

verbal texts in contemporaneous circulation. They also foster new understandings of the dialogic aspects of transcultural expression, revealing the importance of souvenir arts as a medium of visual expression. It is largely in the twentieth century that Aboriginal people have gained access to print media to reach a broad public; visual texts inscribed by commoditized arts have had a much longer history of circulation. The study of souvenirs, then, adds a temporal dimension to the models of social scientists that permits us to locate the narrow but crucial space for negotiation claimed by peoples subjected to colonial domination and capitalist commoditization.

## Tourist Art as the Crafting of Identity in the Sepik River (Papua New Guinea)

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For centuries, New Guinea has attracted visitors. First, from the East, came Malay hunters in search of birds-of-paradise. Now, from the West, art dealers and tourists seek the exotic "primitive." Other, especially along the Sepik River. A more suitable place they could not have found, for New Guinea invokes primal images in the Western imagination: Hobbesian savagery, cannibalism, pagan rituals, and Rousseauesque ideals of sensuality, innocence, and beauty.

It is this popular imagination that tends to frame Sepik River tourist art. But these meanings have little in common with indigenous experience, social life, and aesthetics. Focusing on the Iatmul people of the middle Sepik River, I offer here three related arguments concerning Sepik tourist art. First, I argue that the art adheres to traditional aesthetic canons and cultural themes. Second, I attempt to demonstrate that the art also conveys messages about emergent notions of village, regional, and national ethnicity. Finally, I suggest that Sepik River tourist art expresses changing and often contradictory notions of self and personhood in the contemporary conjuncture of tradition and modernity. Indeed, many of these artworks express ambiguous bodily imagery—at once devouring, birthing, excreting, and regurgitating—in order to convey the predicament of Sepik culture today.

My essay first considers the position of Sepik art in the Western imagination; next, the traditional social and artistic themes that frame tourist art; and last, regional tourism. In conclusion, I offer a reading of tourist art that situates its iconography in terms of authentic and localized meanings within an aesthetics of self and society, culture and (post)modernity.

## SEPIK ART AND THE EUROPEAN GAZE

European explorers, scientists, and colonizers who penetrated the Sepik River in the late 1880s were enthusiastic collectors (see Kaufmann 1985). Archival photographs suggest that Sepik dwellers in the early twentieth century reproduced works specifically for external exchange, most likely for metal tools (Douglas Newton, personal communication, 1988). Sometimes, the art was simply taken by force, with firearms. When the colonial proprietorship of German New Guinea was transferred to Australia after World War I, Sepik artists began to sell their wares to missionaries, patrols, travelers, and traders in addition to anthropologists and museums. By the mid-1960s art was becoming a substantial source of income in the region (Wilson and Menzies 1967; May 1977). This process entered a new phase in the 1970s, when Sepik dwellers encountered independence and tourism.

In 1975 Papua New Guinea became an independent nation within the British Commonwealth. Traditional sociolinguistic distinctions have persisted, but they coexist with new and often contentious concepts of ethnicity, nationhood, and citizenship (see Lipset 1987; Premdas 1987; Gewertz and Errington 1991: chap. 6). A year after independence, Melanesian Tourist Services introduced the *Sepik Explorer* houseboats, which were soon replaced by the *Melanesian Explorer* steamship, itself succeeded in 1988 by the *Melanesian Discoverer*, a luxurious state-of-the-art vessel. In 1990 a rival tourist boat, *The Sepik Spirit*, entered the river. Like national ethnicity, tourism significantly alters local identity (F. Errington and Gewertz 1989; Gewertz and Errington 1991; Schmid 1990).<sup>1</sup>

Western tourists and dealers tend to purchase Sepik objects as images of the mysterious and "natural," "primitive" Other. These travelers might, for example, read "The Art Market in Southern Oceania," published in *African Arts* (Crowley 1985), which describes "whatever objects *de vertu* may be available there." Others succumb to Western tropes of possession, consumption, and collection (Gewertz and Errington 1991: 38-57; Stewart 1984).<sup>2</sup>

The widespread dispersal of Iatmul and Sepik River art is a visual commentary on the postmodern world's sense of detachment. Tourists, disillusioned with modernity, long for the "primitive" essence of humanity. Thus an article in the *New York Times* is illustrated with a photograph of a Sepik mask on the wall of a physician's office. Sepik art can also be seen at Ye Olde Curiosity Shop and Museum along the Seattle waterfront. The brochure for the shop *qua* museum (or is it a museum masquerading as a shop?) is entitled: "The Lord's Prayer engraved on a grain of rice; Fleas in dresses; Genuine shrunken human heads . . . and thousands more from every corner of the globe!" Sepik River art is also featured at the Tambaran Gallery on Madison Avenue in New York City; the gallery is subtitled "Primitivism-Minimalism."<sup>3</sup> And readers familiar with the Pottery Barn stores and catalog were

perhaps tempted by the "Barrister Bookcase" in the January 1991 "Catalog for Today's Home." On its nearly bare shelves is a Lower Sepik mask, an example of the recent "decor of nostalgia" (Phillips and Steiner, this volume).

Sepik art has occupied many of the central and shifting categories of "things" in Western institutions, including the authentic, inauthentic, masterpiece, and artifact (Clifford 1988). It is found in curio shops, antique stores, galleries, offices, homes, and natural history and art museums.<sup>4</sup> Depending on institutional framing, the same Sepik object might embody curio (sity), relic, trophy, art, and artifact. Our "Iatmul's" with objects, contends Thomas, are "promiscuous" (1991: 208).

