism, it proved to be almost impossible to confidently attribute specific *malagan* terminology to an object that had been collected over 100 years ago. People in one village might say that a particular object has a certain name, but when a photograph of that object was shown to another group of people living 30 km away, a different name would be given to it. There were only two exceptions: *malagan* sculptural objects with the very distinctive “eye of fire” symbol were always said to belong to the *walik* (or *ualik*, *valik*, or some other variant) group or subtradition of *malagan*; and the woven disc-like *malagan* objects





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left to right:

FIG. 6: **Painted mouth-piece. New Ireland.**

Wood, shell, red ochre, lime, paint, hornbill feathers, resin, and iron spike. L: 36.9 cm. Australian Museum, Sydney.

FIG. 7: **Mask-like head. New Ireland.**

Wood, shell, lime, and paint. H: 56.5 cm. Peabody Essex Museum, Ex-A.B.C.F.M. collection, 1946.

FIG. 8: **Painted mouth-piece. Attributed to New Ireland.**

Wood, shell, and paint. L: 26.9 cm. American Museum of Natural History, ST/2236.

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FIG. 9 (Above):

Painted barkcloth. New Ireland.

Barkcloth and paint. 41.4 x 21.4 cm. Australian Museum, Sydney.

FIG. 10 (Right):

Squatting figure. New Ireland.

Wood, paint, and possibly shell or glass eyes. H: 82 cm. Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin.

FIG. 11 (Far right):

Vertical malagan figure. New Ireland.

Wood, shell, paint, branchlets, and parinarium attachment resin. H: 241 cm. Saint Louis Art Museum, Gift of Morton D. May, 60:1977.



were always known as *varara* (*wowara*, *uara*, or some other variant).

When we started showing photographs to people living on New Hanover, the large island to the north of mainland New Ireland, it became evident to us that although an object was made in the main art style used in the north, here it was not necessarily associated with *malagan*. Photographs of masks that had been identified as belonging to *malagan* on the Tabar Islands were identified on New Hanover as the type used in *kipang*, the primary cultural tradition there. Though *malagan* and *kipang* were completely different cultural traditions, both used very similar masks in the northern region.

Further south we came across another interesting anomaly. By far the most well known art-producing cultural tradition in the south was the secret society known as *tubuan* (*tumbuan*). Although its central base is in the Lak (Siar) region in the remote southeast part of New Ireland, *tubuan* is known in most villages throughout southern New Ireland and even as far north as the villages around the base of the Lelet Plateau and on the Lihir Islands. The performance aspect of *tubuan* uses large body masks that are closely related to the better known *dukduk* masks used in the Gazelle Peninsula and Duke of York Islands of East New Britain. Strangely enough, in our examination of more than 120 museum collections, we did not find any New Ireland *tubuan* masks.

The information gathered during our fieldwork now allows greater context for the artworks in the exhibition, which is titled *New*





Ireland: Art of the South Pacific. It includes more than 125 objects lent by thirty-two institutions and private collectors. Ninety of these pieces are from northern New Ireland and thirty-five from the southern and central regions. The selected objects represent the best of the twelve known art traditions from New Ireland. Most of the pieces were selected for their aesthetic merits and each is among the most interesting of its class.

The accompanying catalogue will feature all the objects shown in the exhibition at all three venues (St. Louis, Paris, and Berlin) and will be published in English, French, and German. Fifty-two papers by nine authors (Vicky Barneclutt, Antje Denner, Brigitte Derlon, Michael Gunn, Sean Kingston, Susanne Küchler, Philippe Peltier, Markus Schindlbeck, and Graeme Were) cover a wide range of topics concerned with the creation, production, and use of art objects from New Ireland.

New Ireland: Art of the South Pacific opens at the Saint Louis Art Museum on October 15, 2006, and can be seen there until January 7, 2007. It will then travel to the new Musée du Quai Branly in Paris, April 2–July 8, 2007. The final venue will be at the Ethnologisches Museum in Berlin, August 10–November 11, 2007. Due to the differing natures of the institutions hosting each venue, the exhibition will vary in the number of objects as well as in presentation and organizational structure. In each, it will provide new understanding for visitors about the remarkable art forms of New Ireland.

FIG. 10 (Facing page):
Wooden mask with manufactured cloth head-covering. Collected with the name *Iorr*. Southern New Ireland, west coast Siar region, Lamassa Island.

Collected in New Ireland by Emil Stephan (S.M.S. Möwe), 1904. Acquired 1905. Wood (*Alstonia scholaris*), shell, rattan, lime, blue pigment, red ochre, manufactured textile. H: 29 cm. Ethnologisches Museum, Berlin, Germany, VI 23797.

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FIG. 11: Eighteen men dancing on top of an eight-meter-tall fence. Nusavung village, New Hanover, northern New Ireland.

Photo taken during the 1907–09 Deutsch Marine Expedition. Courtesy of the Völkerkunde-Sammlung der Universität Tübingen, Tübingen [1467].

FIG. 12: Map of New Ireland.

Cartography by Alex Copeland.

FIG. 13: A group of men in an ocean-going canoe in southern New Ireland, c. 1900.

Courtesy of the Linden Museum, Stuttgart, Germany [A.C. Pl.148].

