

A Spellbound Vision



Viewing Asmat Art Through the Eyes of the
Western Contemporary Artist

About the Asmat

Asmat describes the land the people and the culture found at the southern coast of the island of New Guinea in the far-western Pacific. Once a part of Sahul, the continent comprised of Australia, Tasmania and part of the now submerged mass separating the Pacific and Indian oceans, New Guinea as we know today represents the Earth's second largest island, reaching from warm equatorial sands to icy glacial peaks of c.16,000 feet. For some 400 years the Asmat have practiced their culture in an area of muddy alluvial swamp covering approximately 6000 square miles where tall mountains descend rapidly at the edge of the Arafura Sea. The earliest of Western encounters with the fierce Asmat date back

to the 1700's, however little contact was made until a brief period in the early 20th Century and again in the 1960's when Michael Rockefeller was lost amid ominous descriptions of his demise in this land of unforgiving seas, fierce crocodiles and headhunting cannibals.

The Asmat of today lead a mostly peaceful but still challenging existence. While their land continues to resist change, outside influences persist, eroding their traditions and invading their environment. In earlier times the Asmat were visited only by occasional traders and early twentieth century research expeditions, today the combined effects of Indonesia's sovereign

authority, western religion and mores, tourism and the exploitation of the region's rich natural resources have provided an unyielding catalyst for change. The Asmat today are torn by the coercion, temptation and innovation brought about by a cultural evolution which pits traditional beliefs against western concepts of progress. This evolution is seen clearly in their art - as art for the Asmat has always been integral not just to their feasts and rituals, but to their everyday life-balance and existence. Asmat art of the most recent decades demonstrates and proclaims boldly the emergence of a new cultural generation and places the Asmat securely among the preeminent traditional artists of our time.



On the cover – from left to right:

Fons Bloemen, *Fisherwoman*, 1996, oil on canvas, 70 3/4 x 55 1/4 inches • Richard Arnold, *Master of Ceremonies*, 2002, bronze, 13 x 8 x 5 inches

Ingo Wegerl, *Portrait 32*, 2001, acrylic, tempera on Paper, 43 1/4 x 86 1/2 inches • Angela Keeney, *Bandaïd*, photograph, Syuru Village

From the Steven C. Chiaramonte Collection, *Very old carved prow of a canoe*, Sawa Village, Unir Sirau, Asmat • Frank Herrmann, *Thinking: Brazza River Skies*, 2002, acrylic and Asmat rubbing on canvas, 84 x 80 inches

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Mary Elizabeth Dee Shaw Gallery
Ethel Wattis Kimball Visual Arts Center
Weber State University
Ogden, Utah

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Thoughts on Spellbound Vision

by Steven C. Chiaramonte

In the years since 1994, northern Utah has witnessed several exhibitions involving the art and spirit of the Asmat. The first exhibition was a successful presentation of elements from my private collection, mostly gleaned from initial expeditions I had made into the Asmat homeland during 1992 and 1993. In 1998 I was asked to mount a thematically oriented exhibition, this time attempting to describe the changes in Asmat art brought about by several decades of contact with outsiders. In 2000 a group of Asmat men were encouraged to come to Utah and speak for themselves of their culture, spirituality, beliefs and art. Each of these previous exhibitions was very clearly about the Asmat. My goal for this exhibition, *Spellbound Vision*, will be different – this exhibition is because of the Asmat.

Considerable study has been undertaken and significant international exhibitions have been mounted during recent decades in an effort demonstrate the impact of various indigenous art forms upon artists of the 20th century. Among the most renown of these was an opening in 1984 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City that was entitled “Primitivism in 20th Century Art”. This well prepared and fully documented exhibition focused on the influence that was imparted by traditional sculpture of Africa and Oceania upon the works of modern artists including Gauguin, Picasso, Klee and a host of others. *Spellbound Vision*, while quite a modest undertaking by comparison, forces the viewer to a much narrower focus. For *Spellbound Vision* the participation of five contemporary western artists prepares the viewer to grasp just how the creativity of these very artists has been augmented as a result of their very individual experiences with the Asmat people, their art and their culture.

Each of the contributing artists were well accomplished in their chosen medium prior to any introduction to the Asmat. Yet each was exposed nonetheless and individually, their creativity now demonstrates the indelible mark of the Asmat.

The idea for this exhibition came to me first when I was acquainted some years ago with Fons Bloeman. Fons had visited the Asmat on several occasions and returned to his native Netherlands where his paintings, to me, expressed the countless questions that trouble one’s mind after an all-too-brief sojourn in this mystical culture. Sometimes brooding and deep and at other times light and whimsical, Fons’ paintings spoke to me of Asmat culture.

Ingo Wegerl, on the other hand has never visited the Asmat lands. He by contrast, has been subjected to a nearly constant stream of Asmat art, hundreds of photographs of the Asmat and occasional visits by Asmat artists and others. Ingo’s history and his catalog of paintings are prolific, but as the Asmat invaded his creative realm they dominated a significant sector of his work. Working from photographs in acrylic and tempera, he has developed numerous arrays of Asmat portraiture, each blending Ingo’s own profound ability and style into the again, mysterious presence described by the intense faces found in those original photographs.

