



Journal de la Société des Océanistes

142-143 | 2016

Du corps à l'image. La réinvention des performances culturelles en Océanie

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Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/jso/7528>

DOI: 10.4000/jso.7528

ISSN: 1760-7256

Publisher

Société des océanistes

Printed version

Date of publication: 31 December 2016

Number of pages: 179-192

ISSN: 0300-953x

Electronic reference

Harry Beran, « Nineteen « New Guinea » sculptures by a mystery hoaxer from the Gene van Grecken Collection », *Journal de la Société des Océanistes* [Online], 142-143 | 2016, Online since 15 December 2018, connection on 01 May 2019. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/jso/7528> ; DOI : 10.4000/jso.7528

Nineteen «New Guinea» Sculptures by a Mystery Hoaxer from the Gene van Grecken Collection

by

Harry BERAN*

ABSTRACT

In the 1960s Jean Guiart bought fifteen «New Guinea» woodcarvings from Gene van Grecken in Sydney for the National Museum of the Arts of Africa and Oceania in Paris and published nine of them. Some authorities on New Guinea art considered them forgeries and two of these advised Guiart of this but he rejected their judgement. The issue was referred to only once in print very briefly in a Sotheby's sales catalogue. In 1987, van Grecken offered a further seven «New Guinea» woodcarvings for sale at auction in Sydney. They are similar to those bought by Guiart and are also inauthentic. This essay illustrates twelve of the carvings van Grecken sold to Guiart in the 1960s and the seven carvings he offered for sale in 1987 and argues for the view that they are not forgeries but part of a hoax perpetrated by an Australian artist, who remains anonymous, perhaps to see whether experts on New Guinea art can tell genuine woodcarvings from pastiches.

KEYWORDS: material culture, woodcarvings, forgeries, hoax, New Guinea

RÉSUMÉ

Dans les années 1960, Jean Guiart a acheté quinze sculptures sur bois « Nouvelle-Guinée » de Gene van Grecken à Sydney pour le musée nationale d'Afrique et d'Océanie à Paris et a publié neuf d'entre eux. Des autorités sur l'art de Nouvelle-Guinée les ont considérées comme contrefaçons et deux de ces derniers ont donné des conseils sur ce sujet à Guiart qui a rejeté leur jugement. La question a été mentionnée seulement une fois en noir sur blanc très brièvement dans un catalogue des ventes de Sotheby. En 1987, van Grecken a encore proposé à la vente aux enchères sept sculptures sur bois de « Nouvelle-Guinée » à Sydney. Elles sont semblables à celles achetées précédemment par Guiart et pas plus authentiques. Cet article illustre douze des sculptures que van Grecken a vendu à Guiart dans les années soixante et les sept mises en vente en 1987 et expose les raisons pour lesquelles elles ne sont pas des contrefaçons mais un canular monté par un artiste australien resté anonyme, peut-être pour voir si les experts en art de Nouvelle-Guinée pouvaient distinguer les sculptures véritables des pastiches.

MOTS-CLÉS : culture matérielle, sculptures sur bois, contrefaçons, canular, Nouvelle-Guinée

Fifteen woodcarvings sold by Gene van Grecken to Jean Guiart in 1966

In 1963 Jean Guiart published *The Arts of the South Pacific*, the first survey devoted entirely to

the material arts of this region. Three years later he visited Gene van Grecken, a Sydney tribal art dealer and collector, and bought fifteen woodcarvings from him for the National Museum of the Arts of Africa and Oceania in Paris (NMAAO) now incorporated into the Musée du Quai Branly.¹

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1. This essay was written in July 2006 and revised in April 2011. A number of minor corrections were made in October 2016. I am grateful to a number of colleagues for discussing the ideas in this essay with me or commenting on drafts of it, to Yves Le Fur for showing me the objects Guiart bought from van Grecken for the NMAAO, and to Gene van Grecken for

In 1967 Guiart published nine of these carvings (Ills 1-9 in the present essay) in an article « Art primitif et “structures” » and claimed they demonstrate that Sepik artworks have far greater stylistic variability than is generally recognised. In 1969 he republished seven of them (Ills 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 8, and 9 in this essay) in another article, « The Concept of Norm in the Art of Some Oceanic Societies », and claimed they show that the borders between Sepik style regions are much more fluid than is generally thought.

Between these years, Guiart (*et al.*, 1968) included eight of the fifteen pieces he bought from van Grecken in 1966 in an exhibition entitled *Art d'Océanie* shown at the Nouveau Musée du Havre. Only one of them, that in Ill. 1 in this essay, was illustrated in the catalogue; namely, on its cover. Six of the eight carvings had been published in the 1967 essay (Ills 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, and 8 in this essay); the other two included in the exhibition (Ills 10 and 11 in this essay) are published in Guiart's book of 2003.²

In Guiart's essay of 1967, one of the objects is recorded as having come from the collection of Gene van Grecken,³ one from that of Captain Godenev, Director of the Matson Line, four from that of Ernest Wauchope, Hansa Bay, one from that of Franz Werner, Melbourne, and two from that of Colonel Woodman, the first district officer stationed at Ambunti.⁴ No doubt, this information was given to Guiart by van Grecken.

Some readers of Guiart's essays, including David Moore and Peter White of the Anthropology Department at the Australian Museum, thought the carvings published in them were forgeries. In their letter to Guiart of 28. November 1968, they wrote with regard to the 1967 essay « we venture to suggest that some or all of these items may not be of native workmanship ». They offered a number of reasons for this suggestion. One was that none of the specimens in the Australian Museum's extensive Melanesian collection at all resembled the pieces in question; not even the flute-stoppers and limegourd-stoppers collected for the museum by Wauchope on the Sepik. Nor could they find anything like them in the literature. They advised Guiart that they had consulted S[tephen] Kellner, S[tan] Moriarty, D[ouglas] Newton, and A. [Tony] Tuckson – all now deceased – and all agreed that « your spe-

cimens are not characteristic of the regions to which they are attributed ».

In fact Douglas Newton, in his letter to Peter White of 5. November 1968, had expressed himself more strongly, writing that he was certain the pieces were forgeries.

