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Introduction

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We thank Nora Scott for translating the French text.

- 1 From the time of its discovery at the end of the 19th century, the northern Sepik Valley was recognized as one of those places with a seemingly inexhaustible capacity for artistic creation. The cultures found along the river and its tributaries produced objects and architectures that astonished by the impressive diversity of their forms. This creativity has motivated numerous studies with no end in sight so rich is the material, as attested by the articles collected in the present volume.
- 2 Most of the articles were first presented at a conference organized by the musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac in the autumn of 2015. This meeting was one of the high points in a project begun several years earlier and culminating in the Sepik exhibition presented in Berlin, Zurich and Paris in 2015-2016. The show featured some 230 original works from the lowlands and surrounding regions between the mouth of the Sepik and April River.
- 3 The checkerboard of languages and cultures found in the Sepik Valley makes reducing this zone to some two hundred sculptures a difficult, daunting and necessarily partial (in both senses of the word) exercise. To avoid being reductive, a risk entailed in any exhibition on the Sepik, the visitor was invited to explore a fictitious village. This stroll was a pretext for discovering, first, the objects contained in a family dwelling, then those kept in the men's house and finally those used in elaborate ceremonies. The device supposed the existence of a cultural fabric uniting all of the valley's groups. The idea of a unified Sepik culture has haunted research on the region from the start. It was prompted by the existence of objects whose shapes and uses seemed infinite but which also shared a certain *je-ne-sais-quoi*, a family resemblance. From the very first publications, the objects that had been collected or seen raised the formidable question of cultural differences and group boundaries. The museographic layout took for granted that there were some common features, a "Sepikness", a feeling binding all

History of research and collecting in the Sepik area

- 6 Constant reference to history demands a quick look back over some of the most significant points.
- 7 It all began one day in 1885, when Otto Finsch and Captain Eduard Dallmann, together with some German and Indonesian sailors, discovered the mouth of the Sepik River. They sailed their way a few kilometers inland. Several exploratory trips followed. In 1886, the voyage of the *Ottilie* brought back the first objects to the West. However studies of Sepik material culture would have to await the years preceding the Great War. In 1910, Otto Schlaginhaufen's book on the collection he brought back from his 1909 voyage for the Dresden museum appeared (Schlaginhaufen, 1910). In 1913, Otto Reche, who would take part in the expedition organized by the Hamburg museum under the direction of Friedrich Fülleborn, published what remains a major treatise: in the space of nearly 500 pages he describes some one hundred objects out of the 900 collected by the expedition between 22 May and 4 June 1909 (Reche, 1913). To these he adds numerous Sepik pieces already in German museums. For those interested in Sepik culture, these two books are still a must. Not only do they provide the first descriptions of the villages and inhabitants of the Sepik but they draw up an inventory of certain objects used along the river.¹
- 8 Otto Reche was the first to divide the region into four stylistic areas, which he reduced to three culture areas (Reche, 1913: 475). These divisions are still used, though their boundaries have been altered as knowledge of the river has extended further upstream. Time and again in his text, Reche notes that some objects have true artistic worth. This remark runs counter to today's widespread idea that early-20th century ethnographers were indifferent to the artistic value of these objects. One only has to read the first texts to understand the erroneous nature of this idea. To wit: von Luschan's article published in 1911 in the *Baessler Archiv*, in which he recommended nothing less than drawing up a program of field studies on Sepik art (von Luschan, 1911).
- 9 This article was definitely known to the members of the multi-disciplinary expedition organized in 1912–13 by the Berlin museum of ethnography. Headed by Artur Stollé, the members included Carl Ledermann, botanist, Walter Behrmann, geographer, and two ethnographers, Adolf Roesicke and Richard Thurnwald. The expedition would spend several months in the valley, while Thurnwald stayed on into 1914. Unfortunately the First World War made it impossible to publish the voyage. The collections, or what was left of them after the vicissitudes of history, were published only fifty years later when the rediscovered objects were transferred to the new Dahlem museum (Keklm, 1966 for volumes 1 and 2, 1968 for volume 3).² Roesicke's voluminous travel journal was published only some one hundred years after the author's death in early 1919 (Schindlbeck, 2015 and Roesicke 1914). We are indebted to Behrmann, however, not only for a remarkably precise map (Behrmann, 1917-1924), but for a book (Behrmann, 1922) in which, following Roesicke's work, he proposes a classification of the culture groups by, among others, the forms of their ceremonial houses.
- 10 As early as the first years of the 20th century, the Sepik aroused an interest that went beyond Germany's imperial power and colonial project. Following that of George Dorsey, a large-scale expedition was organized by Albert B. Lewis, who was at the time an assistant curator with the Chicago Field Museum of Natural History. After a lengthy

