



Carved face

Kalabu village, Maprik sub-province,
East Sepik Province, Papua New
Guinea
Collected in 1964
Wood, paint

In Abelam society, initiations and yam ceremonies are occasions for creating various carvings. This carved face represents either the main ancestral spirit *Nggwal* or another spirit, and was probably part of a larger display of spirits in the *haus tambaran*, the central male cult house.



Ehoro mask

Orokolo, Gulf Province,
Papua New Guinea
Purchased in 1920
Cane, pith, bark cloth, natural
pigment

For the Elema people of the Gulf of Papua, the men's *ravi* or longhouse was a central part of ceremonial life. Carved ancestral boards, masks, figures and drums were created and held in the longhouse for ceremonial purposes. *Ehoro* masks are not part of sacred ceremonies; rather, they relate to humorous clan myths performed by dancers.



Kovave mask

Parimono, Gulf Province,
Papua New Guinea
Purchased in 1915
Cane, pith, bark cloth, natural
pigment, synthetic pigment

Initiates among the Elema people wore these masks in *kovave* or *kaiva kuku* initiation ceremonies. The masks also incorporated clan totems, such as a fish, bird or turtle. This example has a storm lamp at its top and, in addition to natural pigments, used Reckitt's Blue laundry whitening powder.



Baba tagwa or baba kumbu mask

Kamge village, Maprik sub-province,
East Sepik Province, Papua New
Guinea
Purchased in 1980
Cane, cassowary feathers, natural
pigment, paint

This helmet mask is worn by
participants in male initiation
ceremonies and is part of a full-body
costume that includes a fibre or leaf
skirt. The ceremony is performed
on ceremonial grounds near the *haus
tambaran*, the central male cult house.



Among mask

Raten village, East Sepik Province,
Papua New Guinea
Purchased in 1938
Clay, shells, rattan, trade beads,
dog teeth, pig tusks, cassowary
feathers, ceramics

Male initiation ceremonies commonly
involve the use of masks and
performance. This over-modelled mask
(clay and pig fat over wood) represents
an ancestor's face and the prominent
tusks give it the appearance of a pig.
Traditional elements and introduced
materials, such as trade ceramics, are
incorporated into the face. Initiation
masks were placed in the men's
ceremonial house following ritual use.



Tumbuan mask

Serakum village, Maprik sub-province,
East Sepik Province, Papua New
Guinea
Collected in 1964
Cane, natural pigment

For the Abelam people, many aspects
of life revolve around the growing
of yams and associated ceremonies
and festivals. Masks are an integral
part of these events. This *tumbuan*
mask was part of a full dancing
costume and was most likely used
in a yam festival when collected
during the Australian Museum's
1964 Sepik River expedition.



Over-modelled mask

Lower Sepik, East Sepik Province,
Papua New Guinea
Donated in 1986
Turtle shell, clay, shells, cassowary
feathers, human hair

'Over-modelled' masks (in this case, over a turtle shell) were first made following the ban on selling over-modelled skulls after the independence of PNG in 1975. They are still produced by Lower Sepik villages for the tourist market. The designs and themes of the masks reflect the taste of the contemporary carver and have little relevance to traditional mythology.



Bird mask

Lower Sepik, East Sepik Province,
Papua New Guinea
Purchased in 1994
Wood

In the Sepik area, ancestors could take the form of a human face, bird, insect, crocodile or other animal. This mask probably represents one of these ancestor spirits. Many of the Sepik masks collected and available today were made to meet the export demand for the region's art. While not wholly traditional, these masks are still significant to the Sepik art story.



Tumbai mask

Saparu, Yuat River, East Sepik
Province, Papua New Guinea
Purchased in 1938
Wood, fibre, shell, natural dyes,
red ochre

This *tumbai* mask is typical of carved wooden masks from the Yuat region and is associated with a tree spirit of a particular clan. *Tumbai* masks were traditionally held by male dancers during ceremonies.



Ceremonial mask

Northern New Ireland, Papua New Guinea
Purchased in 1887
Wood, shell, barkcloth, red ochre, Berliner wasch blau, black paint, aerial rootlets, coral, white lime

This mask honoured the memory of dead leaders, both men and women. The characteristic facial 'bars' have different meanings – some refer to a person's last breath or life force. The snake attacking a flying fish is symbolic of an important person. The leader of the village during the mourning period may have used this style of mask to remove taboos restricting people's activities at this time.