Moore and White also mentioned in their letter to Guiart:

« You may not be aware that there is a very skilful forger of ethnographic works of art operating in Australia. It is strongly suspected here that this forger has produced many works of art, excellent in their own right, with close stylistic similarities to ethnographic art from various parts of the world. »

Exercising caution, they drew no connection between this « forger » and the pieces Guiart had bought from van Grecken.

In a second letter, dated 16. April 1969, Moore and White advised Guiart that in response to their enquiries, H.E. Woodman had told them that he did not recognise the two pieces attributed to his collection as having been his and that A.M. Godenev had told them that he was neither a captain nor a director of the Matson Line but Master on the S.S. *Ventura* of that company and did not have a collection from which the piece attributed to him could have come. By 1969 Wauchope and Werner were no longer alive.

Van Grecken has pointed out to me that the advice regarding Go(r)denev involves a confusion between two persons with similar names. He showed me an old letter regarding the sale of Oceanic artworks, dated 29. December 1957 and signed by Captain J. Godenev, Director, on Matson Line stationary. He said that the carving he sold to Guiart was from J. Godenev, not A.M. Godenev.

Guiart, in his reply to Moore and White of 3. May 1969, rejected their suggestion that the objects he had published were inauthentic. He told them that he was not surprised that the provenances of some of the objects he had bought seemed to be incorrect, that there was no proof that the objects were forgeries, and that stylistic considerations regarding their authenticity were inconclusive as there were too many New Guinea objects in museums that were unknown and unpublished. He wrote that he had been dealing with New Guinea objects since 1944 and that, if

showing me his collection in 1997 and 2003 and a number of discussions between November 2005 and February 2006. I am especially indebted to van Grecken for generously sharing information with me and correcting mistakes in earlier drafts of the essay, although he is not in sympathy with its aims, and to Jean Guiart for extensive comments on a draft of the essay in letters dated 28. February, 15. March, 19. March, and 27. June 2006 and for sending me a copy of his book of 2003.

2. The 1968 catalogue does not provide the registration numbers of the pieces borrowed from the NMAAO; however the descriptions and measurements stated in the catalogue permit their identification. Ills 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 10, and 11 in this essay correspond to those listed in the catalogue as Nr 38, 36, 37, 26, 27, 6, 7, and 8 respectively.

3. According to the NMAAO catalogue card for this item (Ill. 1 in this essay), it was acquired by van Grecken from Mel Ward, Meadlow Baths Museum.

4. Barry Craig has mentioned to me that the information about Woodman needs a correction. The first district officer to be stationed at Ambunti was R.A. Woodward, in 1924. Lieut-Colonel H.E. Woodman was an assistant district officer at Wewak in 1927 (Craig, 1996: 5).



ILLUSTRATION 1. – MdQB 72.1966.14.2 (previously MNAO 66.14.2). 30 cm high, negative 66-112. NMAAO registration card: no function recorded, Yuat River, ex Mel Ward Collection. Guiart (1967: Fig. 2; 1969: Plate 61): Yuat River, top of lime spatula. Guiart *et al.* (1968: exhibit Nr 38, front cover): Yuat River, standing figure. (© Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac. Photo Jacques Germain)⁵

the pieces in question were forgeries, their creator would have to be an « artistic genius ».⁶

None of Guiart's critics published their views and in an exhibition catalogue of 1975, written by Marie-Claire Bataille, François Lupu, and Jean-Michel Chazine, with Guiart's assistance, four of the pieces ex van Grecken were published once again (Ills 3, 4, 5, and 9 in this essay) as genuine Sepik carvings.

Of the fifteen pieces Guiart bought from van Grecken in 1966, nine were published by him in 1967 and had their authenticity challenged by a number of experts (Ills 1-9 in this essay). Two more were included in the 1968 exhibition, but not illustrated in the catalogue, and they too look inauthentic (Ills 10 and 11). A twelfth carving is also of dubious authenticity and is shown in Ill.

12. Below, these twelve artworks are referred to as Group A.⁷ The remaining three pieces are not discussed in this essay. Two pieces, a Huon Gulf betelnut mortar (NMAAO 66-14.6) and a New Ireland *malagan* sculpture (NMAAO 66-14.15), are omitted because they are authentic Melanesian artworks. The third carving, a « Maori » fork (NMAAO 66-14.14), is left aside, despite being a pastiche, because it is carved in a Maori style. Its discussion would complicate this essay unduly.

In 1976, some of the woodcarvings Guiart had published in his 1967 essay were on permanent display at the NMAAO. When Christian Kaufmann and Jean Guiart viewed them together in March of that year, Guiart still expressed the view that the pieces demonstrated the originality of individual New Guinea woodcarvers. Kaufmann voiced doubts about their authenticity but Guiart rejected them. The objects remained on display until the early 1980s (Christian Kaufmann, 7. Feb. 2006: personal communication).

Philippe Peltier has also had doubts about the authenticity of the pieces in Ills 1-12 since he first saw them. These doubts have increased considerably in recent years, as the patina of some of them has come to look more and more « strange » and unlike that of authentic pieces from the Sepik region (2. and 29. March 2006: personal communications).

In print, the whole issue has been alluded to only once; namely, when Carlo Monzino offered for sale a « ceremonial lime stick, Yuat River, Biwat » at Sotheby's, New York, on 10. November 1987, as Lot 126. He had acquired the piece from Wayne Heathcote, who had bought it from van Grecken. To squash any suggestion that this object, offered with an estimate of US \$ 100 000 to 120 000, had been made by van Grecken, the catalogue entry said that it was

« a remarkable and unique work of art by a brilliant artist who managed to combine ...color, forms and volumes in a masterful synthesis » and that « van Grecken [had] ...probably used it as a model for a large series of copies which were published a[t] a later date (Guiart, 1967 and 1969). »

The second comment in the catalogue invites a number of responses. First, the pieces Guiart had bought from van Grecken and published are by no stretch of the imagination « copies » of the « ceremonial lime stick ». None resembles it and each is an original creation different from every other. Second, the catalogue entry suggests

5. Editor's note. –Illustrations 1-12 are © Musée du quai Branly-Jacques Chirac. Photos Jacques Germain.

6. I am grateful to Jim Specht for mentioning this correspondence to me and to Peter White and especially Jan Brazier for locating it in the Australian Museum archives. The reference is AN 91/31, Anthropology Division - Correspondence with Individuals. Item 14 Prof. J. Guiart 1969-71.

