

SPECIAL REPORT

Guinea experts cry foul on tribal exhibits

A new exhibition of Melanesian artefacts raises questions about how the pieces ended up in a Californian art museum. **Rex Dalton** investigates.

At San Francisco's new fine-arts museum, a stunning exhibition of South Pacific artefacts sheds light on the world of primitive peoples. The display includes about 400 specimens from Papua New Guinea — with adorned human skulls from the days of head-hunting, masks and shields portraying tribal spirits, and life-size carvings steeped in fertility rites.

The de Young Museum offers scientists the first opportunity to study a rare collection of some 6,000 Melanesian artefacts. But the exhibition also engenders difficult questions — because at least nine of the artefacts seem to be the national cultural property of Papua New Guinea. Records show that these have been earmarked by the country's government as objects of cultural significance to the nation.

Several anthropologists, many of whom have worked in Papua New Guinea, claim that the specimens were illegally exported. And other artefacts in the exhibition can allegedly be traced back to worldwide trade networks, in which misappropriated specimens are sold to antiquities dealers.

In recent months, accusations and criminal charges have arisen against high-profile art dealers and museum leaders. An ongoing criminal trial in Italy has revealed that looted artefacts from ruins have been sold to fine-arts museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and the Getty Center in Los Angeles. And some scholars at New York University are protesting over a \$200-million donation to the university, to fund a centre for the study of the ancient world; they say the funds may be tainted by antiquity dealing.

Concerns over the source of the de Young artefacts raise complex issues for the museum, recently rebuilt after it was damaged by an earthquake. Only 30 years independent, Papua New Guinea remains a poor nation, with little international clout or economic means to fight for its lost patrimony. Some question whether

the country's Public Museum and Art Gallery, in Port Moresby, would have enough money to properly secure and care for the artefacts if they were returned.

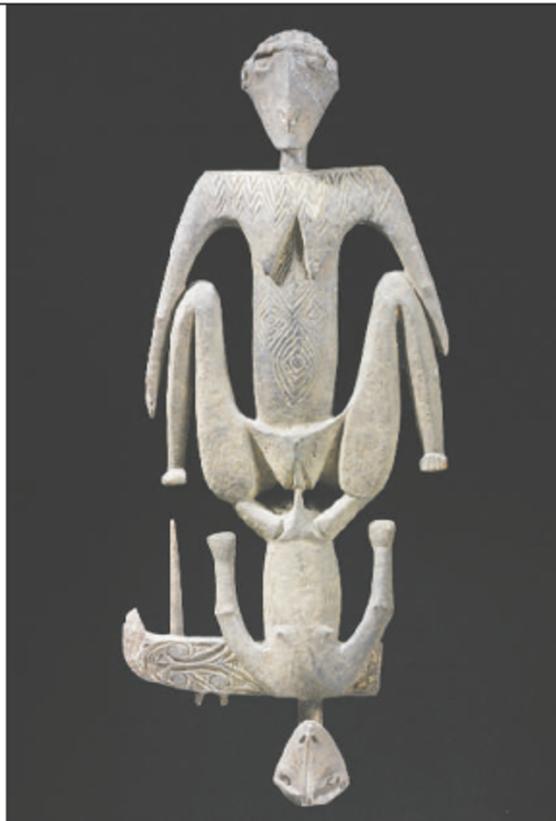
But others are adamant that the issue must be addressed. A 1965 law bans exports of national cultural property, says Barry Craig, curator of foreign ethnology at the Museum of South Australia in Adelaide. "Material removed illegally should be returned. But it is up to the Papua New Guinea government," argues Craig, who served as a curator at Papua New Guinea's national museum from 1980 to 1983.

The Papua New Guinea government has tried to crack down on illegal exports in the past. In 1972, working with the government, Brian Egloff, a University of Canberra ethnoarchaeologist, and Dirk Smidt, a Dutch ethnographer, shut down exports one weekend and discovered crates of prohibited artefacts ready for shipping abroad. Some were to go to Wayne Heathcote, an Australian collector, who has clashed with Papua New Guinea authorities over artefacts; Heathcote declined interview requests.

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The de Young Museum offers scientists a rare chance to study a large collection of Melanesian artefacts.



But other artefacts have slipped out to auction or parlour deals, which can be lucrative; the donor of the de Young collection values his gift at \$100 million.

Finding the source

Smidt, who has long championed Papua New Guinea patrimony, penned an article in the de Young catalogue on the current exhibition. Records show that he had previously entered several of the nine artefacts into Papua New Guinea's national-property catalogue. Smidt



Whose heritage? The carvings shown here have been classified as property of Papua New Guinea.

acknowledged that national property was in the collection, but declined further comment.

Egloff, who has investigated questionable artefact purchases in Australia, says an independent audit should be conducted on the de Young specimens. "There are two issues," says Egloff. "First, to understand the objects' place in society and how they came to the collection. And second, what to do with them."

Sebastine Haraha, the enforcement officer for the Port Moresby museum, says he will inspect the artefacts in San Francisco next week, in order to confirm that they are national property. Museum files contain notes claiming Heathcote illegally purchased two of the artefacts in the 1970s, Haraha says. "I expect all those that were removed illegally should go back."

Officials at the de Young say they are taking the issue seriously. The museum's director, art historian John Buchanan, says he has begun an inquiry into the origin of the questioned artefacts. The de Young museum has a history of repatriating objects when appropriate, Buchanan says, and could do it again.

"We want to be a positive player to resolve the puzzle," says Buchanan. "The way to do that is to be as transparent as we can."

The nine objects in question include a

Karawari mask from the Middle Sepik River (pictured, near left); a wooden Garamut slit gong, about three metres long; and a metre-tall carving showing a Kaningara woman copulating, preying-mantis style (pictured, far left).

Such unique artefacts cry out for study, but not as pieces of art, says anthropologist Adrienne Kaeppler, Oceania curator at the Smithsonian Institution in Washington DC. "These pieces need to be studied in conjunction with people knowledgeable about the culture from which they were taken."

Homeward bound?

Already, researchers at the University of Arizona in Tucson have conducted radiocarbon analysis on 150 specimens. More than 30 are at least 300 years old — with one mask dating to 1,200 years ago.

But the questioned provenance of some specimens may hamper research on the collection. One Smithsonian scientist says privately, "We wouldn't go near it now."

The Melanesian collection was donated by John and Marcia Friede. John Friede, who began collecting artefacts about 40 years ago, has purchased former European museum collections, expropriated in the late 1800s by missionaries. And for decades, he bought specimens from international dealers, such as Heathcote.

Friede denies knowing any of the Melanesian artefacts were national cultural property, insisting that he did not engage in any illegal exports. "Dealers don't tell you where they get them," he says, adding: "It really doesn't matter a great deal." Repatriating the artefacts is "crazy," he says. "They are a lot better off in San Francisco."

If international law-enforcement authorities confirmed that certain pieces were stolen, Friede says, he could see them being returned. "If a few specimens cause the collection to be thought of as nasty, illegal stuff, it would be a shame. My desire is to create a collection to define the greatness of the art."

Papua New Guinea's ambassador to the United States, Evan Paki, expressed surprise when *Nature* pointed out that the de Young collection probably contained national property, saying: "I'm not aware of that. I don't want to set something in motion. But if something is clearly protected, we would want it returned."

And in Papua New Guinea, the long wait for the repatriation of national property continues. As Prime Minister Michael Somare wrote in 1974: "We view our masks and art as living spirits with fixed abodes. It is not right they should be stored in New York, Paris, Bonn or elsewhere." ■