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## **High Art as Tourist Art, Tourist Art as High Art: Comparing the New Guinea Sculpture Garden at Stanford University and Sepik River Tourist Art**

This paper compares two contemporary aesthetic expressions: tourist art from the Sepik River in Papua New Guinea and the New Guinea Sculpture Garden at Stanford University. Both aesthetic expressions undermine the conventional categories that classify art. Sepik River tourist art is motivated not by the drive to lend individual, subjective experience a material expression but by monetary desire. The New Guinea Sculpture Garden was expressly created so that Sepik artisans could expand beyond the confines of village traditions and create unfettered aesthetic expressions. But seemingly inauthentic Tourist Art actually represents many of the ideals normally ascribed to Western masterpieces, or High Art. Conversely, the High Art of the Sculpture Garden in many respects resembles inauthentic reproductions and the tenacity of traditional forms. Both tourist art and the Sculpture Garden, however, have one key quality in common: they rupture conventional artistic categories.

*Keywords:* tourism, art, Sepik River, New Guinea Sculpture Garden

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### **Introduction**

In the summer of 1994, I returned to Tambunum village in the Sepik River of Papua New Guinea to study, among other topics, tourist art. But I was unable to speak with my main research collaborator, Gamboromiawan. He was at Stanford University carving High Art! His Stanford sculptures intentionally resemble the works of Rodin so they can compete aesthetically with Western masterpieces, which they do. From another angle, the lowly tourist art crafted in the village actually conforms to the ideals of High Art while the High Art sculpted in Palo Alto, California resembles tourist art.

Sepik River tourist art is not motivated by some internal, individualistic drive to lend subjective experience an outward, material expression. Rather, tourist art is motivated by money. A different motivation was at play in 1994, when men from two Sepik River societies were flown to Stanford University to carve the New Guinea Sculpture Garden. The express goal of the Garden was to provide a new setting for Sepik artists, a "public art space," so carvers could express their aesthetic creativity outside of village conventions. Reigning aesthetic categories and evaluations would largely classify Sepik

River tourist art as inauthentic—mere kitch that bastardizes a formerly authentic tradition in order to cater to uninformed tourists. At the same time, the setting and intention of the Sculpture Garden would likely result in the creation of genuine High Art, unique masterpieces that attest to the human spirit as a font of creativity.

Ironically, Sepik Tourist Art actually represents many of the ideals normally ascribed to High Art. Conversely, the Sculpture Garden often resembles inauthentic reproductions and the shackles of tradition. Some Sepik tourist art *does* display a lack of genuine aesthetic creativity. The Sculpture Garden *is* a stunning, brilliant setting whose works are breathtaking. My goal is not to argue *against* these claims. Instead, I identify certain ironies in these two art genres to claim that both expressions call into question conventional categories and the very idea of artistic categorization.

### Brief Theoretical Thoughts

In his aptly titled collection of essays *Routes*, James Clifford (1997a) focuses not on the center of culture but on what Pratt (1992: 7) calls “contact zones.” These transnational frontiers are defined by “the spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect.” While the “contact zone” idea does not ignore issues of domination, power, and hierarchy, it emphasizes innovation, creativity, and hybridity. The New Guinea Sculpture Garden and Sepik River tourist art arise in, and as, “contact zones.” As such, they defy conventional art-culture categories which link authenticity to taxonomic boundedness rather than rupture and blurring.<sup>1</sup> Sepik River tourist art and the New Guinea Sculpture Garden confound distinctions, thus “playing and subverting the dominant art-culture game” (Clifford 1991: 214). They are hybrid, transnational “routes” that argue against fixed categories of art and authenticity.

The dominant Western art-culture system, argues Clifford (1988), is framed by two oppositions: authentic-inauthentic and masterpiece-artifact. There are four static categories: authentic masterpieces (art), authentic artifacts (material culture, crafts), inauthentic masterpieces (fakes), and inauthentic artifacts (tourist art). Although there is some movement between zones, the point of the system is to place objects into categories rather than to allow them continuous classificatory motion. Drawing on the ideas of the “contact zone” and “routing,” I propose that we reconfigure this art-culture system *not* a set of new categories linked by routes but solely as a system of routes in which objects are always in taxonomic motion. From this perspective, Sepik River tourist art and the New Guinea Sculpture Garden are authentic not because we can classify these works but because we can not.