Dennis O'Rourke's acclaimed 1987 documentary film *Cannibal Tours* featured Iatmul and Sepik tourists. A subtext of the film is a dichotomy between the dominant and encompassing tourists, who represent the crisis of modernity, and the encompassed Sepiks, who typify the dependent "primitive" in ruin (E. Silverman 1996a).<sup>5</sup> This Eurocentric dichotomy, wherein cultures are either pure or defiled, often conceals hybridity as well as indigenous negotiation and resistance (Lips 1937; D. Evans-Pritchard 1989; but cf. Thomas 1996). It also denies local subjectivity, agency, and creativity within the touristic encounter. Art, after all, has mediated many encounters between Sepik dwellers and foreigners. Tourist art is a new form of culture, locally understood as "culture," which is used to negotiate with and often to challenge modernity (F. Errington and Gewertz 1996; K. Adams 1995).

## CULTURAL THEMES AND THE ART OF TRADITION

As this section indicates, several cultural and artistic themes are relevant for interpreting Sepik River tourist art.<sup>6</sup> My focus is the Eastern Iatmul village of Tambunum, a horticultural fishing village of some one thousand inhabitants. The village consists of patrilineal descent groups that are chartered by totemic names (*isag*) and related mystical *sacra* such as masks, dance costumes, and bamboo flutes (Bateson 1958).

The human body is a focal symbol in the culture for society, morality, and cosmology (E. Silverman 1996c). Eastern Iatmul equate bodily cleanliness, sexual and dietary modesty, and control over orifices with a bounded, restrained, and authoritative social order. However, this "moral" body is mocked by the "grotesque" body's juxtapositions of death and birth, consumption and expulsion, violence and renewal (see Bakhtin 1984). Inasmuch as the "moral" body represents order, the "grotesque" body alludes to transformation. Together, the two bodies have a dialogic rather than an oppositional relationship, yielding ambivalence rather than closure.<sup>7</sup>

Nearly all Iatmul objects are ornamented with intricate curvilinear patterns. "The curve in this case attains its greatest freedom. . . . It can scarcely exhaust itself, setting forth on ever new courses with sharp spiral hooks, form-

ng meanders, circling around the whole surface and swooping again toward the middle" (Speiser 1966: 144). Many patterns evoke the serpentine Sepik River, whose banks were formed in mythic history from the undulating bodies of a totemic snake and eel. Other patterns symbolize movement, as do lute music tones, which are named after rapid tides and swift fish. In fact, 'good' (*epnum*) art evokes literal or figurative movement and blurring, which instances the cultural ideal of *yivut* or "liveliness" (Bateson 1958: 129 n. 1). Sacred objects do not represent totemic spirits; they *are* spirits. An ornamented art object is a "body" (*mbango*) animated by the totem's "soul" (*karak*). The wooden carving is akin to "bones" (*awo*); decoration is "skin" (*tsimbe*). Totemic entities (*soqinda*) signify the mystical power and fertility of a specific descent group. Yet a group's ritual and totemic art must be created, adorned, and displayed by its sisters' children (*laua nyanggw*) and (alter ego) partners (*tsimbela*) (E. Silverman 1995). In this regard, the production and ritual use of art celebrate the autonomy of the group yet admit to its dependence on exchange relations.

This aspect of traditional art relates to personal identity, which is prismatic in Tambunum. The self is plural or "partible" (Strathern 1988; E. Silverman 1995). This collective or composite self is embedded in social relations and gift exchanges. Yet it is opposed by an ideal of individual autonomy.

A totemic object and its human namesake have the same identity. As Gregory Bateson observed: "This is a region of what, for lack of a better term, we may call assertive art. Its basic theme is a sort of immanent totemism. The crocodiles, weevils, and ancestors with noble noses *are* the people who made them and the people who admired them. . . . This positive assertion, which equates the self with a traditional ego ideal, is the basis of the art of this area" (1946: 119-20).

Since a totemic name can be given to only one living person, a ritual object represents both the unique person and the totemic foundation of the group. In this way, traditional art expresses the problematic dynamic between the individual and collective self, which is similar to Bateson's differentiation between "monism" and "pluralism" in Iatmul cognition or *eidos* (1958: 235).

Space is another important aspect of ritual art. Paints, manufactured from clays and stones that are located in the surrounding region, evoke mythic-historic locations and ancestors. Because most woodcarvings require paints that originated in the topographic domain of another descent group, paint symbolizes exchange and social relations in addition to sociotopographic space (E. Silverman, n.d.).

Decorative *nassa*, cowrie, and conus shells were once obtained through long-distance canoe travel to the Murik of the Sepik Estuary or through down-the-line exchange that began along the north coast of New Guinea. Today, shells are sold in town markets, often in used beer bottles. Still, shells con-

tinue to symbolize travel, distance, and successful exchange (or monetary transaction), as do acrylic paints and shoe polish, which decorate many tourist woodcarvings.

From their landed Sawos neighbors, Eastern Iatmul obtained tree oil for putty, cassowary and bird-of-paradise feathers, and boars' tusks. Even the wood itself comes from afar, either hauled to the village from the surrounding jungle or found drifting down the river. In order to create art, therefore, men must traverse culturally salient geographic zones, conduct successful exchange relationships, and negotiate through social space.

Sepik River cultures constantly exchange artistic materials, valuables, non-material traits (e.g., magic spells), and mundane objects such as baskets and pottery (Mead 1938: 157-58; Gewertz 1983; Barlow, Bolton, and Lipset 1987; Terrell and Welsch 1990; S. Harrison 1993). Villages often transform importations according to the logic of their cultural system and then export them anew, cloaked in a superior mystical ethos (Mead 1938, 1978: 70). Many early-twentieth-century Iatmul masks, in fact, were ornamented with European buttons and enamel plates (see, e.g., Bateson 1958: pl. 27), a practice that endures (see also O'Hanlon 1993).