tour of the Pacific with several stops along the northern coast, his boat sailed 465 kilometers up the river between 9 and 16 August 1910. Lewis purchased enormous numbers of objects in the villages. Upon returning, he published a few studies on his collections and provided for their installation in the Field Museum's new rooms. Here, once again, history repeated itself, as his journal would not be published until 1998 (Welsch, 1998).

- 11 This quick introduction to three expeditions organized by museums allows us to point up a paradox: whereas these institutions hold – not to say hoard! – a considerable number of objects, the early collections were little known owing to historical circumstances. These objects, together with the information available about their origins, nevertheless made it possible to reconstruct a relatively complete picture of the region's material production. As several of the articles in the present volume show, exploiting the documentation from these expeditions allows some objects to be brought back to life.
- 12 Life on the river was not altered by the First World War. In the long run, change came when the Australian administration replaced that of Germany. Yet the former took a long while to establish. After the war, villages began to empty out, and many young men left to work on the plantations. They returned home knowing new things, a new communication language – New Guinea pidgin, today known as Tok Pisin – and in possession of new wealth. These departures probably slowed the production of objects. But whatever the case, collecting went on. Times had changed, and large-scale scientific expeditions were no longer the fashion, having been replaced by voyages organized by rich travelers or a few colonists, whose acquisitions enriched museum collections. The British Museum received a donation from Lord Moyne (see Bolton, this volume); the Australian Museum bought objects from Wauchope, a planter having settled on Hansa Bay (see Bolton, Barlow and Lipset); and Axel Bojsen-Moeller gave the Copenhagen Museum some 800 objects collected during his 1933-34 voyage. On the eve of World War Two, the musée de l'Homme received a deposit of objects collected by rich French art-lovers during a 1934-36 cruise on the Korrigane (Coiffier, 2001). A more original case is that of the War Collection recently deposited with the Melbourne Victoria Museum, as it is made up of objects acquired or seized by the Australians when they took control of the German part of New Guinea (Craig *et al.*, 2015).
- 13 During this period, a large number of photographs and films were taken of village life along the Sepik. For the record, let us mention the work of the Chicago Field Museum's Crane Pacific Expedition in 1928-29 and the expeditions organized in 1930 by Felix Speiser and Heini Hediger. The latter two researchers put together a collection for the Basel Ethnographic Museum and had the good fortune to film part of a male initiation. Their film shows how the crocodile masks swallow the boys and incise their skin with scarifications attesting to their visit to the mythical world of the ancestors.
- 14 The inter-war period was dominated by the work of Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead. Bateson would never publish a study on Sepik art, his writings on art being restricted to Bali (Coupaye, this volume), but he would compile highly detailed note cards on the some 600 pieces he collected (Lovelace, this volume). For her part, Margaret Mead put together collections on several sections of the river and published numerous studies on Sepik art. In 1938, the introductory volume to her monograph, *The Mountain Arapesh*, bore the explicit subtitle: *An importing culture* (Mead, 1938). With

this study, a more complex image of the Sepik emerged: its cultures could no longer be regarded as isolates but as part of a dynamic process of exchanges.