Frank Hermann was first drawn by the powerful art of another Oceanic people and only by happenstance came to know the art of the Asmat. But captivated by the design on shields and other elements of Asmat art, Frank has since integrated these graphical and other concepts into his paintings. By comparison to Fons and Ingo, Frank is a newcomer to the influence that the Asmat might have on the contemporary artist, yet his productive work continues for

now to integrate a growing complement of Asmat instigated components.

Rich Arnold has a keen eye and an undeniable sense for describing Asmat design and use of space. Rich is very insightful and most respectful of certain of the principles of Asmat art, for instance, the bilateral symmetry so common in traditional Asmat sculpture. Without directly assuming Asmat motifs or imagery, Rich incorporates what he has learned from the Asmat into his own sculpture, although it is only he perhaps, who could describe just how that takes place.

Angela Keeney is visibly uncomfortable when confronted as an artist, she had wanted since childhood to become recognized as an ethnographic photographer. In 1998 during her initial visit to Asmat her wish began to materialize. Already an accomplished photographer, the faces of Asmat provided her the palette from which she could raise near-living images seeming to breathe the sights and smells of Asmat.

So, with the assistance of this exceptional group of artists, and with the Ethel Wattis Kimball Visual Arts Center, Mary Elizabeth Dee Shaw Gallery at Weber State University serving as the exhibition venue, I have set out in this exhibition to change the way in which the observer appreciates both the Asmat and their art. As the observer passes the four massive Asmat sculptures in the atrium to enter the gallery, he or she will encounter not only another exhibition of imaginative traditional art, but an exhibition providing physical proof of what this particular traditional art has created in the imaginations of others. In witnessing the motifs incorporated within Frank Hermann’s paintings and the subtlety of design in Rich Arnold’s sculpture, I anticipate the viewer will become receptive to and comprehend some of the volumes that Asmat art has

taught these artists. Similarly, in digesting Fons Bloeman's painted descriptions of Asmat ritual or in grappling with the humanity demonstrated in Angela Keeney's photographs, or even by peering into the eyes of Ingo Wegerl's portraits, I hope that the viewer will gain an understanding for the intensity of Asmat culture.

Once the viewer has begun to absorb this consequence of Asmat art and has initiated his or her own personal understanding as to how the Asmat and their art has encouraged these artists, the viewer may then be led to discover his or her own wealth within Asmat. Here, at the heart of the exhibition and surrounded by the creative consequence of the Asmat stimuli, the viewer will witness the source of that motivation. A pyramid of Asmat art and cultural objects is provided with the hope that yet another artist will be inoculated with the powerful spirit of the Asmat.



Artist: Niko, *Contemporary carving of an Asmat emerging from the tree*, Omandesep Village, Forets River, Becembub, Asmat.

Fons Bloemen

Images of the swamps

At the first time when I arrived in 1989 in the Asmat region I did not know what to expect. The Indonesian authorities had closed the district for some time and missionaries seemed surprised that I had managed to get a visit permit. In Agats I found some storage rooms literally filled to the ceiling with woodcarvings. The soft wood was in most cases full of woodworm holes and many carvings broke in two when I tried to examine it. It was evident that the isolation had blocked the trade with Asmat woodcarvings for a while.

I hired a boat with a guide and followed the Casuarine coast for a few days and then followed one of the many rivers upwards. Great was my surprise when I passed the settlements that not only children; practically everybody seemed excited by our appearance. They yelled and made gestures to enter their village and when we stopped people directed us to their longhouse where we were offered coconut milk and in exchange our tobacco and cigarettes were eagerly accepted. At night the whole community watched me attentively when I made my bed under my mosquito net. I remember how I wondered these people had changed in less than half a century from fierce headhunters into such a friendly people!

I saw them making traditional art: shields, yipae masks, beautiful boat prows and newer developments: small figures, ornaments on planks etc. Of course I was not the first one who discovered these enthusiast colleagues and they seemed to know very well they had developed special artistic skills with very simple tools. I had come to study the present situation of art within the actual culture. I wanted to see how they made their art and I asked myself when they distinguished artistic quality, I would agree on that? Further I wanted to

see if this would have a different effect on my paintings as it had for the primitivistic artists of the 20th century who were not interested to the people behind this exotic art. Now 12 years later I smile at this reckless task I had created my self. Understanding Asmat art I wished to go back to its original source far away from museums or ethnographic publications; a task, which seemed almost an impossible mission. I did not speak Indonesian or Asmat language. The books I knew from the Asmat, which were pretty numerous, describe these people, their stories, their rituals, but all this had no actual meaning to me. And beside this the Asmat culture had undoubtedly changed during the last 50 years. The Catholic missionaries had stimulated the traditional arts while the religious background of the Asmat had gradually changed by their contacts with outsiders. In all other parts of West Papua the traditional arts had completely faded away, here I found some woodcarvers who could make high quality art. Many of them seemed no slaves of their tradition but were ready to experiment so that gradually new forms of expression were introduced. I knew, this was not a novelty within Asmat art. During the last Dutch colonial years between 1955 and 1960 several woodcarvings were collected which were also not traditional. In the collection Tobias Schneebaum gathered 20 years later (one can see in the Agats museum) are also pieces which I consider as innovations within Asmat art. Further I asked my self if the introduction of iron and the trade to outsiders had caused this enormous quantity of woodcarvings. In the earliest reports there are hardly any mentions of woodcarvings. I suspect that this quantity of art must have an effect on the variety of art. This was the point I liked to step into the world of the Asmat.