Eastern Iatmul claim to have been a pivotal nexus in regional exchange networks, many of which were evolving into hierarchies of unequal economic and symbolic power (S. Harrison 1987). People in Tambunum have an aggressive ethos of cultural, totemic, and military superiority in the Sepik, which is evident in their success with tourism. Eastern Iatmul proudly state that theirs was the first Sepik village to carve art specifically aimed at Westerners. Their pride is fueled by visits to tourism trade fairs in Australia and participation in the New Guinea Sculpture Garden that was created at Stanford University by a select group of Sepik carvers in 1994. The village, moreover, has been a center for anthropological research—Gregory Bateson, Margaret Mead, Rhoda Metraux, and I, to name but a few, have studied there—which is often noted by villagers.

In this section I have described some of the traditional cultural patterns that are important for understanding tourist art. These include body symbolism, an aesthetic of movement, problematic constructions of self and society, aggression, and the regional position of Iatmul villages as cultural purveyors. My point is that Tambunum contained institutions and a cultural logic that facilitated the incorporation, encompassment, and (re)production of tourist art.

#### SEPIK TOURISM AND TOURIST ART

Eastern Iatmul living in the village can acquire the perceived necessities of existence from the abundant local environment. Nevertheless, money enables the acquisition of prestige goods, such as kerosene lanterns, outboard

rotors, clothing, radios and tape decks, sacks of rice, tins of meat and fish, and tobacco and rolling newspaper. As "incarnated signs," these items symbolize a hybrid of traditional and capitalist process such as restriction, prestige, acquisition, specialized knowledge, and links to the amorphous sources of European power (Appadurai 1986b: 38). Traditional markets based on fixed exchange ratios (Gewertz 1983) have been supplanted by currency markets, and money is necessary to procure artistic materials, pay school fees, travel to town, subsist in urban areas, and purchase medicine.<sup>8</sup>

These circumstances imply that the society depends on a world economic system about which most people in Tambunum understand little, and over which they exercise even less control. This is true, to some extent. But, ironically, the encroachment of the world system and tourism enable the village to exist not as a waning shadow of precontact efflorescence but as an emergent and relevant culture (F. Errington and Gewertz 1996). The West has not eclipsed indigenous creativity and authentic meaning.

Tourism provides the village with some 20,000 kina per year and is by far the largest source of income in the village.<sup>9</sup> Most of the earnings are derived from the sale of art and curios.<sup>10</sup> However, related activities also provide cash. When the *Malnesian Discoverer* arrives, men paint the faces of tourists on the upper deck of the ship or under houses, for which they receive five to eight kina each. Sometimes a traditional dance is performed, fetching sixty to seventy kina. Clans alternate in providing these activities. Tourists may also pay a fee to see any rituals that are in progress.<sup>11</sup>

More adventuresome and budget-minded travelers, frequently guided by the Lonely Planet guide *Papua New Guinea: A Travel Survival Kit*, also contribute to village income. They pay to unfurl their sleeping bags and mosquito nets in private homes and frequently hire outboard-motor canoes and drivers. Some visitors stay at the guest house across the river from the main village.<sup>12</sup> It employs men and women on a rotating basis for security, grass cutting, building maintenance, housecleaning, cooking, and other chores.

The *Malnesian Discoverer*, berthed at the Madang Resort Hotel, introduces most tourists to Tambunum. In addition to visiting the Trobriand Islands and Manam Island, the ship winds its way along the Sepik several times a month, stopping at Tambunum for two to four hours. Some groups are as large as forty people, mainly from Europe, the United States, and Australia. These tourists, who can afford to pay the high cost of air and sea freight, are more likely than others to purchase large items, such as six-foot figures, crocodile-shaped tables, and woven dance costumes.

Dealers often visit Tambunum, perhaps every month or so. As the most populous village along the middle Sepik, Tambunum creates the greatest quantity and diversity of art in the region, perhaps even in the entire country. The Lonely Planet guide calls it the "artifacts factory" of the Sepik. I have

seen dealers purchase upwards of six hundred objects for a total of 5,697 kina. This mode of tourism and artifact sales, one could say, democratizes both carving and access to wealth.

#### SEPIK TOURIST ART

When buyers and the tourist boat arrive in Tambunum, men and women, and sometimes children, spread an astounding variety of objects on both sides of the main village path, perhaps as many as a thousand: baskets, wood-carvings, shell necklaces, stools, tables, masks, pots, walking canes, woven animals.<sup>13</sup> Potential purchasers stroll down the path, gazing at the items aligned on either side (fig. 4-1). In this multilingual setting, English and pidgin are the lingua francas, with the local vernacular heard in the background. The two lines of art mediate the encounter in the sense that Westerners and the inhabitants of Eastern Iatmul, each curious about the actions of the other, talk across and through the artworks, which are indigenous interpretations of Western aesthetic desires. As tourists gaze down on the objects, the artists look across the spatial and aesthetic boundary to the tourists' faces, thus reading their reading of the art.

In this conversation, tourists and buyers are central, framed by the two rows of objects. The sellers are usually marginalized by their creations, which also filter their subjectivity. The direction of power in this spatio-cultural encounter is ambiguous; its ethos is maladroït. Still, like the traditional acquisition of paints and feathers, success in this encounter requires the skilled negotiation of social space.