- 15 The Second World War and the years that followed were a time of silence. The Sepik, marked by the massive presence of Japanese forces, was binding its wounds. We know little of this historically important period except what the *kiap*, young Australians trained in the administration of the colonies, were willing to say in their memoirs or their patrol reports. From the 1950s on, the river once again became the site of intensive research. One of the first collectors was Paul Wirz, who, at the behest of Bühler, put his collection on display in Basel in 1954. Wirz and Bühler both stressed the artistic value of the pieces (Bühler and Wirz, 1954).³ Following Wirz's sudden death in Maprik in 1955, Bühler undertook his first voyage, in 1955-56. He was fascinated by the river and returned again in 1959, this time with Anthony Forge (Kaufmann, 2017). These two trips were a milestone not only with respect to the number and importance of the objects collected but also the problematics that emerged. Upon returning, Bühler published a detailed map of the styles found in the region (Bühler, 1960). Although it has often been emended, completed but also criticized (Craig, this volume), it remains an essential reference. Forge's river trip gave rise to a comparative study, published in 1965 (Forge, 1965), that would mark numerous subsequent works. In his text, Forge attempts to define the features shared by two neighboring peoples, the Abelam – where he conducted his own fieldwork – and the Iatmul, whose artistic forms differ radically. Astonishingly, Forge considers that, given the size of the societies and the magnitude of their production, the material culture of these two groups dominates the Sepik (Forge, 2017 [1986]: 162). In saying this, he cast a shadow over a large part of the other Sepik cultures! One wonders about such an exclusion as well as its consequences. It probably reflects a reality in the field in the 1960s-70s: in 1913 a Catholic mission was set up on Marienberg hill, a few miles from the mouth of the river; then in 1918, the presence of the Australian army instigated radical changes in the society and the loss of numerous traditions in Angoram, on the Lower Sepik. Since then, there has been an indisputable paucity of work on Lower Sepik, unlike other regions where traditions are more alive. For example, the groups in the Prince Alexander Range have been studied at different times by numbers of anthropologists (among others, Mead, Forge, Tuzin, Roscoe, Coupaye), as has been the Iatmul *naven* ritual, which has fascinated anthropologists ever since the publication of Gregory Bateson's book, in 1936 (see on this subject Houseman and Severi, 1994). Yet, as the articles in the present volume show, the Lower Sepik and the coastal region raise issues revolving around exchanges, identity and the manifestation of the ancestors, which turn out to be equally important to the understanding of the mechanisms basic to the Sepik groups (see Barlow, von Poser but also Bolton, this volume).
- 16 The 1950s and 60s, too, saw intense collecting activity, which was not limited to the Swiss. Among others: the expedition undertaken between 1953 and 1956 by Carel Groenevelt for the Rotterdam museum; that by Françoise Girard for the musée de l'Homme in 1955; that by Jean Guiart in 1961 for the purpose of constituting a collection for the new musée des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie in Paris; the works brought back by Meinhard Schuster and Eike Haberland for the Frankfurt museum (Haberland and Schuster, 1964). In 1968 Guiart brought out a small book commissioned by UNESCO to expose the region's art to a wider public audience (Guiart, 1968), while an important article by Schuster, published much later (Schuster, 1986), dealt with the variety of

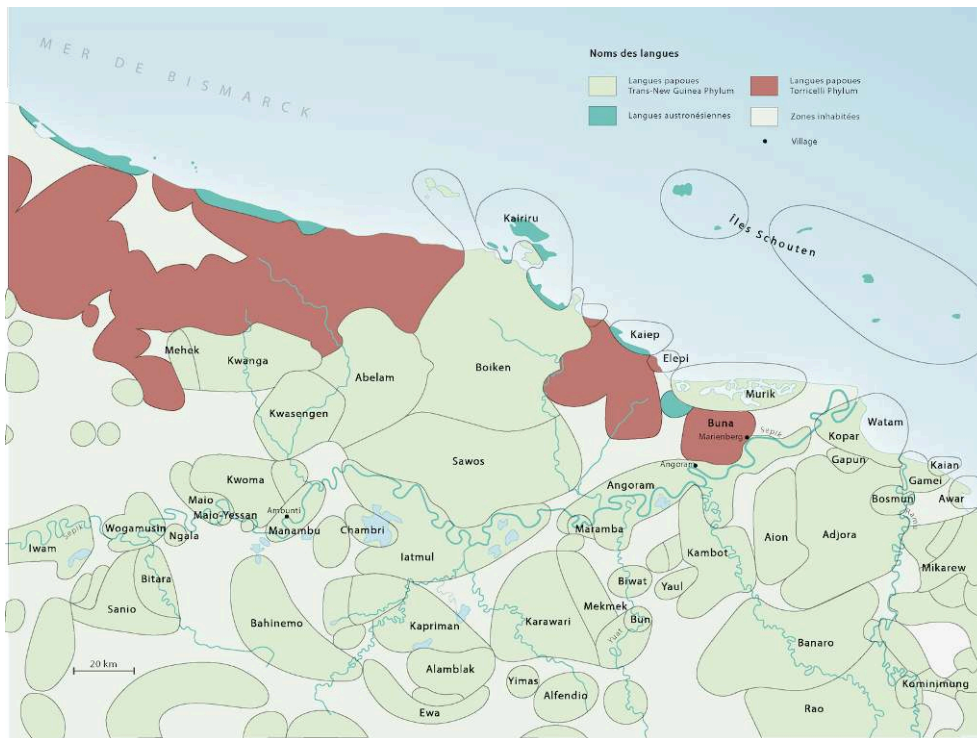
motifs and designs on collected shields from the Upper Sepik presented in a 1968 exhibition in Basel. Finally – but the list is far from exhaustive – let us mention Douglas Newton’s work in the Kwoma/Manambu region, which resulted in an exhibition in New York, in 1971 (Newton, 1971). In the same period, a hitherto largely unknown art form – even if a few rare objects had reached Western collections – was discovered in the Korewori region (Haberland, 1968; Kaufmann, 2003). This was the final surprise the River held in store.

