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THE MUSEUM OF PRIMITIVE ART

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ART OF THE ASMAT:

THE COLLECTION OF MICHAEL C. ROCKEFELLER

SHOWN BY MUSEUM OF PRIMITIVE ART

Note to Editors: You and your representatives are cordially invited to attend a press preview of the exhibition to be held at the pavilion of the Museum on Monday, September 10, from 2 - 4 p.m. Photographs and a catalog will be available.

A major exhibition of art from the Asmat region of New Guinea, one of the richest primitive art areas in the world, will be placed on view today by the Museum of Primitive Art.

In the southwest of New Guinea lies an inhospitable expanse of mud flats, intersected by broad rivers, and covered by tropical forest. Here, eking out a tenuous existence, live some 17,000 tribesmen who call themselves the Asmat, or the People.

They have evolved, despite the rigors of daily life and sporadic outbursts of tribal warfare, a wealth of spiritual tradition which is embodied in their style of sculpture -- one of the most distinguished in the whole of the primitive world.

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Soon this great tradition of art will disappear under the impact of modern civilization, and with it a small but bright facet of human experience, the Asmat culture of New Guinea, will belong to the past.

The exhibition is drawn from the collection gathered by Michael C. Rockefeller, a trustee of the Museum, who, in order to preserve the art and document the life of the Asmat, visited their region in the summer and again in the fall of last year.

To the Asmat, life, art, and magic are one. According to their ancient legends, in the distant past, long before the memory of man, a great magician wandered through their then uninhabited land. Lonely in this swampy region, he longed for the company of his fellow man. He carved figures of mangrove wood and, when finished with his labor, placed them in a forest clearing. He then beat softly on a drum and the sculptures came to life. Thus, from magic and art, the people of the Asmat were created.

The spirit of this centuries-old myth, where wood becomes flesh, is at the heart of Asmat culture and still echos through Asmat life. It is reflected in initiation rites, where ritual dancers slowly mobilize their "wooden" limbs just as the wooden figures in the myth came to life; in everyday existence, where a mask of an ancestor is always spoken of as if it were alive; and lastly, in perhaps its most spectacular manifestation, the bisj ceremony.

When an Asmat warrior is slain by an enemy villager, a bisj ceremony is called to honor the dead man and to invoke vows of vengeance. The hunters of the Asmat village launch their dugouts in the swampy forests and ride to a sacred grove, where, as in the myth of the magician, a mangrove tree is cut. The tree, when stripped of bark, is soon covered with beads of blood-red sap, perhaps the reason why the mangrove plays a paramount role in Asmat symbolism.

Upon returning with the giant tree trunk, the hunters engage in a ritual dialogue with the women of the tribe. The women ask what the hunters have brought, and the men proudly reply that they have brought the body of a great man, whereupon the women hail the hunters

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as fearless warriors and receive the mangrove trunk as though it were actually the body of a warrior.

After days of ceremony, a bisj pole, over 20 feet high, intricately designed, and studded with human figures, is carved from the tree trunk. To the beat of war drums, the singing of songs, and a mock battle dance, the bisj pole is then raised in front of the ceremonial house. Within a few days, the bisj is laid to rest in the sago forests that surround the village. The soft wood soon rots, and according to Asmat tradition, the spirit of the victim thus honored goes into the sago palms, and thence, into the people who eat sago.

Several bisj poles, as well as the other notable art objects Mr. Rockefeller collected from the Asmat villagers, are housed in a specially-built pavilion at 16 West 54th Street, across the street from the Museum of Primitive Art.

A large one-storey structure, shaped around an open courtyard, the pavilion was designed to evoke in part the spirit of Asmat life. From the covered arcade which spans the courtyard, for example, a spectator can view the bisj poles exposed to the weather, as in an Asmat village. In its dramatically-lit interiors, hung with shields and spears, masks, ancestral figures, and animal sculptures, the pavilion is reminiscent of an Asmat ceremonial house.

Photographs of Asmat village scenes taken by Mr. Rockefeller will also be displayed.

The exhibition, Art of the Asmat: the Collection of Michael C. Rockefeller, was designed by René d'Harnoncourt, Vice-President of the Museum, with the assistance of Douglas Newton, Curator of the Museum of Primitive Art, and the pavilion by Arthur Drexler. It can be visited through November 11th, Mondays through Saturdays from 11 to 6 p.m., Sundays 1 to 7 p.m. On Thursday nights the pavilion will be open till 10 p.m. Admission is 50 cents for adults and 25 cents for young people under 18.