In 1985 I had studied the same thing in Mexico at the Huichol Indians, who became famous of their colourful yarn panels with

mythological pictures. The woollen yarn was stuck with wax on wooden panels. The images were related to visions they received after certain ceremonies and using a hallucinating drug, called peyote. The ceremonies and the use of peyote have been extensively been described, so there was no use of studying this again. I wanted to see them making these panels and also to know how they thought about their images. In Mexico this art had started to grow apart from its traditional background. Huichol art consisted mainly of colour tones in stylised flat forms, while the Asmat richly used delicate patterns and three-dimensional forms coloured in very basic earth pigments. My impression was that the Huichol art was inclined towards introspection while the Asmat art showed a much more extravert attitude. Both arts were moving from a traditional background to secular art. Many critics have claimed this non-traditional art as airport art. I believe there has never been much difference between western and non-western artists, they just want to express their ideas and a cultural background will always be reflected in art. What means an airport to an Asmat and what means a museum to a western artist? Very often both are considered as doorways to a heaven. Every year there is an art contest in Agats where money prizes are given to the best artist. If one artist wins, it means a great fortune for his community, who will share the price. One year a woodcarving depicting a mythology scene with several different figures had won the price, the next year there were many follow-ups from other woodcarvers with mythological scenes. I have seen the same process happen many times in our museums and art institutes.

The form language of Asmat art is, as I said, very rich, they are able to express their enthusiasm of life in many ways just like they actually are when you meet them. The French philosopher Henry Bergson described "elan vital"; the general sense of life

as the driving dynamic force behind all culture: here in the villages of the Asmat it was as if I saw this elan vital manifest in many aspects of life.

Back home I started to paint. At first my experiences were so manifold and above all positive; I felt confused from this culture shock. I was going to dive deep into the Asmat world. I left my sense of colour for a while for what it was and limited my palette mainly to earth colours. I adopted elements of the form language of the Asmat and used it in my own work. Also my themes were inspired by the information I had gathered in New Guinea.

The painting "jipea" f.i. is inspired on a jipea mask I saw in the village Sawa Erna. The form of my jipea painting is very different to the original Asmat mask and some goodwill is needed to see that the pattern is related to its original source.

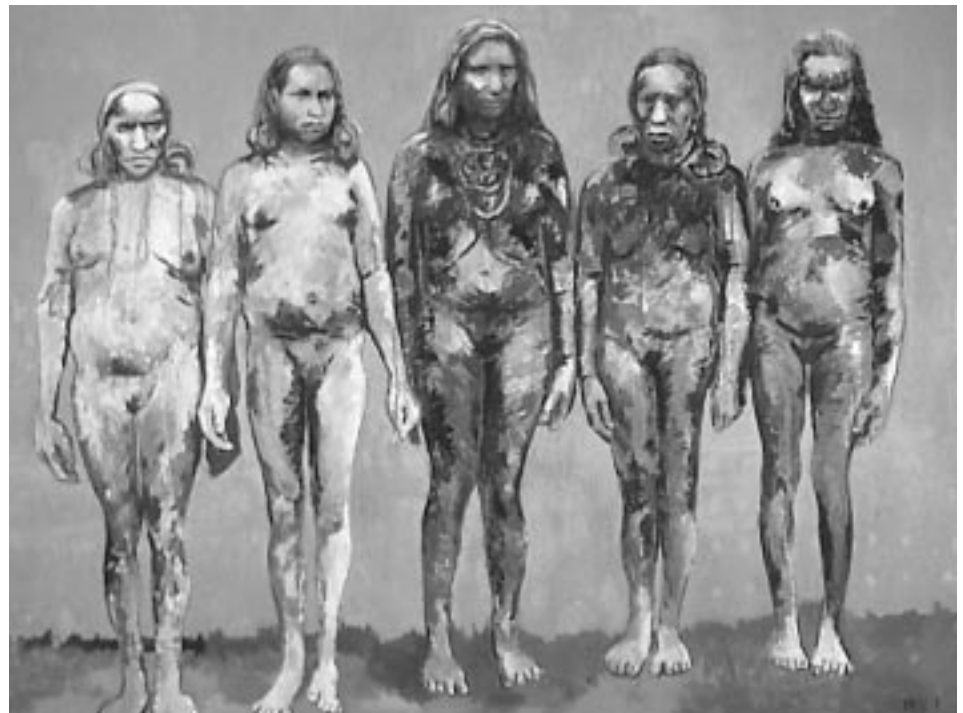
After 3 years I turned slowly back to more figurative images. I wanted to close my Asmat project with one large painting dedicated to the subject. It is inspired on a so-called wuramon; a ghost ship, I saw for the first time in the museum of Agats, and a second one I found later in a garden of Merauke, rotting away. It were boats of 10 to 12 meter long with ancestors on it with ibis (like) birds, all bent forward as in the position of headhunting victims. I asked my self: what if these beings come to life in our world? The question stimulated my fantasy and a strange film started to come to life. The result you can see on my painting "wuramon".

In 1995 I started to collect old travel reports from whites who had made first contact to the Papua's of the south coast of New Guinea and in 1998 I published the artist book: *First contact in south New Guinea*". These first contact reports were made between 1606 until 1920. Interesting

is that many authors have tried to prolong this concept of "first contact reports" to the inhabitants of south New Guinea until today. And this fact had made me curious to the real first reports.