Tourism has fostered "mechanical reproduction" (Benjamin 1969b) in the form of wooden crocodile-shaped napkin rings and naturalistic snakes, birds, and frogs. These objects have expressive meaning in the relatively narrow sense that they draw on elements of the sociocultural world in an attempt to fulfill a perceived Western aesthetic desire. Symbolic messages, one could suggest, are muted in sheer quantity (see also Gewertz and Errington 1991: 53-54).

Another kind of commoditization occurs when carvers seemingly replicate ritual art. These carvings, however, usually differ from traditional forms. Unlike ritual *sacra*, moreover, these objects are devoid of totemic names and were not carved by sisters' children and *tsimbela* partners. Some forms are unable to be (re)produced for sale, especially objects such as bullroarers—long, narrow, and flat wooden objects that are whirled on twine in order to create a roaring sound—which must never be glimpsed by women. Moreover, if a man sees the totemic spirit of a carving in a dream he must not sell the object but place it inside the cult house.

Typically, carved objects reflect local interpretations of Western taste. Sometimes, however, an economic asymmetry influences the artistic process

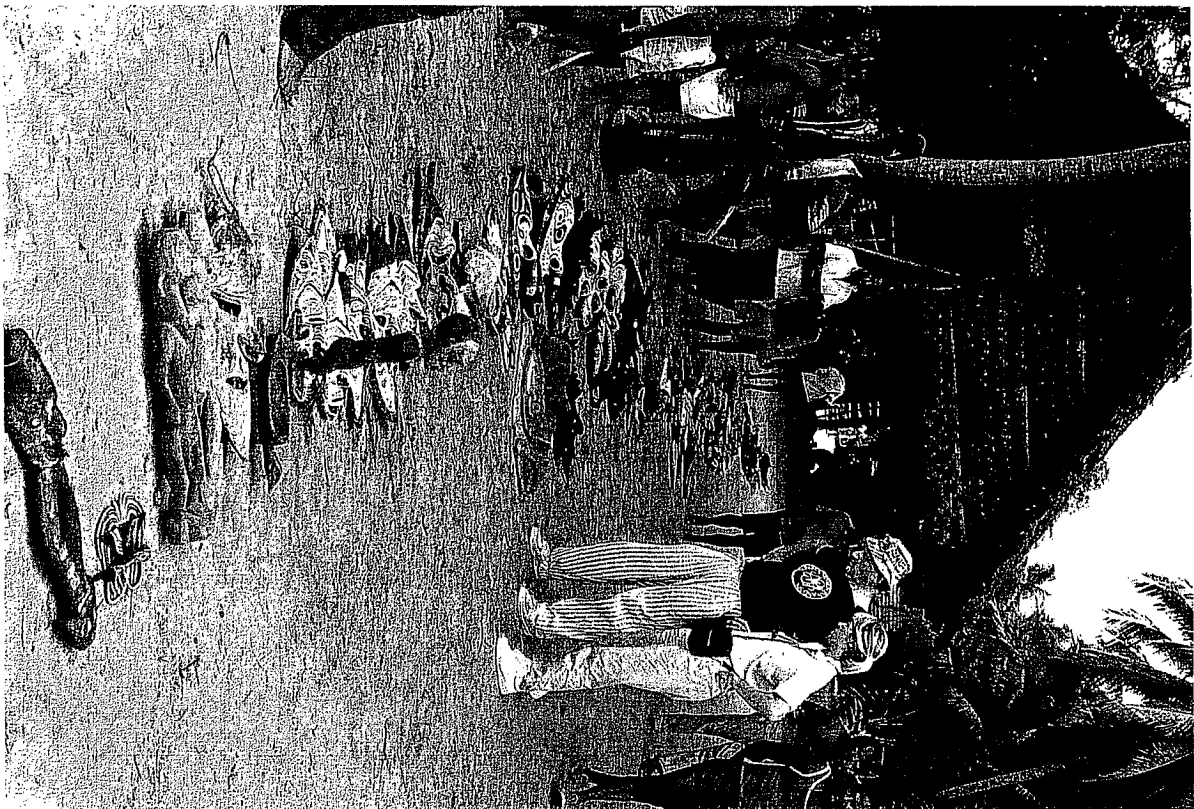


Figure 4.1. Tourists looking at a display of art for sale in Tambunum village along the Sepik River, Papua New Guinea. Photograph by Eric Kline Silverman.

more directly.<sup>14</sup> In the mid-1980s, a man carved a large orator's stool, which was purchased by a Canadian art dealer and featured in a poster advertising her store. When she returned in 1989, she gave the carver the poster and asked him to carve a replica. Eight years later she had yet to return for it. Such instances of commoditization in the village arise from, and in turn escalate, asymmetrical economic and creative power. This example also illustrates the successful marketing of "primitive" Otherness and the canonization of that representation.

Many forms of tourist art convey messages about three new forms of collective identity. First, Iatmul tourist art, to a degree greater than traditional art, conforms to styles that are largely indigenous to individual villages. I have recognized many styles that are specific to Tambunum in art shops in Australia, Hawaii, and the mainland United States. Local carvers, too, recognize that tourist art symbolizes village identity.

Second, people from the Sepik region are known as "Sepiks" in the national context of Papua New Guinea. Despite artistic variation from village to village, Iatmul recognize that, taken together, their tourist art differs stylistically from that of other regions of the country. Many women weave the letters "TS" on baskets, an abbreviation of the pidgin phrase "pikmini Sepik" or "child of the Sepik."<sup>15</sup> In this respect, Sepik tourist art is an index of Sepik ethnicity. The use of writing on tourist art, moreover, is a new form of aesthetic communication, what O'Hanlon (1995) calls "graphicalization" (see also Gewertz and Errington 1991: chap. 5).