- 17 And so in the years preceding the granting of Papua New Guinea’s Independence in 1975, the tenor of what we know about the region’s material culture underwent a change. A considerable amount of material, often attesting to important transformations in both production modes and iconography or types of objects, began arriving in the West, often accompanied by detailed information on their use or function.
- 18 This effervescence temporarily culminated in a significant but underestimated event: the 1982 opening of the “Rockefeller Wing” at New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art devoted to the “primitive arts”. On this occasion, the idea emerged of a cooperative effort between New York and Basel in the form of a conference on the Sepik, which was held in Basel in 1984. A large number of specialists, if not everyone who had ever worked in the valley, attended. The conference theme, “Tradition and Change”, indisputably heralded the inclusion of new problematics, but also the concern to use anthropology to respond to the problems created for the villagers ten years after independence by the slow transition to modernity (Lutkehaus *et al.*, 1999).
- 19 The Basel meeting was followed in 1986 by a second conference, held in the Spanish town of Mijas. It was organized by Anthony Forge. The discussion revolved around anthropology and cultural dynamics. Unfortunately the Proceedings were never published, but Forge’s introduction to the volume has now come out, more than thirty years after the event (Forge, 2017). The text is just as stimulating as the author’s 1965 article. Forge notes that, in the Sepik, the activities performed by men and women in the productive system are complementary. The men take care of organizing the rituals centered on the men’s houses (and ceremonially relevant crops), while the women ensure general food production and the children’s education⁴:
- “The Sepik is therefore arguably the most coherent area of the lowlands in the whole island where the old patterns of interaction and the production of ritual and its accessories remained, if not intact until the 1960s at least of considerable importance to the lives of its inhabitants who had retained everywhere an excellent knowledge of ritual and the details of its performance” (Forge, 2017 [1986]: 156).
- 20 For Forge, then, in the 1960s-70s it was still possible to study rituals in their traditional form. Yet, when the text was written (1986), Sepik societies were in the throes of mutation. The 1980s and 1990s would see a more constant and increasingly large-scale migration toward urban centers. Slowly but inexorably the region was emptying out. The question of the survival of “kastom” (tradition), including in the villages, was beginning to be raised. In a text following a stay with the Banaro – a Keram group – in 1989, Bernard Juillerat observed a considerable loss of memory, to such an extent that he spoke of “a historical ethnology” (Juillerat, 1993).

Contributions

- 21 In the final years of the 20th century, the Sepik had well and truly joined a new world, that of modernity. This is confirmed by the texts gathered in this volume. All or nearly all speak of social change and adaptation to the contemporary world. None show any sign of nostalgia for a bygone era. Anthropology has stepped through the looking glass of time. The study of earlier social forms has yielded to analysis of present-day practices. But this passage to modernity is also a challenge thrown at museums. The study of collections built for the most part in the first half of the last century implies that the new approaches include a historical perspective.
- 22 The contributions contained in this volume are divided into three sections, respectively: rituals, collections and future challenges. A fourth group extends the axes of reflection to new fields and to regions bordering the valley.

MAP 2 – Language groups of the Sepik-Ramu area



(Map Courtesy musée du quai Branly, Paris, © Thierry Renard)

Rituals and materiality

- 23 One of the mythical figures present in numerous groups on the Lower Sepik is that which the Murik call Nzari (she may be known by different names in other groups). Some myths tell that she came from upriver, others that she came from the coast. At once healer and midwife, she was at the origin of many aspects of the culture and landscape, which she helped shape.
- 24 Until recently, the importance of the figure of Nzari has been under-rated. Yet she plays a vital role, for she not only makes it possible to re-assess gender relations but

also to grasp the astonishing symbolic power of objects used or made by women. Barlow's text shows that women's power in the Murik Lakes region is based on food-giving at ceremonies organized by the men, a gift enabling the spouses to accumulate prestige. The women's power is also based on making plaited bags whose complex designs are first and foremost identity markers, even before being memory aids. Von Poser, for her part, analyzes clay pots, which Nzari taught the women in the Bosmun area to make. These pots are the expression of female identity; the women use them to stir sago starch into an edible jelly in the course of a mysterious coagulation metaphorically connected with gestation.