7. In 1976, Guiart bought another fifteen woodcarvings from van Grecken (NMAAO 76.1.1 – 15). Most are clearly genuine Melanesian artworks but two or three seem not to be authentic. Their inclusion here would not throw much extra light on the issues under discussion.



ILLUSTRATION 2. – MdQB 72.1966.14.8 (previously MNAO 66.14.8). 38 cm high, negative 66-114. NMAAO registration card: Sepik River, flute stopper, ex Wauchope Collection. Guiart (1967: Fig. 3; 1969, Plate 62): probably Yuat River, top of lime spatula. Guiart *et al.* (1968: exhibit Nr 36): Yuat River, flute stopper



ILLUSTRATION 3. – MdQB 72.1966.14.3 (previously MNAO 66.14.3). 39 cm high, negative 66-115. NMAAO registration card: no function or locality recorded, ex Wauchope Collection. Guiart (1967: Fig. 4): Middle Sepik, top of lime spatula. Guiart *et al.* (1968, exhibit Nr 37): Yuat River, standing figure. Guiart (1969: Plate 65): ?Middle Sepik or Lower Yuat River, lime spatula. Bataille *et al.* (1975): Yuat River, lime-container stopper

that van Grecken had made the « copies » Guiart published, but provides no evidence to support the suggestion. Third, the euphemism « copies » hides the fact that the catalogue comment implies that van Grecken had engaged in deception in selling the pieces to Guiart. The comment implies this as he had sold the carvings referred to, not as his own work, but as New Guinea pieces from the collections of Godenev, Wauchope, Werner, and Woodman, as indicated in Guiart's 1967 essay.⁸ Fourth, and most important: are the objects published in Guiart's essays of 1967 and 1969 indeed not genuine New Guinea artworks? If so, did van Grecken in fact make them? And, if they are not genuine, are they forgeries, as is generally assumed in tribal art circles, or are they part of a hoax?

There is a great difference between a forger and a hoaxer. A forger hopes that his deception is never discovered because he wants to benefit from it. In contrast, a hoaxer normally discloses at some stage that he has engaged in a humorous

or mischievous deception because he has other motives; for example, he may wish to show that so-called experts do not have as much expertise as they think they have.

The forger Han van Meegeren only admitted making paintings in the style of Vermeer and selling them as genuine works by this artist when faced with a gaol sentence for exporting a national treasure to Hermann Göring during World War II (Dutton, 1983). In contrast, James McAuley and Harold Stewart voluntarily disclosed their literary deception – their hoax – within a few months of committing it in 1944. In one of the greatest literary hoaxes ever, they had composed what they considered very bad poems in the modernist style they abhorred, had invented Ern Malley as their late author, and had sent them to Max Harris, the editor of the Australian literary magazine *Angry Penguins*, who

8. In Guiart's 1967 essay, only one of the nine woodcarvings he had bought from van Grecken is shown as having come from the latter (Fig. 2 in Guiart's essay; Ill. 1 in this essay). In his 1969 essay, van Grecken is not mentioned at all. The catalogue cards for the items at the NMAAO record that all of them were purchased from van Grecken. I am indebted to Philippe Peltier for sending me copies of the NMAAO cards, photocopies of photographs of the objects, and the new registration numbers in the Musée du Quai Branly.



ILLUSTRATION 4. – MdQB 72.1966.14.4 (previously MNAO 66.14.4). 36 cm high, negative 66-120. NMAAO registration card: no function recorded, Ambunti, ex Woodman Collection. Guiart (1967: Fig. 5): Middle Sepik, top of lime spatula. Bataille *et al.* (1975): Ambunti, lime-container stopper



ILLUSTRATION 5. – MdQB 72.1966.14.7 (previously MNAO 66.14.7). 37 cm high, negative 66-119. NMAAO registration card: flute or lime-container stopper, Sepik River, ex Woodman Collection. Guiart (1967: Fig. 6): Middle Sepik, top of lime spatula. Guiart (1969: Plate 67): Lower Yuat River, lime spatula. Bataille *et al.* (1975): without precise localisation, lime-container stopper

promptly published them as the works of a fine previously unknown poet (Heyward, 2003).

Seven woodcarvings sold by Gene van Grecken at auction in 1987

When I started work on this essay, it was obvious to me that one way of trying to find answers to the questions raised was to interview van Grecken. However, before doing so I wanted to form my own judgement whether the objects under discussion are genuine or not, if not genuine whether they are forgeries or part of a hoax, and whether they are likely to be by one hand or a number of hands.

In order to do this, I examined my photographs of a group of « New Guinea » carvings which I had viewed some years ago, long before I became aware of the Guiart essays of 1967 and 1969. The seven objects in the group (Ills 13-19) were offered for sale on 22. June 1987 at J. R. Lawson, the Sydney auction house now opera-

ting as Lawson-Menzies.⁹ They are referred to as Group B below. I was told by Lawson's that the vendor did not want his name disclosed but I have since learnt that they were offered for sale by van Grecken (see below).

It is worth quoting the catalogue descriptions of them, which, it seems, were provided by van Grecken:¹⁰

[Lot] 95 A fertility amulet in the form of a female ancestral figure, Humboldt Bay ... [Ill. 19 in this essay.]

[Lot] 96 A very early carved wood sculpture of figures love making, Asmat ... [Ill. 16 in this essay.]

[Lot] 99 A carved wood flute stopper in the form of a female ancestral figure, the stylised head of a sea eagle ... Humboldt Bay ... [Ill. 14 in this essay.]

[Lot] 100 A carved wood flute stopper in the form of a male ancestral figure with carved eagle surmount ... Humboldt Bay ... [Ill. 13 in this essay.]

[Lot] 101 A carved wood flute stopper in the form of a male ancestral figure, Humboldt Bay ... [Ill. 18 in this essay.]