Finally, Papua New Guinean ethnicity is also evident in tourist art, particularly in carvings of the national emblem. Instead of merely replicating the national symbol, however, carvers in Tambunum create numerous variations, thus rendering national ethnicity in a local, village-based idiom (fig. 4.2).<sup>16</sup> The diversity and number of these objects increased between 1990 and 1994, as did the frequency of Christian and biblical slogans beneath the emblem, which represent another dimension of emergent identity. Eastern Iatmul living in Wewak also carve emblems of the PNG military and constabulary, which they sell at the local police headquarters and army barracks.

Another prominent style of tourist art expresses the tension between the bounded and partible self (fig. 4.3). Through a series of hidden faces—or masks within a mask—these woodcarvings contain no visual self-focus. They seem to deconstruct bounded identity. This style, one could argue, expresses visually one valence of traditional personhood in which the self is inextricably bound to social relationships. Yet this notion of the person is at odds with the contemporary economic emphasis on individuation (see below).

Often a painted face is mounted on top of another face—signaling dualistic identity?—and a bird is placed on top of that. Escher-like, the bird is interstitial, emerging from or receding into two-dimensional and three-dimensional spaces. Crocodiles do likewise on wooden tables. Birds and croc-



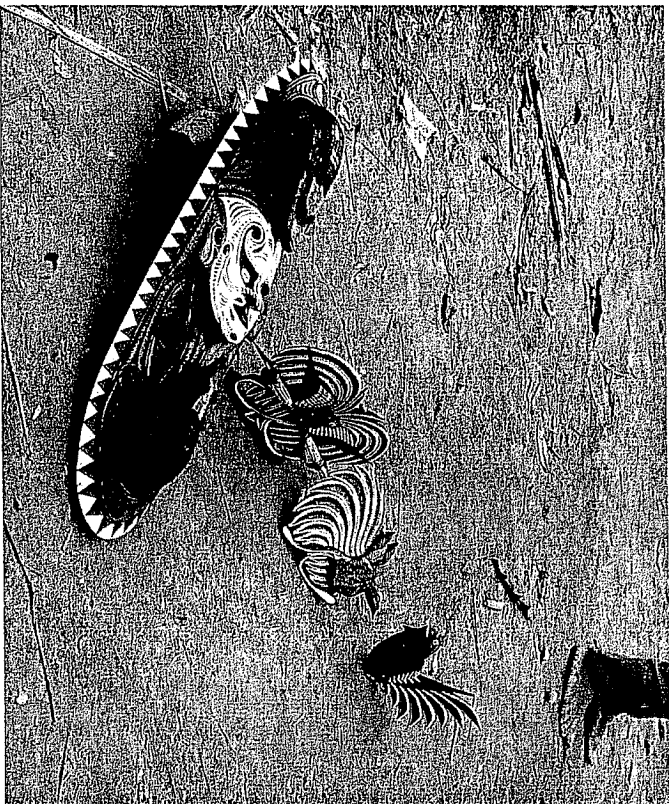


Figure 4.2. Stylized variations of the national emblem and mask with emergent crocodiles in Tambunum village, Papua New Guinea. Photograph by Eric Kline Silverman.

idies, like snakes, are liminal creatures in the local imagination because they cross spatial boundaries that in myth are sites of danger and transformation. In this sense, some tourist carvings represent contradictions in personhood as well as cultural themes that were formerly conspicuous only in myth.

In their attempt to (re)define their identity aesthetically, Eastern Iatmul low venture symbolically into previously unknown regions of the East Sepik Province. It is increasingly common for men to carve objects that are entirely unrelated to the traditional culture of Tambunum. They may, for example, carve a yam mask that is characteristic of the distant nonriverine Kwoma (see Bowden 1983). The novel painting style on one such yam mask, is the whim of one man, does not derive from any traditional Eastern Iatmul or Kwoma style.

Eastern Iatmul at times purchase masks, pots, shell ornaments, and necklaces from other villages and town markets, which they may modify and sell at a profit to tourists and dealers. Men in the village delight in recounting