- 25 Contact with the modern world has brought about changes in these identity markers. Barlow describes transformations both in traditional exchanges between neighboring groups but also on the occasion of the recent entry into the tourist market. Building on Gell's work, von Poser shows that recently the symbolic investment has shifted from making objects to other material productions. In the Bosmun area, this affective investment seems to be more sensitive to contemporary changes than in the Murik Lakes region: the younger generations no longer know how to make clay pots, whereas the plaited bags found in the Murik Lakes region are still being produced today and play a central role in ceremonies celebrating funerals or changes in personal status but also in the local economy.
- 26 Nzari, the mythical heroine and founder of numerous aspects of the culture, continues to haunt the Lower Sepik. This tutelary figure, source of a range of social features but also of objects produced by women, allows the author to analyze the processes of resistance or adaptation to changes arising in geographically and culturally similar societies but whose different ecological environments shape their economy and social relations.
- 27 Garnier and Silverman deal with a burning question for Sepik anthropology: what do women know about the men's secrets? For Garnier, women know much more than they say. This is a paradox, as everyone knows that everyone knows, without wanting to admit it. Secrecy is probably a fiction. Indeed, women see many men's objects. Garnier and Silverman thus shift the dynamics of gender relations. Beyond this gender division lies the problem of knowing vs. seeing. Is seeing enough? Is not the important thing to know the names and stories attached to the objects? For Garnier, the women's indifference to men's secrets is not due to recent social changes, but the question remains up for debate.
- 28 A second group of articles deals more directly with change in reaction to demands of the charismatic Churches. Traditional societies were dominated by bush-spirits (Vávrová and Telban, this volume). Some of these spirits can be permanent residents, while others travel with groups. They appear in dreams, in which case their figures can then be carved and installed in the men's house where they are ceremonially given a name. Borut Telban thus shows how dream and reality stem from a single aspect, a spirit-image emanating both from the dream world and the real world. Belonging to two spaces gives them a power to forecast events. As Telban shows, these spirits, like any object (even a modern one), can exist only after having received a name. For a Sepik man, an object without a name is an empty shell. To name is to call into existence.
- 29 This conceptualization of the world has an unforeseen effect, to say the least, when belief in the Western God is adopted (Vávrová, this volume). Despite the villagers'

conversion to the charismatic movement, these dream-world spirits are still present. On the other hand, the Western God is both exclusive – while he can be reached by cell phone, only a very few know his – and not tied to a specific territory. Although he, too, knows the future, his capacity for prediction is sometimes called into doubt. A charismatic cure relies on prayer, that of the healers on the extraction of an object, which is visible proof of the cause of the sickness. Extraction of the object is indispensable to proving the success of the operation. The Western god suffers from a form of incompleteness with respect to the spirits: he does not provide any tangible sign.

- 30 This power of objects is at the heart of Bartole's study, which analyzes the action of a charismatic movement promising a bright future. The realization of this divine future depends on the apparition and then possession of a statue of the Virgin Mary, which, in the present case, does not appear. The absence is interpreted – and it can be thought that this was also the case in traditional societies – as the refusal to give. Now, the gift, which is a technique in Mauss's sense of the term, must be renewed periodically by touching the statue if it is to be effective. The power of touch gives the author the opportunity to closely analyze a new practice (can we speak of rite in this case?) that is widespread in the Sepik: the handshake between village groups to end a conflict.
- 31 These contributions allow us to re-think the place of the object in society. No longer in terms of its most quotidian materiality but of its power, which becomes part of a dynamic relationship between the object and its user through naming, seeing and touching. Analysis of the actions performed with objects, their manipulation, expands our understanding of what an object is: beyond its merely material components it is essential to include its relationship to the real body or the imagined spirit. In other words, in order to exist and assert its power, an object must have the help of the senses and of language.
- 32 Lambert-Bretière for her part introduces an entirely different aspect of modernity. She shows the effects on Kwoma society of the disappearance of the ritual songs connected with the yam ceremonies. These ritual songs, known by only a few men, are rarely performed. On one of her stays in the field, the author had the occasion to attend such a performance. Her description of the many recording devices set out on the table in front of the men's house where the ceremony was held alone shows the fear, recognized by the Kwoma themselves, of losing their knowledge, as well as their concern with transmitting it. This scene is also revealing, by their absence, of the position of women researchers in this society – as a woman she does not have access to the ritual site – but also the place of secrecy, as the songs cannot be published. The author further shows how modernity disrupts the relationship the society entertains with space and time. In effect, the men who know the songs live in urban centers, and the organization of the ceremonies depends on the temporality of the cities. Another space, mental as well as physical, is emerging.