9. The photographs were taken during the viewing at Lawson's, with Lawson's permission.

10. Lawson's solicitors, Henry Davis York, advised the solicitor of the buyer of three of the objects in their letter of 18. January 1988 that Lawson's had « catalogued [the items] ... in accordance with the vendor's description » of them. The letter has been given to me by the buyer of the objects.

[Lot] 102 An extremely rare, carved wood free standing figure, squatting and hermaphroditic, the elf-like face with phallic nose ...Hunstein Mountains... [Ill. 15 in this essay.]

[Lot] 103 Lake Sentani - a phallic symbol depicting two generations, extremely rare ... [Ill. 17 in this essay.]

Knowing then even less than now about New Guinea art outside the Massim region, I thought they were outstanding New Guinea pieces and sent photos of them to Anthony Meyer in case he was interested in bidding for them. He was not, as he considered them forgeries.

All seven were consigned for sale by van Grecken. When I checked with Lawson's a few years ago, they could not confirm that he was the vendor because they no longer had the documents relating to 1987 sales. However, I have a letter, mentioned in footnote 10, which indicates that the pieces in Lots 100, 101, and 103 (Ills 13, 18, and 17 respectively) were consigned by van Grecken. He has told me himself that he consigned those in Lots 96, 99 and 102 (Ills 16, 14, and 15 respectively). I have no direct evidence that the carving in Lot 95 (Ill. 19) was consigned by him, but it is stylistically closely related to that in Lot 101 (Ill. 18) and had the same very high estimate as the other pieces consigned by him.

Lot 95 (Ill. 19) sold to a Sydney collector who still has it at the time of writing. Lots 100, 101, and 103 (Ills 13, 18, and 17 respectively) sold to a Sydney dealer who resold them later.¹¹ Lots 99 and 102 (Ills 14 and 15) probably sold but I do not know to whom. Lot 96 (Ill. 16) did not sell and is still in van Grecken's collection at the time of writing.

When the buyer of Lots 100, 101, and 103 (Ills 13, 18, and 17) sought a valuation for them from Galleries Primitif in Sydney, the gallery declined to give one because, they wrote, « in our opinion, they do not appear to be authentic »¹². Two other well-known experts also declared the objects forgeries.¹³ Attempts to return the pieces to Lawson's reached a point where Lawson's legal representatives suggested that a « conference might be held at its [Lawson's] office with Mr Van Grecken [presumably as vendor of the objects], Lawson's representatives, your client and such expert as he may care to bring with him ». ¹⁴ However, due to rising legal costs the buyer abandoned the attempt to recover his money before the meeting was held.

All the nineteen carvings discussed in this essay were sold or offered for sale by van Grecken. Few, if any, experts with a deep knowledge of New Guinea art would now regard them as genuine tradi-

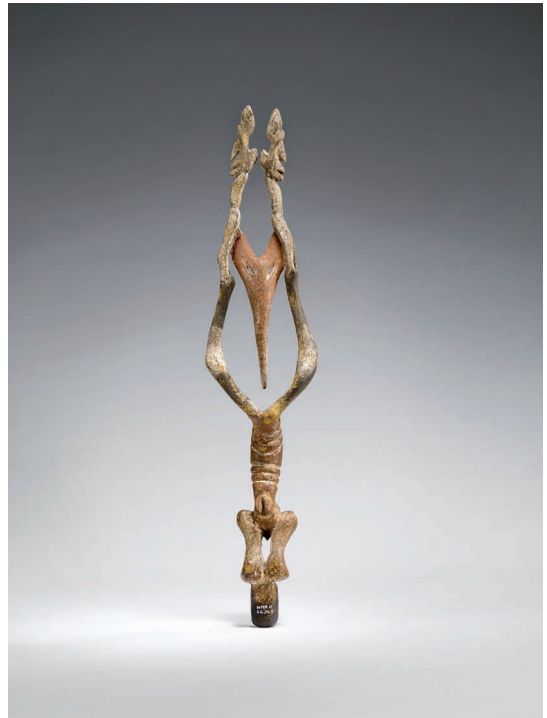


ILLUSTRATION 6. – MdQB 72.1966.14.9 (previously MNAO 66.14.9). 36 cm high, negative 66-113. NMAAO registration card: flute stopper, Sepik River, ex Wauchope Collection. Guiart (1967: Fig. 7; 1969: Plate 66): Middle Sepik, (top of) lime spatula. Guiart *et al.* (1968: exhibit Nr 26): Sepik River, flute stopper

tional woodcarvings from this island. Of course much more is now known about New Guinea art than in the 1960s when Guiart published his two essays. But even then the experts mentioned above considered them inauthentic.

Stylistically, the great majority of the carvings fall into two groups. One group is composed of figures with projecting buttocks and generally distorted body parts (esp. Ills 1, 3, 7, 9, 13, 14, 18, and 19), the other of graceful openwork carvings in which the open spaces in the interior of the sculptures provide much of the sculptural effect (Ills 8, 10, 11, 15, and 16). The piece in Ill. 6 has both attributes and unites the two groups.

The nineteen carvings have a number of features in common that distinguish them from authentic New Guinea artworks and make it likely that they were made by one person.

First, in each group there is at least one piece in which sex is treated in a way that is foreign to

11. In 2002, I bought one of these pieces, that in Ill. 18, from a private collector when I recognised it as one of the figures I had photographed at Lawson's in 1987.

12. Letter from Galleries Primitif, dated 24. November 1987 and signed by the late Leo Fleischmann, now in my possession.

13. A letter from the buyer's solicitors to Lawson's, dated 24. July 1987 mentions that « several independent tribal art experts ...advised that the ...lots are clearly forgeries » and another letter from them, to Lawson's solicitors, dated 2. February 1988, names three experts, including Leo Fleischmann. The letters are in my possession.