In the main time it was hard to regain my bright colours again and to develop my art further. It took me more than 4 years to change to my present way of painting. Visible emotions became my new subject. Looking back I conclude: the Papua's of New Guinea never left my mind anymore, there is no way to deny this. In my recent paintings there are no Papua's any more, but I like to express the openness and "joie de vivre" I had learned to know with the Asmat. Something, I will be always grateful for.

Fons Bloemen
Jabeek 02-04-2002



Five Marind Women, 1999, oil on canvas, 55 x 71 inches

Ingo Wegerl

Faces From a Different World

This is the world of the Asmat, a primitive race in the south of west New Guinea, in West Papua, which even well into the fifties was living almost undisturbed and in unadulterated conditions of the stone age, and firmly rooted in tradition and myth; a culture of former head hunters and cannibals, from which additionally emanates a culture of most expressive woodcarvings. Contrary to developing civilization, the Asmat were able to retain their own culture and tradition which is manifested in a contemporary artistic language of form. The artistic dialogue with the complex Asmat culture provided a challenge for Ingo Wegerl. A conceptually arranged series of paintings was created. Almost entirely devoted to portraits, format and size groupings within the series is varied. Sizes range from 30 cm X 30 cm through to 80 cm x 160 cm and up to 125 cm x 340 cm, the only solitary canvas. Always subject to the general concept, sets are created by hanging them in close linear sequence or as groupings. Without the viewer noticing, a face may even reoccur in different groupings.

These are faces from a different world, where Ingo Wegerl captures the enigma of that culture as well as its history, past and present. Faces, independent of typological characteristics, which witness the life of the individual as well as the entire people. Ingo Wegerl's favourite genre of portraiture here again unites artistic raffinesse with fascination of the exotic.

Analogous to the genesis of the Asmat and still giving evidence to inherited traditions, it is above all festive facial painting which estranges personal physiognomies of this tribe through colourful splendour. A splendour, which Ingo Wegerl not only restricts to facial features but which expands over the entire painting. Parallel to the colour developing its own dynamics, the faces also leave their naturalistic image. Ingo Wegerl

increases the impression of estrangement with subtle artistic means, especially by dimensional distortions; accentuated sharpness and artistic sfumato make the faces more tangible and expressive.

Like personal confrontation we face the large format of an over dimensional segment of a young Asmat's portrait. Behind artistically woven ornamentation, dark eyes observe us expressively. The ornamentation seemingly expands independently from Ingo Wegerl's freely associated festive paintwork into filigree latticework. Only the small size, renaissance like portrait of a missionary and the simple symbol of the cross break up the composition. Besides the ornamentation spreading over the entire surface it is these inconspicuous pictorial motifs which explain the roots of our personal genesis and our western understanding of culture. While entrapped by our individual power of imagination it can be difficult to unfold to a world outside our familiar cultural horizon and grasp and respect the history, ideology and values of other races. We are too easily influenced by our personal maxims, we easily forget the uniqueness of a different race, its culture and inherent art.

With the portraits Ingo Wegerl is able to expand our view. In numerous series of pictures he presents us with the faces of a different world, the world of the Asmat. Each face is so expressive, that even when hung in a group the principle of monotonous symmetry of display no longer applies. Disassociated from the classical portraiture, sections of portraits are painted and shown from various angles and become much more realistic when approached.

Each painting requires numerous

processes of work. First acrylics are applied, followed by tempera, then repeatedly sanded off, rubbed down and blurred and painted over. The results in a surface structure with pictorial plasticity; individual segments appear and the hidden appears again or is seemingly dissolved. Often the monochrome use of colour remains dominant. Isolated gold leaf is used as a contrast – gold leaf which in this context and in the understanding of Christian painting tradition may be understood as a cultural anachronism.

With his paintings Ingo Wegerl leads us into a different world, where the familiar is left behind and where all is secretive and mystical.

Dr. Barbara Maiburg



Ingo Wegerl in the studio, 2001

Frank Herrmann

Who would have thought that the Asmat Bis poles and other artifacts that I saw in the Rockefeller collection in the Metropolitan Museum, in the early eighties, would become one of the significant resources and reference in my paintings twenty years later?

References to Oceanic artifacts such as the concentric circles and connecting bars of an Aboriginal sacred waterhole rock carving is evident as part of the vocabulary of my images since the mid eighties as well as some of the more recent work.

Repeatedly in the late nineties there appeared in the small drawings an oblong shape inscribed with markings. Later I was surprised when I found that this shape was similar to the Churinga, a sacred inscribed Aboriginal artifact. This form found its way into the beginnings of the current series of paintings titled Thinking.

The Thinking series started in March of 2000. In the months prior I was at a point where I was unsure where the work was going until the day I noticed one of my small-framed drawings that hung in my house. I had always liked the drawing, but never knew how it fit into what I was doing until this rediscovery. There in this 2" x 2" ink drawing was the same situation I was in. Rising from the bottom of the drawing were cropped and abstracted facial forms, slightly bowed, acting as pedestals for the whirling, colliding, emerging and dissipating forms that were organized above them. I thought this is true to what thinking is like, made visual. Thoughts emerge, reoccur, collide, dissipate and have synergy all at once. Maybe if I try to make visual what happens chemically and electrically? I now feel as though I have a specific but flexible subject or image that can take the questioning that comes when new information and images are proposed for the paintings.