Tago mask

Tami Island, Morobe Province, Papua New Guinea
Purchased in 1888
Wood, red ochre, black paint, lime

Tago masks represent the ghosts of important ancestors. Every 10 to 12 years, a year-long series of ceremonies remind each clan of its ancestral connections, with two major performances celebrating the arrival and departure of the ghosts. When men wear the *tago* mask, a taboo is placed on all coconuts for one year and there must be peace in the village.



Mask headdress

Southwest Bay, Malakula Island, North Central Vanuatu
Purchased in 1984
Tree fern, wood, feathers, mineral and vegetable dyes, coconut husk

This headdress was worn during the final stages of the funerary rituals of a *Nalawan* (sacred knowledge society) member. During the journey to the world of the dead, the dead person is assisted by spirits. The wearer of this headdress becomes one with these spirits during this stage of the funerary ritual.


Spirit
faces

For image requests please contact
Michelle Van Doninck,
Publicist Australian Museum

t 61 2 9320 6181 m 0421 617 019
michelle.vandoninck@austmus.gov.au





Kanak masks

La Grande Terre, North Central
New Caledonia

Purchased in 1898

Wood, human hair, pigeon feathers,
wicker basket

These impressive Kanak (indigenous people from New Caledonia) masks were most likely used during funerary ceremonies of chiefs. However, functions varied between regions and were linked with various spirits, including those of creation, the underwater world of the dead and of traditional money. It is difficult to determine the exact symbolism and function of Kanak masks as many were destroyed by early missionaries and colonial administrators and no longer used from the mid 19th century.

The masks are part of a costume consisting of headgear, face and clothing. The headgear is associated with the tidi or traditional hat worn by high-ranking elders, and includes human hair cut from men who had performed funerary rituals for the chief.



Susu mask

Pomio, East New Britain, Papua
New Guinea

Purchased in 1911

Pith, wood, rattan, dried leaves,
feathers, natural dyes, pollen

Susu masks are worn by Sulka men during important ceremonies, such as initiations, marriages and funerals. The masks represent spirits and are destroyed following the ritual. This example has elongated earlobes representing initiated men and blackened teeth symbolising those of young male initiates. Masks are made in secrecy by men, out of the sight of women.



Lor mask

Duke of York Islands, between
New Britain and New Ireland

Purchased in 1885

Wood, lime, red ochre, seeds, fibres

This is a rare early example of a *lor* mask used by members of a secret society from the Duke of York Islands. Its purpose and function is unknown; however, the face probably represents a spirit and the white colour resembles that of a dead body. The overriding expression is that of the sadness of loss.


Spirit
faces

For image requests please contact
Michelle Van Doninck,
Publicist Australian Museum

t 61 2 9320 6181 m 0421 617 019
michelle.vandoninck@austmus.gov.au





Baining mendaska mask

East New Britain, Papua New Guinea
Purchased in 1978
Barkcloth, bamboo, red and black natural dyes

Baining people from New Britain create large barkcloth masks to represent spirits of leaves, trees, animals and insects. The masks are traditionally worn during harvest time in ceremonial dances lasting all day and night. This style of *mendaska* mask, made by the Uramot people, is worn during daytime ceremonies associated with female fertility, mourning and important community events.



Owl head mask

Notsi, Northern New Ireland, Papua New Guinea
Purchased in 1887
Wood, shell, pith, lime, red ochre, cambium, black paint, barkcloth

Owl head masks appeared in dance performances representing the birth, life and death of the owl. Traditional rights to wear these masks for performances were probably sold from one village to the next, with the original village retaining performance rights. The masks were used in northern New Ireland from the 1830s to the 1930s.



Funerary mask

Northern New Ireland, Papua New Guinea
Purchased in 1887
Wood, shell, hardwood spikes, rattan twine, lime, red ochre, black paint, coconut husk

Men wore these masks during funerary ceremonies in Northern New Ireland. Many of the mask's features depict death: the lime paste and spikes resemble an old man's white hair, the shell-bead eyes bulge from the rest of the head, and the snake above them represents death.


Spirit
faces

For image requests please contact
Michelle Van Doninck,
Publicist Australian Museum

t 61 2 9320 6181 m 0421 617 019
michelle.vandoninck@austmus.gov.au


Australian
museum
nature culture discover