14. Letter from Henry Davis York, solicitors acting for Lawson's, dated 18. March 1988, now in my possession.



ILLUSTRATION 7. – MdQB 72.1966.14.10 (previously MNAO 66.14.10). 29 cm high, negative 66-111. NMAAO registration card: flute stopper, Sepik River, ex Wauchope Collection. Guiart (1967: Fig. 8): Middle Sepik, top of lime spatula

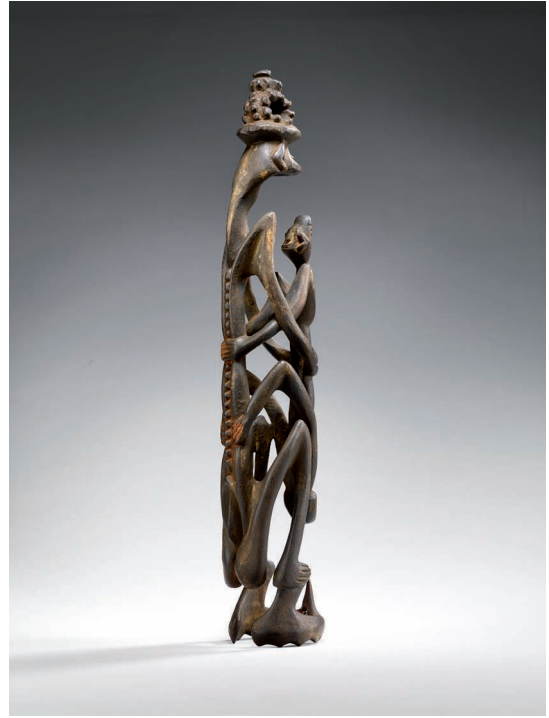


ILLUSTRATION 8. – MdQB 72.1966.14.11 (previously MNAO 66.14.11). 42.5 cm high, negative 66-116. NMAAO registration card: no function recorded, Asmat, ex Franz Werner Collection. Guiart (1967: Fig. 9): South-east coast West Irian, sculpture

traditional New Guinea art. This can be seen in the pieces in Ills 9, 16 and 19. The human figure of Group A in Ill. 9 is under attack from creatures that appear to be pecking at various parts of its body. One of the creatures is pecking at the figure's large protruding tongue, another at its large penis. The human figure of Group B in Ill. 19 holds its vulva wide open suggesting sexual defiance or an invitation to sexual intercourse. The piece is highly reminiscent of a carved stone figure holding its vulva open on a Norman church at Kilpeck, Herefordshire, England (Ill. 20).¹⁵ Another piece of Group B is shown in Ill. 16. It could be taken for a stylised praying mantis but, on closer inspection, it can also be seen as two stylised human figures positioned to have oral sex in the 69 position.

While fertility images are important in traditional New Guinea art and images of sex organs, sexual intercourse, pregnancy, and mother-and-child relations are part of its artistic repertoire

(Dirk Smidt in Friede, 1995, Vol. II: 45-46), sexual sadism or masochism, sexual invitation or defiance, and oral sex are not.¹⁶

Second, in both groups of objects there are pieces that are more fragile and structurally less sound than is normal for mainland New Guinea carvings intended to last for some time. The neck of the half-human and half-avian figure of Group A in Ill. 7 is not strong enough to support the large head securely. The figure of Group B in Ill. 13 is also structurally unsound. The bird at the back of the figure is attached to the head by too thin a piece of wood and the figure's arms are too distant from its trunk to withstand use by villagers. Indeed, the bird may well have been carved separately from the figure and attached to it. In contrast, mainland New Guinea carvings are normally carved from one piece of wood and tend to be structurally sound to minimise the chance of damage.¹⁷

15. This is a so-called *Shelah-na-gig* figure. According to John Sharkey (1975), such figures are common in Irish castles and churches and are representations of the Celtic goddess of creation and destruction. Jørgen Anderson (1977), who also reproduces this carving, proposes that they are protective figures.

16. Group sex and fellatio are rendered in some New Guinea woodcarvings made for the 'tourist' trade, such as those made in the Trobriand Islands, but that is another matter altogether.

17. These remarks are intended to apply, not to the highly fragile *malagan* carvings of New Ireland made from a light wood and intended for use in a single ceremony, but to the woodcarvings of the wider Sepik, Lake Sentani, and Asmat regions (the putative origin of the sculptures discussed in this essay), which are intended for repeated use.

Third, none of the pieces seems to have close counterparts among authentic New Guinea pieces. Traditional New Guinea artworks come in types. Lime spatulas can serve as an example. Within each style region where they are used, there are likely to be a number of designs of spatulas and of most of the designs a number of examples are extant.

There are some traditional New Guinea artworks from the early contact period that are unique and have solid provenances. A unique piece may be the only example that survives of a type of objects or of a particular variation of this type. But such unique pieces are relatively rare. In short, as Kaufmann (Greub, 1985: 35) notes with regard to Sepik art, « (a)lmost every individual piece can be assigned to a larger or smaller group of similarly crafted works. Such groups, despite individual differences, speak a common language ».

In contrast, each of the nineteen pieces comprising Groups A and B appears to lack a close counterpart among authentic New Guinea artworks. The significance of this lies in the fact that each group was offered for sale on one occa-

sion. It would be an extraordinary coincidence if a whole bundle of authentic pieces lacking counterparts in well-provenanced collections turned up together on one occasion - and this indeed twice.

Fourth, while some of the pieces are stylistically related to pieces of particular New Guinea style regions, each group contains pieces which, while having a vague relationship to New Guinea sculptures in general, have no direct relationship to the style of any particular style region.

The style of the anthropomorphic sculpture of Group B in Ill. 17 is reminiscent of the Lake Sentani style but it is unclear what its function could have been. The projection at the bottom of the carving suggests it could be a flute stopper but there are no flute stoppers in the Lake Sentani region. As already mentioned, the carving of Group B in Ill. 16 can be interpreted as an Asmat praying mantis but the Asmat do not carve human figures performing oral sex, let alone in the 69 position. A slightly similar carving of Group A (Ill. 8) is attributed by Guiart to the south-east coast of Irian Jaya - now (West) Papua - but it is unclear what its function could have been. An anthropomorphic carving of Group A (Ill. 1) is attributed by Guiart to the Yuat River area and the style of the arms of the figure and perhaps of the nose do resemble the style of figures from

ILLUSTRATION 9. – MdQB 72.1966.14.1 (previously MNAO 66.14.1). 42 cm high, negative 66-133. NMAAO registration card: no function or locality recorded, ex Godenev Collection.