During this time I was reading Dirk A. Schmidt's book on Asmat Art, given to me by my anthropologist son Jason, which speaks of the role of the Asmat wood

carver warrior and a brief telling of the creation myth. I was hooked. My interest in Oceanic cultures and in particular the woodcarvings, motifs, and myths of the Asmat intensified. This is evident in a marked increase in the research and use of particular Asmat motifs in my paintings. After reading about the art and culture, I wanted to learn the significant motifs, not just by reading about them, but by touching and following the tracery of the wood carver's motifs and designs manually. I wanted to find a way to incorporate Asmat motifs into my work that would most directly integrate the images into my paintings and yet not compromise the significance of the cultural symbols. I thought that through tactile contact with the artifacts themselves, and by directly transferring the designs and motifs by hand, the Asmat artist and I would be able to meet in the plane of painting.

How would I do that? I thought if I could take rubbings from the Asmat artifacts and incorporate them in the paintings, I would learn the motifs and provide forms for the paintings. This decision presented me with some new problems. There are no Oceanic objects in Cincinnati museums. I do not know the collectors of New Guinea artifacts in Cincinnati, or if in fact they exist at all. Secondly, and more importantly, who would let me touch their collection?

I bought two Asmat shields, one a Northwest shield and the other a horned shield most likely Agani. Both have fruit bat motifs. I also own a Mimika, Yamate and a ceremonial tablet that make beautiful rubbings. I have also made a wood-cut from a blown up internet picture of a Brazza shield that has a water motif. Having touched

the carved motifs and gaining information on the motifs created by the warrior artist, now enable me to invest them as rubbings into my paintings as part of an expanded vocabulary of images.

Presently it is the questioning and thinking about how the Asmat motifs were developed, the awe of the inventiveness of the Asmat carving, the recognition of the spirituality invested in these carvings, my interest in the manipulation of the rubbings in the paintings to create visual experiences partly appropriated but mostly of my own invention that are concerned in driving my painting to what it could be.

I am not sure how long this series will continue. I find that at the moment the Asmat Art still informs the possibilities for the work. But, most important, one would hope that by looking out beyond this place and looking into and learning about a totally different culture that is at once so different and yet so beautiful one learns to locate himself in the world



Thinking: Churinga Chains, Form and Skull, 2000, acrylic on canvas, 84 x 80 inches

Richard Arnold

The Asmat Algorithm

What accounts for the compelling fascination of Asmat art? For many, if not most Western sensibilities, it can be located in what we may call the “wild man mystique”.

Now what I want to set up against this mind-set is something quite different.

I was educated in the nineteen sixties and seventies by teachers and mentors who were adherents of the American academic tradition. As an art student I learned the formalist theory of art criticism: that art is a language and morphology of two and three-dimensional forms, and that the purpose of art history is to study the evolution and development of these forms.

Hence, the art object, of whatever time or whatever culture, is first and foremost valued for its exemplification of deep design, that is precisely “the art”.

The walls of a great art museum contain a vast database of catalogued material objects, that all share the status of art. Museums function as a sort of encyclopedic reference book, or case-book, of possible solutions to design problems, as well as a collection of the best examples of all known style-periods.

An example: the open-work, grill-like carvings of the Asmat, made up of numerous piercings and holes penetrating the shallow board, as in one of their marvelous canoe prow ornaments, are compositions of counterpoised shapes organized in a polyphonic and rhyming abstract scheme. These designs always move me, whatever they may happen to represent: whether a praying mantis or a cuscus tail, they are always not what they are called by the local villagers, but far more ambiguous and

suggestive. Do I really need to be cognizant of the social/political/religious referands of the Asmat carving? People may say that I am superimposing my values—my art-school values of what is good and bad design—on a totally culture-specific item.

As an artist, I am creating Asmat art for myself, in the sense that I can create anything that I can analyze formally. Asmat art serves as a precedent for some of my own pieces. I may work on a lump of moist clay with my fingers, with every squeeze or pinch made simultaneously with left hand and right hand working in a mirror relationship, usually proceeding in one direction, say from top to bottom. These topologies—these symmetrically placed holes and connecting tubes—are not strict—they are

not gridded in a Cartesian grid made up of right-angled axes. The axes are swaying, always swaying, and the left- and right-handed elements are never aligned evenly, nor do they stay the same size. And the flat surfaces become elastic and bend. Design motifs (figures) are repeated once, twice, three, four times, but not exactly the same way, with not one, but often two or more axes of symmetry. Constellations of design elements are based on rhyming schemes and an underlying algorithm that satisfies our deeper intellect. Hence it can be said of Asmat art, that there is an example of how an art of a remote and isolated geographical area focuses on certain problems of three-dimensional imaging, that simply did not appear significantly in Western art history until the twentieth and on into the twenty-first century.



Eleven Holed Mask, 2002, 8 1/2 x 7 x 2 1/4 inches

Angela L. Keeney

My first exposure to ethnographic photography came at an early age from the pages of National Geographic. I loved to look at the photographs of what I saw as “wild and primitive” people and read the tales of strange customs and exotic locales. My sisters and I would gaze in amazement at some of the images, and would giggle nervously at others. I marveled at the seemingly huge difference between those strange and distant worlds and my own – a small farming community in rural Indiana. The people and places depicted each month were as far away from that farm as was the moon. I dreamt about being a photographer for National Geographic and traveling the world with a backpack and camera.