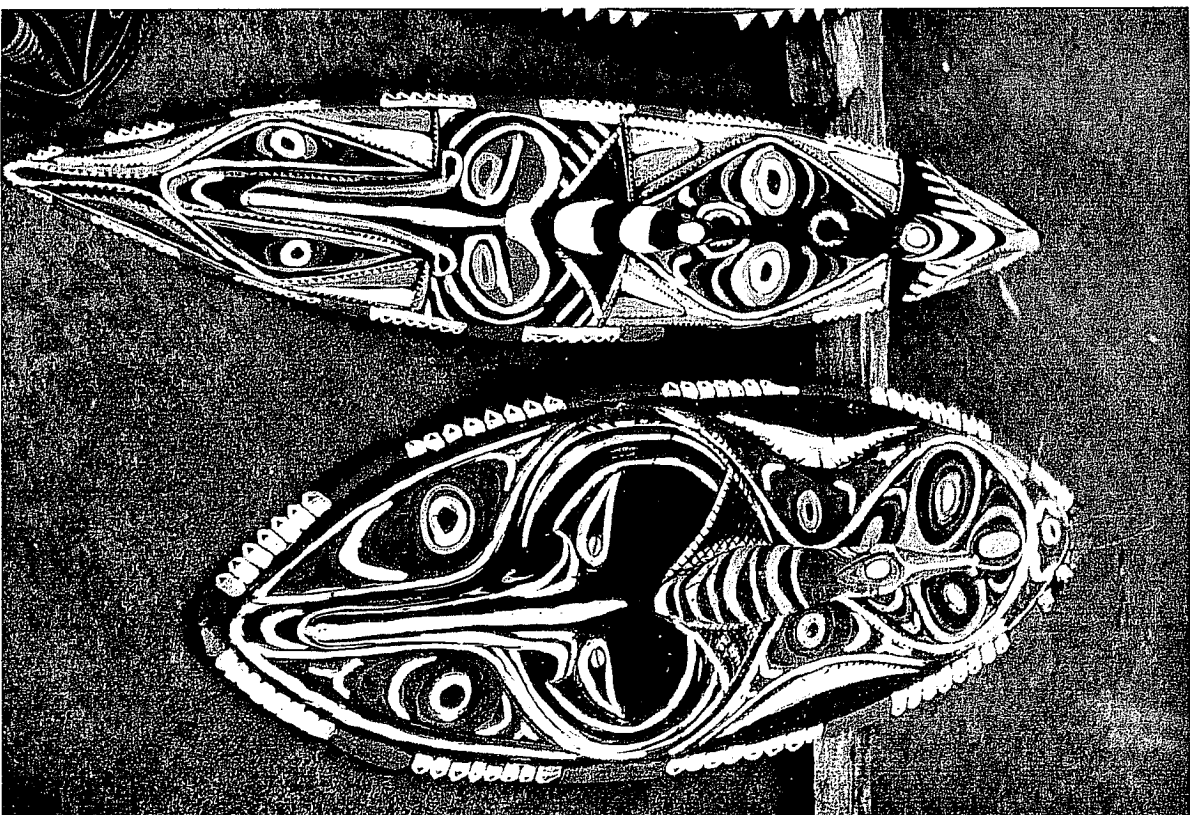


Figure 4.3. Multiple faces, multiple selves: carved masks in Tambunum village, Papua New Guinea. Photograph by Eric Kline Silverman.

o tourists all sorts of fictions about these items—for example, tales of initiations and homicides—in order to surround these imported objects with a new mystique. Such tales also appeal to Western desires for authentic subjects—older things that were used in “genuine” ritual.<sup>17</sup> In addition, Tambunum women now weave Murik-looking (Sepik Estuary) baskets and make ooped *bilams* (string bags) that are characteristic of other regions of the country, such as the long-fringed “Madang style.” The importation of alien cultural forms that are then invested with a local aura continues through tourism. This practice also arises from the precontract position of the village as a nexus for regional, now global, exchange networks.

Tourist art fosters individuality. This relation explains the prevalence of faces in contemporary carvings, which was not the case formerly. As men state, if we all carve the same things or just traditional objects, then nobody’s objects would stand out; since all men carve, there is competition to be unique.” Some carvers draw on affinal relations with non-Tambunum villages in order to acquire the “rights” to reproduce and sell distinct art forms. Other men try to carve unique objects by scanning regional art catalogs<sup>18</sup>—although many dealers tell carvers not to create these “fake” art objects (Shiner 1994). Through art, then, tourism places the bounded individual into the foreground of social life, thus deemphasizing group motivation. Before tourism, this traditional facet of identity lacked for the most part a visual expression.

In traditional societies, according to Igor Kopyroff (1986: 89), persons and things have social identities and biographies; in complex societies their identities and biographies are highly individualized and unique. Men with increasing frequency, therefore, sign distinctive carvings with their Christian name rather than their totemic name. Tourists often ask for the (Christian) name of the artist—rarely the name of his or her lineage or clan—thus further strengthening the bond between bounded personhood and the aesthetics of tourist art.

The pursuit of capitalistic goals and monetary profit often problematizes social relations and gift exchange (Sahlins 1992; Maclean 1994), which form a self who is embedded in constant moral obligations for reciprocity that can never be fully reciprocated or renounced. As I have suggested, this tension, which is locally acknowledged, finds expression in tourist art. At the same time, the competitive ethos of capitalism fits well with the former warlike posture of the village. Tourists, in fact, often remark that Tambunum is the most aggressive village in the river when it comes to peddling art. Once again the reason is self-assertion, as well as the traditional relationship between exchange and hostility, rather than group, village, or totemic motivation (Mauss 1990).

I have already mentioned the local aesthetic ideal of “liveliness” (*yivud*), which holds that ritual art should be viewed while in motion and that floral decoration and other ornaments should resemble the chaotic break of ocean

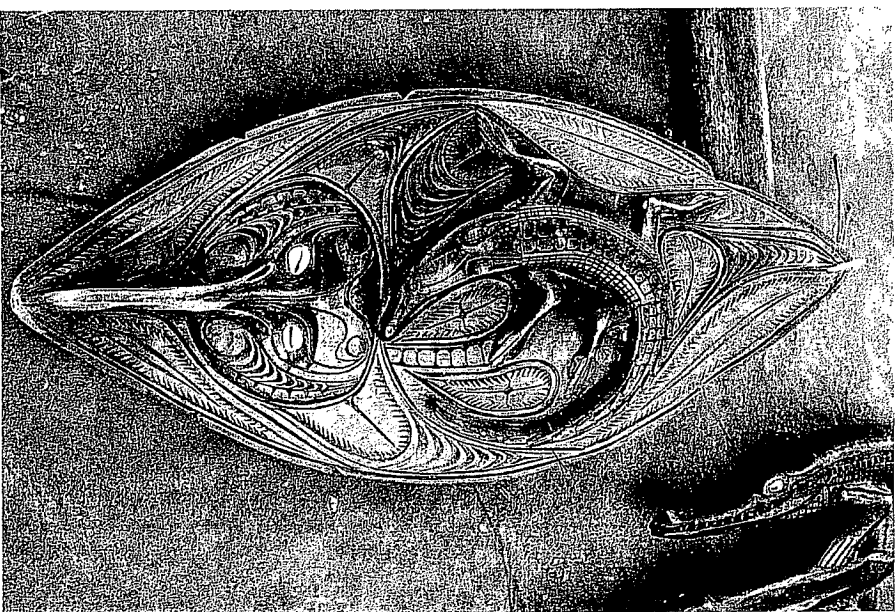


Figure 44. The movable, blurred self; mask with crocodile motif in Tambunum village, Papua New Guinea. Photograph by Eric Kline Silverman.