Guiart (1967: Fig. 10): Middle Sepik, ?top of flute stopper.

Guiart (1969: Plate 68): Middle Sepik or Chambri Lakes, ?lime spatula, male image covered with birdlike, crawling, small beings.

Bataille *et al.* (1975): Yuat River, masculine figure pecked by birds

ILLUSTRATION 10. – MdQB 72.1966.14.12 (previously MNAO 66.14.12). 28.5 cm high, negative 66-127 b.

NMAAO registration card: no function recorded, Asmat.

Guiart *et al.* (1968, exhibit Nr 7): Asmat, seated figure. Guiart (2003: 142): Hunstein Mountains?





ILLUSTRATION 11. – MdQB 72.1966.14.13 (previously MNAO 66.14.13). 58.5 cm high, negative 66-117. NMAAO registration card: no function recorded, Asmat.
Guiart *et al.* (1968, exhibit Nr 8): Asmat, openwork woodcarving.
Guiart (2003: 144)



ILLUSTRATION 12. – MdQB 72.1966.14.5 (previously MNAO 66.14.5). 45.5 cm high, negative 66-118. NMAAO registration card: no function recorded, Ambunti added (in pencil, ex Woodman Collection)

there. But the elongated neck and elongated, highly stylised head of the figure are unlike anything else from this area.

However, most of the pieces of the two groups of carvings are not carved in the style of particular culture regions. Many are vaguely reminiscent of Sepik River carvings; some borrow individual stylistic elements from particular culture regions; others, for example the pieces in Ills 10 and 15, appear to be stylistically entirely original in a surrealist manner.

Fifth, it is unclear what the function of the pieces with short pegs could have been. This is reflected in the different descriptions some of them are given by the vendor and those who published them. It seems that van Grecken described the carvings with short pegs at the bottom in Ills 5, 6, 13, and 14 as flute stoppers when he sold them or offered them for sale.¹⁸ (The object in Ill. 1 is another with a short peg but its function is not recorded on the museum registration card.) However, Guiart in his 1967 and 1969 essays described those in Ills 1,

5, and 6 as the tops of lime spatulas and Bataille *et al.* in their 1975 catalogue described the carving in Ill. 5 as a lime-container stopper.

Most Sepik lime spatulas are long, slim, and carved from one piece of wood (for example, Friede, 2005, Plates 194, 197; Kelm, 1966-68, Vol. III, Ills 224, 481, 482; Wardwell, 1971, Ills 123) or bone (Friede, 2005, Plate 192; Greub, 1985, Ills 38, 39; Grunne, 1979, Fig. 3.20; Wardwell, 1971, Ills 124, 125). A smaller number have a small wooden top to which a long slim bone or wooden blade is attached (Kelm, 1966-68, Vol. III, Il. 483; Wardwell, 1971, Ill. 85).¹⁹

In principle, the carvings in Ills 1, 5, 6, 13, and 14 in this essay could be the tops of lime spatulas to which blades had never been attached. But, judging by the examples in Kelm and Wardwell just mentioned, they are too large and too bulky to have been carved for this purpose.

On the other hand, their pegs are too small for them to have served as stoppers for lime containers or flutes. Two lime-container stoppers in the literature that show the complete peg have pegs measuring approximately 9 cm (Friede, 2005, Plate 188; Kelm, 1966-68, Vol. II, Ill. 124). Ten

18. I am assuming that the function of the objects recorded on the NMAAO registration cards for the objects bought from van Grecken reflects information provided by him. To distinguish between the information probably supplied by van Grecken and judgements expressed by Guiart and Bataille *et al.* in their publications, all the information is recorded in the captions of the illustrations of the objects in this essay.

19. Wardwell incorrectly describes the objects in Ills 85, 124, and 125 as « lime tube stoppers ».



ILLUSTRATIONS 13-14. – Whereabouts unknown; Lawson's sale, 22. June 1987, Lot 100 and Lot 99. Approx. 33 cm high. Humboldt Bay, flute stoppers (© photo Harry Beran in 1987)

flute stoppers in the literature that show the complete peg have pegs measuring between approximately 4.3 and 14 cm, with the longer pegs predominating (Friede, 2005, Plates 176, 238, 249, 250, 257; Greub, 1985, Ill. 46; Schmitz, n.d., Plates 88, 90; Wardwell, 1971, Ills 50, 100).²⁰ In contrast, the pegs of the sculptures in Ills 1, 5, 6, 13, and 14 measure between approximately 1.5 and 2.9 cm.²¹ It seems unlikely that such short pegs would keep carvings measuring between 30 and 37 cm securely in place in bamboo tubes.

So, there are good reasons for the view that the objects illustrated are not genuine New Guinea carvings and for thinking that they were made by one person. And, moreover, a person familiar with surrealism, Western sexual practices, and *Shelah-na-gig* figures; that is, almost certainly a Westerner and probably one who lived in Australia when the objects were made as they all come from van Grecken's collection.

There is one piece of evidence inconsistent with these conclusions. François Lupu's entry in the catalogue co-edited by him with Bataille and Chazine (1975) for the sculpture shown here in Ill. 9 reports that this piece comes from Biwat

and was carved by Malwat in relatively recent times. The entry reports that Malwat's family came from Nbôbten on the Keram River but that this carving was inspired by the Biwat style and expressed a theme of his village Nbêt. Presumably, Lupu had been aware that the authenticity of the piece had been questioned and showed photos of it to informants during his New Guinea fieldwork in 1972.

It is a pity that he does not report the time of production of the piece more accurately nor the purpose for which Malwat carved it. According to van Grecken it comes from the Godenev Collection and judging by the letter from Godenev already mentioned it was in this collection by 1957. Could Malwat have carved it in 1957 or before? In his 1967 essay Guiart speculated that the piece is the top of a flute stopper, in his 1969 essay that it is the top of a lime spatula. In the 1975 catalogue it is described as a male figure being pecked by birds. Did Lupu not inquire for what purpose it had been carved?

As the information reported by Lupu is very limited despite the controversial nature of the carving and as there seem to be no Biwat or Keram River pieces with a similarly sado-masochistic theme, I submit that Lupu's informant told him an invented story. It is easy to think of a range of reasons as to why he did this but impossible to guess which was operative.

