

**Commentary on  
"Sedentary Hunters and Food  
Gatherers: the Asmat"**

**Julia E. Benson  
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As an example of a sedentary hunter/gatherer society, the Asmat of western New Guinea exhibit a sophisticated artistic culture based upon the centrality of headhunting and cannibalism in their society. While the actual hunting of human heads has disappeared with exposure to western societal mores, the significance of the traditional iconography and the emphasis on balancing power through ritual remains in only modestly modified form.

The significance of the tree as symbolizing Man (the mangrove for male and the sago palm for female) is paramount in the Asmat culture. It is not surprising, therefore that wood, thanks to its abundance (as well as the scarcity of other materials such as stone and clay), is a primary medium for artistic expression among this people. Carved and painted shields protected warriors during their headhunting raids, and still protect them when hunting wild game such as boars. The *yeu* houses feature intricately carved support poles as both an integral part of the structure and as ornamentation. The *bis*, or pledge, poles displayed outside the *yeu* houses and the intricately carved prows of the canoes likewise serve as outward representations of the fertility and virility so important to the Asmat culture.

Interestingly, although Asmat carvings are in truth three-dimensional works, they are actually carved as double-sided relief images rather than true in-the-round work. When viewed from one side or the other, the imagery is clearly delineated, but viewed from a frontal perspective, little detail is visible.

Personal adornment is another important form of artistic expression among the Asmat, as it is in many so-called "primitive" cultures. Particularly when preparing for a hunt, the Asmat warrior invokes the protection and guidance of the spirit world by adorning himself with symbols and fetishes of the animals whose powers he wishes to acquire for himself. Feathers, skins, teeth, boar tusks, paint -- all transform the Asmat warrior into an amalgamation of the power creatures of his world.

Asmat art, more than that of many other cultures, is transient. In contrast to the rock paintings of the Australian aboriginals, which can last for hundreds if not thousands of years, Asmat carvings are designed to be recycled within a limited time span. This is in keeping with the Asmat spiritual belief that all resources are finite and that energy must be kept in balance.