Real life, however, had other plans. My camera sat neglected on a dusty shelf while I grew up, attended college, and joined the workforce. At the age of 35, I took my first trip outside of the states, a trip that would completely transform my life. I took up my camera again with a focus on the Asmat.

It has been my experience that people who travel to Asmat are never the same when they return home. The type of trip doesn't seem to matter at all – from a one-week guided adventure tour to years of missionary service. The spirit of Asmat lodges in us, and a bit of our soul stays there. There is an indescribable bond between people who have traveled to Asmat – like a shared secret, the answer to a riddle. We are changed by our experience – in small or big ways – but changed nonetheless.

For me, the change was huge, life altering, and complete. “Before Asmat”, I was timid, shy, a bit fussy and very much stuck in the proverbial rut – unfulfilled in my work but too afraid to make a change. My Asmat experience gave me the impetus to change not only the course of my life, but the perceptions I lived by.

Growing up, I thought that the people portrayed in National Geographic were strange, exotic, and bizarre. There was nothing familiar about their way of life. They were “Different”. This was the opinion I carried to Asmat.

My first trip introduced me to the wonders of Asmat. Everything and everyone there captivated me and I was mesmerized by the exotic. There was no question that I would return – again and again. Then a very strange thing happened. As days turned to weeks among my new friends, the line between “exotic” and “normal” became blurred. The differences between their world and mine grew smaller and smaller. I came to a startling realization – there really was NO DIFFERENCE between their world and mine. We share the same goals in life, the tedious daily tasks and the mundane routines. What is exotic to us is normal to them... and what is normal to us is exotic to

them. For me, the Asmat people are my neighbors and my friends.

My goal in joining this exhibition is to challenge the perceptions of those who think, like I used to, that the Asmat people are far different from us. Here you will find images portraying the normalcy of Asmat life.

The images presented here have been on display for the past year at the American Museum of Asmat Art in Shoreview, Minnesota in an exhibition entitled “Focus on the Tropics: Photographs of Asmat Women and Children”. This photographic exhibit is comprised of selected images from a series taken over a period of four weeks in October 1999. Many are from the women's day feast held on October 8th in the village of Syuru while others are from visits to the Becembub and Safan villages along the Casuarina coast and on the Forets, Fayit, Ewt, and Etwa rivers.



Women's Day Feast, photograph, Syuru Village, Regal

Biographies

About the Curator...

Steven Chiamonte is a California native who has been residing in Utah since 1985. Still young when he retired from the corporate world, Chiamonte engaged his initial expedition to New Guinea ten years ago and has returned often and for lengthy periods of time since that first exposure to the fascinating people, art and geography of Asmat. Chiamonte has curated several exhibitions of Asmat art for the Utah Museum of Fine Arts and is a Trustee for the American Museum of Asmat Art in St Paul, Minnesota. He has also prepared the research for a catalog of objects and has participated in the authorship of an upcoming book being published on behalf of the Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress in Agats, West Papua.

Chiamonte has helped a number of people to learn more about the Asmat during his years traveling, building collections and performing research there. He is familiar with most of the important collections of Asmat art around the world and has added significantly to several collections in the USA. For the future he will be assisting a group of adventuresome travelers to Asmat by providing a series of shipboard lectures concerning the art and culture of Asmat. Similarly several documentary filmmakers have enlisted his advice, assistance and participation in accomplishing their filmmaking objectives in Asmat and Chiamonte is excited to bring his knowledge of Asmat to an even broader group of people through the medium of film.

Of particular interest to Chiamonte are the changes he has witnessed in the creativity of a number of contemporary artists who have been exposed to Asmat art and culture. This curiosity has fueled for him, an extensive agenda of travel and discovery, leading to introductions, discussions and collaborations with artists from as far away as Prague to here at home in Salt Lake City. Chiamonte's study of this phenomenon is the seed from which Spellbound Vision grows and the contributing artists are among those for whom the influence of Asmat has been most dramatic.

Chiamonte presently operates the Equatorial Arts Gallery with operations in Midvale, Utah and Plymouth, California. Equatorial Arts Gallery maintains a mission to preserve tribal and ritual arts from the world's rainforest regions.

Fons Bloemen

Fons Bloemen was born in Venlo Netherlands in 1949. He studied painting at the "Rijksakademie voor beeldende kunst" of Amsterdam and psychology, pedagogy and comparative religion in Utrecht and Lugano. He traveled to many countries including Mexico in 1985 and West Papua in 1990 and 1995. These two trips resulted into paintings, etchings and sculptures which have been exhibited at; the Museum Bommel Dam in Venlo Netherlands, as well as galleries in Amsterdam, Los Angeles and Seattle.

In 1998, he published the first part of his artistbook; first contact in South New Guinea. The text of this book consists of all first contact reports I could find between white explorers and Papua's of South New Guinea, from 1906 – 1920. The cover of the book is made of leather with relief of traditional Papua scar tattoos. In this way the content of the book becomes a physical experience with the cover. The second part of the artistbook will be published in the future, and will focus on the first contact in North Australia, especially in North Queensland and the Torres Strait Islands.

Angela Keeney

Angela Keeney was born in Lebanon, Indiana in 1962. A graduate of Purdue University, she has lived in Utah since 1989 and has studied photography and cinema at the University of Utah and Salt Lake Community College. Currently she commutes often to the Sierra Foothills of California where she is active in building an artist cooperative there.