Further evidence regarding the authenticity of this piece and the other carvings under discussion may be obtained by carefully assessing their patina, by checking whether the woods used are those the people of the regions to which they are attributed would normally have used, and by trying to find evidence of the carving tools and practices used in making them. However, this is beyond the scope of this essay.

Forgeries or hoax pieces?

So, if the nineteen pieces illustrated here were made by a Westerner, is there evidence regarding the person's identity and whether they are forgeries or part of a hoax?

I will address the second question first: are the pieces in question forgeries or part of a hoax? The person who made them clearly had a considerable knowledge of New Guinea art and certainly had the skill to make carvings that would not easily be recognisable as inauthentic. Hence one must ask why so many of them have features that almost shout out their inauthenticity. The artist who made them seems to have wanted to

20. Guiart published two lime-container stoppers and one flute stopper in his book *The Arts of the South Pacific* (1963, Ills 170, 171, 181) but their pegs are incompletely photographed or invisible.

21. The length of the pegs is estimated on the basis of the photographs of the objects reproduced in this essay.



ILLUSTRATION 15. –
Whereabouts
unknown; Law-
son's sale, 22. June
1987, Lot 102.
Approx. 45 cm
high. Ex Thomas
Slimon Collection.
Hunstein Moun-
tains, hermaphro-
ditic figure.
(© photo Harry
Beran in 1987)

play games with those who might be interested in acquiring them. It is as if he had asked himself: what strange features never found on New Guinea artworks can I give these carvings before potential collectors will recognise them as not genuine? In Group A there is the sado-masochistic surrealist figure in Ill. 9; and in Group B the standing female figure displaying its vulva in Ill. 19 and the sculpture that is both a praying mantis and two lovers in the 69 position in Ill. 16.

The most plausible explanation as to why anyone would make such carvings and offer them to collectors as genuine New Guinea artworks is that the carver was attempting a hoax – was trying to see whether putative connoisseurs could tell genuine New Guinea woodcarvings from parodies of them. The hoax succeeded, probably beyond the artist's wildest expectations. However, unlike other hoaxers, he has never made his deception public.

This essay places on the public record the distinctive pieces carved by the mystery hoaxer while those caught up in the hoax are still alive. I think it was the philosopher David Hume who distinguished between mistakes that are illuminating and those that are not. Kaufmann (7. February 2006, personal communication) has pointed out to me that Guiart's assumption that the pieces he published in 1967 are genuine, unusually

original sculptures is an interesting mistake as it highlights how little individual originality in traditional New Guinea woodcarving is studied. Surely such superb, stunningly original works as the Sepik River headrest and Huon Gulf ladle in John Friede's book (2005, Plates 85 and 385) demand such research.²² If more of it were done, it would be easier to assess the authenticity of highly unusual sculptures, like those discussed here.

As forgeries the pieces illustrated in this essay are not very good because most people with a sound knowledge of New Guinea art recognise them as not genuine. But as part of a hoax they are brilliant because they distinguish between experts with a good knowledge of New Guinea art and those whose knowledge is not quite as deep.

There are certain aspects of some of the sculptures under discussion which are only possible because the carvings are not genuine New Guinea artworks.

The figure in Ill. 19 is perhaps a parody of traditional New Guinea woodcarvings. By depicting a female blatantly displaying her vulva for intercourse or in a gesture of defiance, the artist may be poking fun at the comparative blandness with which sexual organs are depicted in Sepik River art as symbols of fertility.

The sculpture in Ill. 15 is an abstract depiction of a squatting anthropomorphic creature that greatly distorts the human form in a highly original surrealist manner. It would not be out of place in the Western art world. Its greatest originality lies in the two ways it borrows from New Guinea art. The sculpture imitates the squatting posture of some New Guinea figures and has a face reminiscent of Sepik masks. And it was carved from an hourglass-shaped New Guinea drum. The figure retains the shape of the drum and its long curved nose is part of the former handle. There are two other figures that have been created in this way: that in Ill. 10, sold by van Grecken to Guiart in 1966, and another I saw in van Grecken's collection in 2003.

Equally interesting is the sculpture in Ill. 16. It combines meanings found in Asmat and Western culture in a highly original way. In vertical position, it can be seen as a praying mantis in a style reminiscent of Asmat art. In this art the praying mantis is a head-hunting symbol, perhaps because the female sometimes eats the head of the male during or straight after mating (Gerbrands, 1967: 30). In horizontal position, the piece depicts anthropomorphic creatures positioned for oral sex in the 69 position. And in English, oral sex is conceptualised as 'eating' one's partner, as satirised in Linda Jaivin's book *eat me*.²³

22. Some of the other superb « skull rack » headrests, possibly by the same hand as that in Friede's book, are published in Schmitz (n.d., Plate 53); Conru (1999, Nr 33); and Sotheby's (2000, Lot 17). The only other ladle of the same design as that in Friede's book I am aware of is illustrated in Kaepler, Kaufmann, and Newton (1997, Ill. 638).

23. The sexual interpretation of the sculpture was pointed out to me by van Grecken when we viewed it together at his home.



ILLUSTRATION 16. – Van Grecken Collection; Lawson's sale, 22. June 1987, Lot 96 (not sold). Approx. 45 cm long. Ex Aldo Massola Collection. Asmat, sculpture of figures making love (© photo Harry Beran in 1987)

The identity of the hoaxer

Van Grecken, the vendor of the nineteen objects discussed, was born in 1924 and has been interested in New Guinea artworks since his twenties. He is a highly talented and versatile craftsman, artist, and designer. For the last few years, as a hobby, he has been making knives with handles of the finest materials and fine swords in the Samurai style. He undoubtedly has the skill to make New Guinea pastiches. For much of his life he has created surrealist drawings and paintings saturated with sexual themes in a highly personal style.²⁴ These themes parallel those in some of the carvings discussed. He is an architect who, in the 1960s, designed and built an innovative shell house (that is, a house without internal walls) with an elliptical roof. Later he designed and built a steam-driven, low-pollution sports car that was featured at the Sydney Motor Show in 1972.