Collecting and exhibiting

- 33 Over the last decades, the history of collections has attracted increasing attention. Museum curators, often experienced fieldworkers themselves, were frequently the mainstay. In order to establish the history of the voyages and collecting expeditions, they turned to the archives. This attentiveness to the history of objects coincided more

or less with the emergence of the idea that museums could be regarded as “contact zones”, as resource centers for the communities concerned. Bolton and Hellmich have shown in detailed case studies just how rich these two approaches can be when combined.

- 34 Three female figures provide the departure point for Bolton’s study. They are kept in three different museums, where the inventories have attributed them to the Lower Sepik without specifying their use or their meaning. Research to pin down their origin and their function resulted in a long study in which archival research was coupled with a return to the field. It was the job of the archives to detail the source of the objects against a backdrop of the history of the collecting expeditions, while the fieldwork was meant to establish their function. The lapse of time between collection and fieldwork – several decades – obviously often raises the question of recognition and interpretation, informants having a certain tendency to attribute to other groups those objects they do not recognize.
- 35 A mask collected in the village of Masandenei and held in San Francisco’s De Young Museum is the point of departure for Christina Hellmich’s study. The mask is a textbook case. According to different sources, it is one of the oldest objects from the Sepik. But since it left the territory, it has been replaced by four other masks, each with its own variations. The villagers consider all of them to be authentic, while Western specialists see them merely as simple copies. This example shows the relativity of the notion of authenticity. For the villagers, authenticity depends on receiving a name and having an iconography that corresponds to tradition; for the West, the criterion is age.
- 36 These last two articles raise the question of contemporary knowledge about old objects and shed new light on the role of memory. As one Iatmul artist remarked on a recent visit to San Francisco, when it comes to copying an object, remembering the mythology surrounding it is more important than having the object in front of one’s eyes. The role of memory obviously involves the question of the invention of forms, which was probably at work in former times. Whatever the case may be, this process is consistent with present-day knowledge, which, confronted with earlier interpretations, cannot be called into question.
- 37 Knowledge about objects is never frozen in time. It comes about through a slow process of accretion. Time-sensitive knowledge poses the problem of exploiting resources in order to accumulate and process data gathered in different eras by different persons with a view to merging them, if possible, into a coherent set. This hazardous but indispensable exercise was undertaken when it came time to constitute the *Basel Iatmul Catalogue of Objects*. Christin Kocher Schmid reports on this exploit here. The catalogue of the Gregory Bateson collection is studied in these pages by Antonia Lovelace. The two articles suggest the considerable advantage to be gained in confronting and synthesizing these works whose diffusion, unfortunately, for the time being has been quite narrow.
- 38 One might hope that recent technological advances will facilitate reaching a wider readership. Yet making data available online runs into numerous constraints: legal, such as ownership rights to images; scientific such as hierarchization of information; social, such as accessibility by all members of a society to objects whose use is still secret. Putting data online depends on museums’ willingness to network. But networking is not the only problem, as research on collections depends on the type of collections. There is a huge difference between a recent collection with only few old

pieces and an old collection whose objects number into the thousands. The interest of a small collection is that each object can be subjected to an intensive and open-ended reading; that of large collections, that they lend themselves to extensive research covering all aspects of a society.

- 39 All of which brings us to the sensitive but inevitable question of contemporary collecting practices. In response to a frequent criticism – pillaging and respect for local interlocutors – David Lipset exposes what he sees as a post-colonial mode of collecting. It is based on cooperation between researchers and informants, and supposes detailed knowledge of the site and of local social networks. Without glossing over anything, he shows that collecting depends on life’s uncertainties: his article relates his fieldwork with Barlow and Bolton in view of studying the collections from the Murik Lakes region held in the Australian Museum of Sydney. He does not dwell on the changes that have occurred, but we are clearly given to understand that it is not necessarily the objects sought at the beginning of the century that attract the attention of today’s collectors.