Her first major museum exhibition "Focus on the Tropics: Photographs of Asmat Women and Children" was held at the American Museum of Asmat Art in Shoreview, Minnesota sponsored by a grant from the Minnesota Metropolitan Regional Arts Council. Originally scheduled to hang from May through October 2001 the exhibition was held over until June, 2002. Many of the images from that exhibition are included in this exhibition.

Richard Arnold

Richard Arnold was born in Summit, New Jersey, and spent two grade school years with his family in India. He studied Art History at Yale, and obtained his Bachelor of Arts Degree in 1970, receiving an award for his thesis on American Art. His topic was "Representational Painting in New York City Today."

After Yale, Arnold studied art and art history at Queens College of CUNY. Some of his teachers were the noted contemporary critic Max Kozloff, the figurative sculptors Mary Frank and William King, and the painter Robert Deniro Sr., father of the Hollywood film actor.

Arnold lived for over ten years in Manhattan, and worked at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. He was invited to lecture about his own art for the department of Community Education. He also won the praise and encouragement of Sir John Pope-Hennessy, then Curator of European Sculpture and Painting at the museum. Also during this period of time Arnold's terracotta sculpture became known and admired by Lincoln Kirstein and a small circle of art patrons and art dealers.

While spending the summers of the early eighties at his country house, Arnold worked on a major commission for the private sculpture garden of Shelby White and Leon Levy, the well-known family of art collectors and donors. This commission, a giant terracotta chess set, was finally completed and installed in its setting in September, 1985.

Arnold became an integral part of the historic art colony of Cragmoor, New York, in Ulster County, where he lived and had his studio from 1983 to 1987. This region is where many nationally and internationally known artists have lived and worked since the late nineteenth century. The house where Arnold lived was the eccentric creation of the American amateur Frederick Dellenbaugh, an original founder of the community, and belonged to the American Impressionist painter Charles Courtney Curran until his death in 1942. An exhibition in 1985 entitled "Artists of the Shawangunks," in which Arnold participated, provided a sampling of contemporary art being produced in Cragmoor and the surrounding mountains by artists who were represented by prominent New York art galleries and who had summer houses/studios in the local region.

Arnold relocated to Kingston, New York, from 1989 to 1996, opening a studio for working and teaching nearby, and showing regularly in and outside the region as well as at the Blue Mountain and Leslie-Lohman Foundation Gallery in New York City.

Arnold now lives in Rock Hill, a rural community in the Catskills of Sullivan County, New York, where he continues to produce his art at the Glen Wild Studios. He has welcomed visitors there from Europe and Asia as well as America, he teaches and gives demonstrations of his unorthodox working methods, and is always willing to share his art with those who happen to have discovered him on the World Wide Web, or elsewhere.

Frank Herrmann

Frank Herrmann, is currently Professor of Fine Arts, School of Art, College of Design, Architecture, Art & Planning, University of Cincinnati, from 1973 to present. Mr. Herrmann received his BA degree from Western Kentucky University and his MFA from the University of Cincinnati.

Mr. Herrmann has received grants from: Ohio Arts Council Project Individual Artists Fellowship 1983, 1986, 2001; Ohio Arts Council Project Grant, 2001-02; U.C. Research Council, 1983, 1991, 1999; Summerfair Individual Artist Fellowship, 1983, 2000; Arts Midwest NEA Fellowship, 1990; Residency: Castle Cimelice, Foundation and Center for Contemporary Art, Czech Republic 2001, and the Dean's Award for Excellence in Teaching in 1997.

One person exhibitions include: Henri Gallery, Washington, D.C., Toni Brickhead Gallery, Cincinnati, OH, and the 1st Institute of Art and Design, Hong Kong. Group exhibitions include; Weber State University, Ogden, UT; C.A.F. International Invitational, Saitama Modern Art Museum, Saitama, Japan 2002 and the Esther Allen Greer Museum, University of Rio Grande, Rio Grande, OH.

Works by Herrmann are to be found in such public collections in the United States and abroad as; the Grand Rapids Museum of Art, Grand Rapids, MI, Chase Manhattan Bank, New York, NY, Saks Fifth Avenue, New York, NY, Trend Publications, Tampa, Fla., SAFCO Corporation, Cincinnati, OH and the Foundation and Center for Contemporary Art, Prague, Czech Republic.

Biographies (continued)

Ingo Wegerl

Born in Germany in 1952 in an area called the “Oberbergischer Raum”, Ingo Wegerl has been living in Monchengladbach since 1965. As early as 1978 he took a step into professional independence and consequently launched his first exhibition as a free lance artist in Monchengladbach. Also, since 1979, he occasionally illustrates scientific medical publications such as Sobotta Becher’s Atlas of Human Anatomy. Artistic refinement and the gift of drawing – almost like using a scalpel – enable him to reproduce graphically anatomical structures with great physical reality.

Ingo Wegerl manages to convert his gift of profound reflection into stylistic versatility and he unearths the multiple facets of human existence. It may be sadness or sensual delights, which are displayed – the sensitivity of his work will always touch us.

The sheer pleasure of painting time and again captivates and inspires Ingo Wegerl. To this can be added the delight in artistic conversion of innumerable ideas and ideologies and his fascination with the variety of compositional possibilities. Ingo Wegerl consciously tend towards portraiture, preferably figures, for him the only imaginable way is to illustratively grasp the complexity of the world and especially the profoundness of human nature.