However, while all this explains why van Grecken has been suspected of making New Guinea pastiches, it does not prove that he has. In November 2005, I told him the basics of the above story. The following is a summary of his response, given to me in a number of interviews.

He totally rejects the claim that he has carved the objects in Ills 1 to 19. He also mentioned that he could not create a convincing false patina on New Guinea pastiches because he suffers from a type of colour-blindness.

He said that he had obtained the carving in Ill. 1 directly from Mel Ward, those in Ills 2, 3, 6 and 7 directly from Ernest Wauchope and those in Ills 4 and 5 directly from Col. Woodman, as indicated by him to Guiart at the time of their sale. The object in Ill. 8, ex Franz Werner, he bought at the sale of this man's collection at Lawson's on 3. December 1958; he still has the sales catalogue. That in Ill. 9, ex Captain Godenev, he obtained through an intermediary. That in Ill. 15 he obtained from Thomas Slimon (or Slimmon), a Sydney collector, and that in Ill. 16 from Aldo Massola, once a curator at the Museum of Victoria.²⁵ He did not tell me the source(s) of the carvings in Ills 13, 14, 17, 18, and 19. The NMAAO catalogue card for the object in Ill. 12 records that he had obtained it from Woodman. The cards for the objects in Ills 10 and 11 do not record from whom van Grecken had obtained them and I did not try to get this information from him.²⁶

When I interviewed van Grecken in November 2005, I assumed that Woodman and Wauchope formed their collections entirely in New Guinea and was, therefore, puzzled as to how some hoax pieces had entered them, later to be sold to van Grecken. Van Grecken has offered a possible explanation regarding Woodman. He was present when Woodman bought New Guinea artworks at the sale of the Franz Werner Collection in Sydney on 3. December 1958. In Woodman's letter to Peter White, dated, 1 January 1969, he does indeed mention buying such pieces at Lawson's but without giving a date.²⁷

24. A selection of his pen and ink drawings has been published as a book (van Grecken, 1986).

25. As already noted, Woodman did not think the items in Ills 4 and 5 had come from his collection. I have no evidence to resolve the conflict between Woodman's and van Grecken's statements.

26. In one way or another, I have seen evidence of the existence of all those named, except Thomas Slimon, but I have no reason to doubt that he also existed.

27. This letter is part of the correspondence already mentioned.

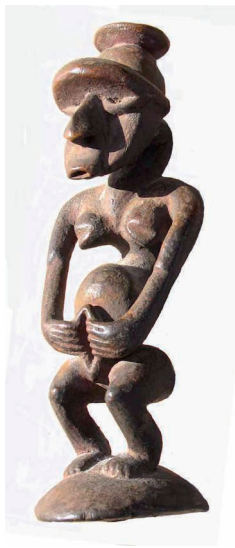


ILLUSTRATION 17. – Private Australian Collection 1; Lawson's sale, 22. June 1987, Lot 103. 50 cm high. Lake Sentani, phallic symbol depicting two generations (© photo Harry Beran in 1987)

PHOTO 18. – Harry Beran Collection, Illustration, UK; Lawson's sale, 22. June 1987, Lot 101. 25 cm high. Humboldt Bay, flute stopper (© photo Harry Beran in 1987)

ILLUSTRATION 19. – Private Australian Collection 2; Lawson's sale, 22. June 1987, Lot 95. Approx. 19 cm high. Humboldt Bay, ancestral female fertility figure (© the collector in 2006)

Van Grecken told me that at the time he sold the objects illustrated in this essay (or offered them for sale) he had no reason to doubt that they were genuine New Guinea artworks but that, in light of my arguments, he was no longer certain of their authenticity.

So who did carve them? Van Grecken told me in February 2006 that the Sydney resident Oscar Edwards made forgeries of New Guinea artworks in the 1950s. He added that when people realised what he was doing he faded from the scene. Edwards is listed in Alan McCulloch's *Encyclopedia of Australian Art* (1984) as a collector and painter. I have been told that he died around 1995 and his wife seems to have predeceased him. I have not been able to discover whether they had children. I have found no evidence that Edwards made pastiches, forgeries, or hoax pieces of New Guinea artworks. Edwards was not the unnamed « forger » Moore and White mentioned to Guiart in their letter of 28. November 1968 (Peter White, 2006: personal communications).

Perhaps the obvious should be mentioned: if the nineteen « New Guinea » objects illustrated in this essay are indeed hoax pieces, most of the information in the captions of the illustrations, reproduced from NMAAO index cards,

from Guiart's essays and exhibition catalogue, from the exhibition catalogue by Bataille *et al.*, and in Lawson's auction catalogue, is of course incorrect.

There are other hoax New Guinea pieces produced by the same hand as the nineteen carvings illustrated here and which appear to have come from van Grecken's collection. However, the views expressed in this essay are intended to apply only to these nineteen carvings. Other New Guinea pieces sold by van Grecken over the years have to be judged on their individual merits as he has sold numerous genuine woodcarvings from the South Pacific and still has many authentic pieces in his collection at the time of writing. As to the « ceremonial lime stick » sold by Sotheby's in 1987, van Grecken is most emphatic that it is a genuine New Guinea artwork from Woodman's collection.²⁸

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28. Authorities on New Guinea art disagree what this object is and whether it is a genuine New Guinea artwork. This is reflected in Allen Wardwell's text for it in his catalogue of the Masco Collection (1994: 54) where it is described as a « Hair Ornament from a Flute Figure ». He notes that « [s]ome scholars claim that it is of relatively recent origin, while others see it as one of the great examples of nineteenth-century, small-scale Sepik sculpture ». The reader could be forgiven for reading the phrase « of relatively recent origin » as « inauthentic ». Wardwell does not make his own judgement about the piece explicit but seems to lean towards the view that it is genuine. Before it was offered by Sotheby's in 1987 as a « ceremonial lime stick », it had already been published in Rubin (1984, Vol. 1: 47) as a « hair ornament from a flute figure ».



ILLUSTRATION 20. – Shilah-na-gig. Church of St Mary and St David, Kilpeck, Herefordshire, England. After Sharkey (1975, Plate 6). By permission of Thames & Hudson and the National Monuments Record

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