Looking to the future

- 40 This final remark concerns the stakes involved in museum acquisition policies. Should it look to the past, as is often the temptation, and acquire only old or traditional objects, or should it be open to contemporary expressions?
- 41 Silverman’s study deals precisely with objects invented in the past decades: “modern” paintings done on truck bodies or souvenir objects for tourists. Although truck art has been seen and photographed by numerous travelers, it has not attracted the attention of many researchers and has long been considered too anecdotal or “kitsch”. Our categories often alter our perception of things. The author begins with a more open-ended observation: instead of judging the value of these productions, he analyzes them as part of a new thought dynamic. Coming back to the question of levels of meaning, he shows that being part of the modern world means incorporating signs referring to past local history. If, when they paint idyllic landscapes, the Iatmul are not directly addressing today’s social and environmental conflicts, their works still reflect a critique of modernity.
- 42 And so Silverman’s text comes back once again to the perennial question of the migration of meanings, a question here revisited by Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin. To show the problems involved in the interpretation and adaptation of signs over time and space, she starts from the case of the *patola*, the Indian fabric imported to Indonesia in the 18th century. The example may seem anachronistic, but it provides a way to measure the distance between then and now, and opens onto a reflection on analytical methods. To be sure, the author once again raises the question of authenticity, but her approach is what might be called transversal. The notion cannot be applied to the contemporary dynamic of societies. Old objects, known to us thanks to the increasing speed with which information circulates, are re-appropriated at urban festivals, which are multiplying in the Sepik as in the rest of the South Pacific. In these displays, it is no longer a question of authenticity but of how forcefully the objects represent an identity.

Beyond the Sepik

- 43 The contributions collected in the final part of this volume both go beyond the valley and open onto often-neglected domains. Such is the case of music. This is an area dealt with by Raymond Ammann, a musicologist known for his work in Vanuatu and New Caledonia. His contribution focuses on three instruments used in the Sepik: hour-glass drums, slit-drums and transverse flutes. Ammann reminds us that studies of music can be counted on the fingers of one hand. This absence is all the more regrettable as studying the music of an area, here taking the isolated case of the Iatmul, can bring out the coherence of the thought system: the repetitive structure, like alternating musical patterns, can be seen as mirroring the dualist structures present throughout the valley. Like social structure, music in his opinion, is vital to defining “Sepikness”.
- 44 If Ammann’s article stresses the advantage of including the study of music in research programs, Barry Craig demonstrates that enlarging the corpus of objects challenges the very idea of stylistic areas. Craig presents a radical critique: after having noted that the source map was established by Alfred Bühler, who used large-scale carvings as his reference (Bühler, 1960),⁵ he shows that the stylistic areas vary with the object category. The study published in this volume is limited to those objects most likely to be used in exchanges, such as penis sheaths. Yet besides being explicitly gender related, these objects are also group identity markers. As intimate objects, one could wonder if they are actually present in the exchange networks or if it is only the designs used on them that circulate. Which in turn raises the question of representative criteria and their pertinence. As Craig notes, by dint of refining the analysis, there is the danger of ending up with a vast, impossible hodge-podge.
- 45 Markus Schindlbeck’s article deals with an important corpus of objects that has been forgotten by contemporary work: these are standing stones. Yet the analysis of these objects has haunted history, as ancient authors believed them to be both a marker of population expansion and objects connected with head-hunting. Schindlbeck goes back over the earlier studies and documents, showing that these stones are associated with group migrations and the foundation of villages. This is a fine example of a reading tied to a theory of the time – here accompanied by a subject as fascinating as it is sulfurous, head-hunting – occulting objects linked to the identity of the ancestors and the history of local group migrations.
- 46 Alexandra Aikhenvald examines the dynamics of linguistic borrowings. During her fieldwork, she noticed that the Manambu, a large group living on the river, have borrowed many words from Tok Pisin, whereas the Yalaku, who live inland and are few in number, only rarely turn to this lingua franca. For the author, this textbook case shows that a habitat open to exchanges, like that of the Manambu, is not the only factor determining the use of new words. Languages spoken by small groups resist better, as the awareness of the danger of identity loss is keener.
- 47 The last author in this section invites us to think about or rethink local societies. Coupaye returns to some theoretical questions connected with the analysis of works, taking the example of a group that was not included in the exhibition: the Abelam. He analyzes how, in the last few years, studies on the status of images and their interpretation, by Bateson and Gell, but also Forge, Tuzin and Kaufmann, to name only a few, start from an, a priori, simple twofold observation: there is not only a hiatus between the image and its referent, but local artists refuse to comment on the signs or