Contrary to short-lived modern tendencies, Ingo Wegerl remains faithful to his own personal style. Based on a talent for the graphic finesse, he manages to artistically vary a wide range of motifs. These tend to be themes which touch him personally, and which in there understated simplicity seem to challenge him. He also understands his paintings as a reaction to his surroundings, including his daydreams. To visualize the supposedly obvious is just as motivating as visualizing the supposedly hidden.

Taking things of their usual context, interpreting them as fresh and thus giving them a new meaning provides an inexhaustible and inspiring attraction for Ingo Wegerl. The extent of motifs seems endless and ranges from profound impressions to scenic representations; it includes landscapes and portraits as well as religious and mythological subjects. Life, mankind and nature, this is where he gets his inspirations from – they emanate from art, music, literature and his immediate environment. The result is an individual, artistic dialogue and transformation, a pictorial alienation, which develops subject into Ingo Wegerl’s personal perspective.

Motifs selected will always call for stylistic modification: the conceptual stylistic and technical approach will always blend with the motive chosen and will be guided entirely by Wegerl’s personal interpretation.

His main characteristics are various interpretations of the same theme in one painting, which may be segmented or dissected and joined again by overlapping. In this way Ingo Wegerl manifests a contemporary caesura, which enables further interpretation on a different level of consciousness.

“Art should never give answers but raise questions” with this premise Ingo Wegerl leads the onlooker in exploring new patterns of thought and ideology and finally in seeking the answers inside himself.

Acknowledgments

For more than a decade, Steven C. Chiamonte has studied and collected the art of the Asmat. However, not until now, has there been an exhibition that brings his outstanding examples of original art and presented in the context of its profound influence on contemporary artists working throughout the world.

The Asmat art from the Steven C. Chiamonte Collection shown in this exhibition document nearly one hundred years of cultural change and individual creativity. The long tradition of Asmat wood- carving has survived through a combination of tradition and innovation, contributing to the survival of the Asmat people themselves. As in the past, it continues as a vital expression of cultural identity.

I would like to thank Steven C. Chiamonte for his generosity in loaning his work and making it possible for such a unique and historically significant exhibition to take place. Also, his commitment, cooperation and assistance in curating the exhibition have greatly enhanced the quality of this project.

This project is sponsored by the Weber State University Department of Visual Arts and is supported by grants from the Browning Lead Trust, the Elizabeth Firestone Graham Foundation, the Utah Arts Council and the National Endowment for the Arts Washington D.C., and the Utah Office of Museum Services

Scott Knauer
Director, Mary Elizabeth Dee Shaw Gallery

Gallery Hours are Monday through Saturday 11:00 a.m. – 6:00 p.m.
All events are free and open to the public.

Special thanks for assistance with exhibition installation:

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Department of Visual Arts programs – Changing Minds with Vision

Through the ages, art has been a means of communication and connection, from the ancient paintings on cave walls that depict hunts to modern expressions about life that use glass, fabric and even rocks again. Art allows individuals to express themselves creatively and societies to preserve their cultures indefinitely.

The Department of Visual Arts (DOVA) at Weber State University provides opportunities for all students – art majors as well as non-majors – to develop similar expressions, learn imaginative problem solving, and practice independent thinking – qualities valued in most professional careers. Each student takes at least one course in the creative arts, gaining skills in imaginative and flexible thinking through hands-on activity. In art history courses students gain a global perspective as well as extensive, state-of-the-art instruction in studio areas.

As global and cultural barriers continue to blur, the study of art provides insight into the past and present cultures. A universal language to express common aspirations and experiences, art is a channel to appreciate customs, culture and values of other peoples. Society bombards us daily with abundant, visual messages through advertising, architecture, film, photography, the news media and other forms of expression. The study of art helps us critically “read” this information and make better decisions.

To address the diverse needs of students, WVSU confers the BA, BS and BFA in fine art and offers more than 70 courses. Instructional areas include art education, ceramics, digital media, metals/jewelry, painting, photography, printmaking, sculpture, visual communication (design or illustration) and weaving.

Several programs complement the DOVA curriculum.

- The Mary Elizabeth Dee Shaw Gallery serves as a “classroom” by exhibiting art that exemplifies the ideas and values of the art program.
- The Highly regarded Visiting Artist Lecture Series, now in its 18th consecutive year, seeks to provide more varied programming in the Utah art community. The community benefits by having more opportunities to see and hear, first hand, nationally and internationally recognized artists.
- In 1999 DOVA began its first outreach program, an in-depth art experience for elementary school classes annually. The students take a field trip to the gallery and discuss the current exhibit with the gallery director, and the artist. The students return to their schools and create work related to the exhibit with guidance from one of the DOVA faculty members. Their art is then exhibited on or off campus. Half-day gallery tours with a short hands-on activity are also provided for school groups.
- The faculty and staff in DOVA are committed to provide challenging, rewarding and enlightening experiences in the visual arts to the Northern Utah community through instruction, exhibitions, lectures and outreach programs. The Ethel Wattis Kimball Visual Arts Center makes these opportunities possible through a building that is itself a work of art and an excellent example of architectural design.

Mary Elizabeth Dee Shaw Gallery
Ethel Wattis Kimball Visual Arts Center
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For further information visit our website at Dova.weber.edu. To view the catalog online please view dova.weber.edu/gallery/Asmatcatalog.htm. Further information on the Asmat can be obtained from the following sites: www.Asmatart.net or at www.equatorialarts.com.