surf (*woli kəpmagart*). Thus many forms of tourist art represent movement through perspective and implication. The crocodile (fig. 44), for example, evokes movement, yet its movement is bounded by the plane of the wood-carving itself. It is, after a fashion, going nowhere. In fact, one man carved a “mask” similar to the one just mentioned, but it lacked the face; it was simply a crocodile in motion. These masks express the rapidity of social and economic change and the inability of the self to become firmly anchored in the

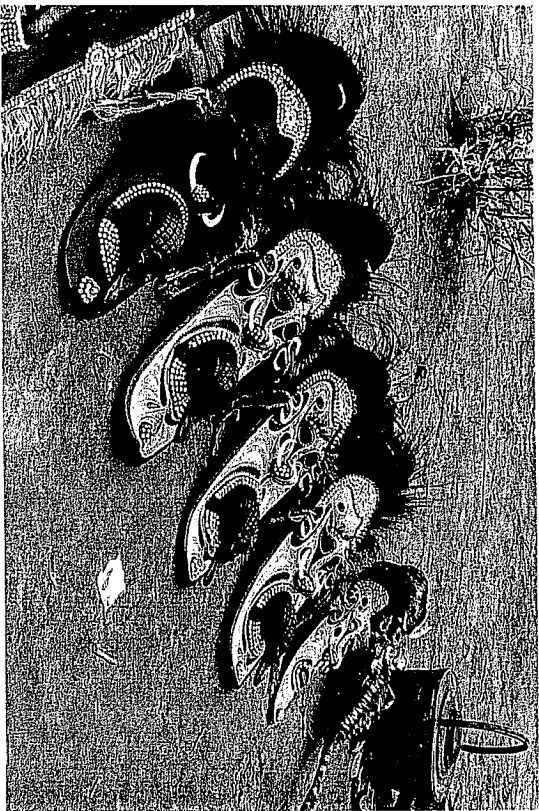


Figure 4-5. The body emerging, devouring, and birthing: masks in Tambunum village, Papua New Guinea. Photograph by Eric Kline Silverman.

contemporary context. To some Eastern Iatmul they also represent small islands (*agwi*) on the river, which are literally afloat.

Many large figures depict a huge face with wide-open eyes.<sup>19</sup> As a striking, bold affirmation of identity, these woodcarvings express an imposing, glaring, vigilant self. On the reverse, however, a small head staring backwards seems to negate the asserted identity of the frontal face. Numerous forms of Eastern Iatmul tourist art, I suggest, communicate an open-endedness of identity that, although traditional, is particularly salient at the confluence of modernity and tradition.

Carved and painted faces often display a pattern of thin red and white swirling lines, which signify menstrual blood and semen respectively—in other words, somatic reproduction. This pattern is painted on the faces of young men during the *shugukhepa* ritual, which enacts cosmic creation and the totemic (re)production of the world (E. Silverman, n.d.). Eastern Iatmul say that tourists like this pattern, which they also paint on the faces of tourists. In the context of tourism, this style represents village identity, but it also allows Eastern Iatmul men to continue to reflect on traditional idioms of gender, reproduction, and cosmology.

Binary structures influence village social organization and *eidos* (Bateson 1958: 235–48, 271). Hence, many tourist masks exhibit remarkably bal-

anced symmetries. However, these symmetries are often prominent only in profile. From the front, they are barely evident. This visual technique is reminiscent of the multidimensional animals carved on masks and tables. Everything has a unique totemic name. Yet all names are associated lexically and spatially with other names, just as all objects, when viewed from different semantic angles, have myriad associations (E. Silverman 1996c). Local reality is totemically prismatic. This worldview seems conveyed by tourist art symmetries that are visible from only a single perspective as well as by the multiple faces and scenes exhibited by other carvings, no less the different valences of personal identity.

The final aesthetic message I interpret concerns the prevalence of orificial motifs (fig. 4-5). Here Lagain refer to Mikhail Bakhtin's (1984) concept of "grotesque realism," wherein dramatic orificial imagery, such as gaping maws, symbolically challenges the established morality of social order (see also Jonaitis 1986; Rosman and Rubel 1990). Distinctions between outside and inside, self and other, and containment and movement are blurred. Totemic animals—often crocodiles, which are contemporary symbols of the Iatmul and "Sepikness"—are at once born, regurgitated, excreted, and eaten. This ambiguity is indigenously on the part of carvers and other villagers.

Some carvings display a crocodile emerging from the plane of the mask. Half of the animal, carved in the round, is visible on the front; the other half can be seen only on the underside. The crocodile is locally recognized to be a symbol of ethnic and societal identity. Yet in many contemporary carvings the crocodile is unable to be seen in full from any perspective. Part of it is always hidden. Other carvings blend different styles and faces. They may be selected from the traditional repertoire or from non-Iatmul cultures; sometimes the two are combined.