figures, and when they chance to name them, each artist often recognizes different entities. In the attempt to resolve the latter point, the idea gradually emerged that images correspond to the changeable and unpredictable nature of the ancestors' manifestation. This in turn raises the formidable question of the nature of the ancestor and the forms in which he or she appears in the world of the living, for instance in the form of envelopes – which are masks or carvings. One may also rightly ask what is the role of body painting in these manifestations, as the ancestor will incarnate only in a body that has been painted. As the author remarks, it is not so much the body as the primary envelope that matters, but the painting, which forms a second sheath. Like Russian dolls, this system of envelopes can be repeated again and again, the men's house becoming an envelope for all the images it contains and thus an ancestral body of unrivaled power. And so we find a formidably effective series of layers that allows numerous levels of reading.

- 48 All the articles gathered here are to a greater or lesser extent indebted to a long history of exploration, collecting, field data and exhibitions, a history marked by the disparity of our knowledge. If some groups located to the north of the river, like the Kwoma, the Abelam, the Boiken, or those living in the swamps of the Middle Sepik, like the Iatmul, the Chambri, or the Sawos, are known; other zones, like the region upstream from Ambunti, or the Lower Sepik, have been little explored. As deplorable as this situation may be, we must resign ourselves to the fact that these gaps will never be filled. Our knowledge of these societies as they were in the past will forever remain at best partial and at worst inexistent.
- 49 Yet this observation should not rule out contemporary work in the field or on collections. The articles gathered together in this special issue show the richness of such work, while setting out a number of axes and problematics for further research. Much remains to be done, though. Only exceptionally have the collections been published, analyzed and above all compared. And their online availability falls short of what it should be.
- 50 Well before Margaret Mead, Reche had remarked that the Sepik cultures were characterized by importation of material or immaterial goods from one group to another. The facility with which new objects or new rituals are absorbed is probably an important, if not a founding, factor of Sepikness. Yet the mechanisms and effects of such exchanges have been given short shrift. Their study needs to be refined. Studying a series of objects whose date and place of collection are known would make it possible to establish a chronology and perceive variations over time. Such a chronology would show just how static our present-day view of the Sepik still is.
- 51 From the first discovery of the Sepik, as von Luschan's programmatic text shows, the question of art has been central to the studies on the region. This is due to the fact that the Sepik was recognized early on as a place of exceptionally rich creativity. Without denying this dimension, it should not be forgotten that material culture requires a much broader approach. A simple analysis of forms does not account for the wealth of meanings the study of the materiality of things allows us to understand. As several of the articles in the present volume show, and to go back to an idea expressed in the brief "Instructions sommaires pour les collecteurs d'objets ethnographiques" in 1931,⁶ everyday objects, like all technical objects, are bearers of meaning. They can be the source of as complex a reading as that of an ancestor figure contained in the men's house. That is not the least of the Sepik's riches.

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NOTES

1. To be sure, this list is incomplete. The groups along the Sepik's tributaries are not represented, and some types of objects were probably not collected. But as gripping as the question of representativeness may be, it is too complex to go into here.

2. However a supplement containing the pieces found after the collections' transfer to the Dahlem museum was published in 1969 (Kelm, 1969).

3. Today this collection is housed in Amsterdam's Tropen Museum. It was published by the museum in 1959 (Wirz, 1959.)
 4. Forge seems to skip over, among others, the role of the men in making war! But already in the 1960s feuding was more of a memory than a reality.
 5. One of the direct applications was, for instance, the exhibition *The Art of the Sepik*, organized at the Chicago Institute of Art in 1971 by Allen Wardwell (Wardwell, 1971).
 6. Marcel Griaule wrote: "The commonest objects are those that teach the most about a civilization. A can of tinned goods, for example, is more characteristic of our societies than the most precious jewel or the rarest stamp. The collector should therefore not be afraid to gather even the lowliest and most disregarded of things. An object can be worthless in our eyes or in the eyes of a native and still be an inexhaustible source of information. (For example: household utensils, ropes knotted for some purpose or other)" (Griaule, 1931, pp. 8-9).
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