As the village undergoes dramatic transformation, the dissolution of the previous order is not yet ensured, and the emergence of a new polity is not yet achieved. Many new styles of carving express this ambivalence, which Eastern Iatmul voice. Men are often equivocal about carving—sometimes they are pleased with tourist art; at other times they feel that it is only a minor step toward that elusive goal of "development."

"Carnivalesque" images in Eastern Iatmul tourist art do not celebrate the boundaries and categories of society. However, they do not lead to revolution or chaos. Instead, the images express the emergence of new social forms from the previous order—an emergence that combines an integrated tradition with the disjunctions of modernity.

#### CONCLUSION

Gregory Bateson noted the Iatmul "proneness to visual . . . thought" (1958: 22). Expanding on this, I argue that Eastern Iatmul tourist art meaningfully



xpresses local experiences and processes as the Sepik River community becomes enmeshed in wider global systems. Although I may have omitted much of the paths of the contemporary moment, it is only to emphasize indigenous creativity and negotiation.

I make four main points. First, touristic processes build on and alter traditional artistic forms as well as regional and village sociocultural processes. In fact, tourism provides an impetus for the refiguration of traditional institutions so they become relevant rather than antiquated in the context of an encroaching world system and rapid sociocultural and economic change. Second, tourist art conveys messages about village, regional, and national ethnicity. Third, some styles of tourist art emphasize personhood that alters rates between individuality and dispersal, capitalism and social relations. Finally, I suggest that official motifs—at once devouring, regurgitating, birthing, and excreting—refer to an emergent state of social formation.

By distorting so-called tradition, contemporary carvers contest the totemic and moral structure of their social universe. At the same time, Eastern Latmul embrace capitalism and “modern” things, encompassing them within their own cultural logic and aesthetic gaze. Tourist art, a result of these practices, expresses ambiguities about the self, identity, and ethnicity as the Eastern Latmul world expands into a state of global (post)modernity.

## Samburu Souvenirs

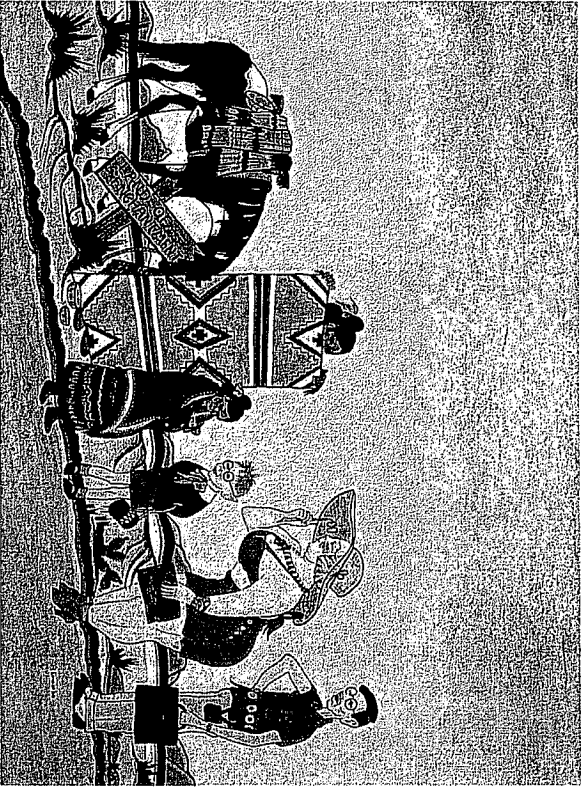
*Sidney Littlefield Kasfir*

### Representations of a Land in Amber

This essay is about the interplay between commoditized and noncommoditized forms and the siting of cultural practice within the creative tension between representation and identity. Discussions of so-called tourist art often focus on its commodity status. While essential in locating such objects within (or “against”) an art-historical discourse whose premises lie in notions of uniqueness and authenticity, the category of commoditization tends to resist analysis of the patron (or spectator) as anything but a consumer and the artist as anything but a producer. Thinking about aesthetic objects as goods is productive for locating and contextualizing them within systems of exchange, but the language of commodity forms works less successfully in dealing with the highly contingent and often somewhat blurred realities of cultural practice; and it cannot do full justice to the ethnographic complexity of the encounter between artist and audience. I therefore intend to proceed in a somewhat different fashion and examine two related sets of artifacts—photographs of and spears *made by* Samburu pastoralists of northern Kenya—in the context and language of the souvenir and theories of collecting. I contrast souvenir collecting with the use Samburu themselves make of their photographs and their attitudes, both artisanal and sociological, toward making spears for foreigners. While neither rigorous nor codified, these attitudes constitute an aspect of Samburu social theory underlying their notions of identity and self-representation. The pairing of photograph and spear is not arbitrary, considering that the most common postcard and coffee-table book image of the Samburu is the spear-carrying warrior. This image, in effect, defines the spear as the ideal souvenir of the hoped-for (if seldom realized) “authentic” encounter between the traveler and the romanticized pastoralist. For the returned traveler (who in this context is also the collector and was once the spectator), both the spear and the postcard are alike in the

# Unpacking Culture

*Art and Commodity  
in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds*



Woodrow (Woody) Crumb (Potowatomi, 1912-89), *Land of Enchantment*, c. 1946, serocolon on board (17.5 × 23 inches). Gift of Clark Field. The Philbrook Museum of Art. Reproduced by permission.

EDITED BY  
Ruth B. Phillips and  
Christopher B. Steiner

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS  
Berkeley Los Angeles London

1999