Traditionally, argues Root (1996: 78), authentic Primitive Art evoked a sense of “seamlessness.” The object was “fully and seamlessly inserted into a social context in such a way that permits the experience of perfect presence.” Moreover, many Primitive

Masterpieces derived their authenticity from the idea that they could have appealed to Picasso and other modernists (Errington 1994; Torgovnick 1990). If the former notion eliminates disjunctive or hybrid settings such as the Sculpture Garden, the latter idea dismisses tourist art. Sepik River tourist art and the New Guinea Sculpture Garden thus lack an authentic place in the conventional art-culture system. But that is precisely my point: the authenticity of these works arises from a resistance to categorization.

### **Sepik River Tourist Art**

Tourist art communicates hybrid identities and histories (Jules-Rosette 1986; Silver 1979; Kasfir 1992; Steiner 1994). Tourist art is an anti-category. The first term, "tourist," seemingly cancels the second term, "art." Hence, touristic creations are categorized as mementoes, souvenirs, trophies, artifacts, curios, commodities, and fakes but not genuine art. But as I have argued elsewhere, Eastern Iatmul tourist art from the Sepik River is a genuine aesthetic expression that reflects new concepts of self, ethnicity, and identity (Silverman 2001a; 2000; 1999; f.c.). These creations, too, reflect many of the ideals of High Art.

Typically, Eastern Iatmul tourist works are novel, individualized expressions. Carvers vary established themes, forms, and styles to diverge from the traditional canon, thus blurring aesthetic and politico-ritual categories. The objects are created for display, like modernist art, not utilitarian or ritual usage. Capitalist competition fosters egocentric selfhood since carvers strive to create unique objects that reflect their identity as individuals rather than sociocentric persons who identity is fused to others within the descent group (Silverman 2001b). Touristic carvings frequently display the artist's baptismal name, not his totemic or vernacular name, thus doubly signifying modern identity through literacy and Christianity. Many masks display a large face that would seem to represent the assertive dimension of personhood. This sense of identity is traditional but especially pronounced in modern settings.

Many carvings exhibit multiple faces. Some visages are obvious while other faces become evident only when the object is viewed from a particular perspective. The message here is that contemporary Sepik identity is prismatic, partial, and never wholly actualized. Another genre of tourist art is characterized by mouths that ambiguously consume, disgorge, excrete, and birth creatures, typically the crocodile. Formerly, this creature symbolized agnatic spirits. Today, the crocodile is a ubiquitous emblem of pan-Iatmul ethnicity, a colonial and even anthropological construct.

Tourist art expresses other levels or dimensions of identity. Tourist art, unlike traditional art, has a strong sense of village style within the Iatmul language group. But in contrast to other language groups and regions, the total corpus of Iatmul tourist art, comprising some 25 villages, also forms a distinct style. Additionally, Iatmul tourist art expresses regional Sepik identity. Women weave "PS" into baskets, an acronym for the

Melanesian Pidgin phrase “Pikinini Sepik” or “Child of the Sepik.”

Independence in 1975 created the Papua New Guinea nation-state. Eastern Iatmul reproduce colorful national emblems. They also create endless variations of the emblem, thus expressing national identity and citizenship in a localized, individual idiom. Carvers frequently add Christian and Biblical slogans. These phrases, combined with the stylistic innovations, communicate four dimensions of modern personhood: citizenship, literacy, individualism, and Christianity. All told, Eastern Iatmul tourist art is a complex self-representation, a wide-ranging conversation between tradition and modernity. These works communicate subtle, often elegant messages that are muted by traditional categories and notions of authenticity.

As Eastern Iatmul aesthetically redefine their identity, they sometimes carve objects that are unrelated to their traditional repertoire. Men borrow from non-Iatmul aesthetic traditions, yet often embellish these works with novel painting styles. They also purchase non-Iatmul masks, pots, shell ornaments, and necklaces from other villages and town markets. They peddle these items at a profit, often after slight modification. Men offer these objects to tourists as authentic Eastern Iatmul creations. In a sense, they are, but not in terms of conventional categories of authenticity. The taxonomic status of these objects is ambiguous. They are authentic fakes, inauthentic tradition, individualized expressions, commodities, and hybrid forms of contemporary identity.

Margaret Mead said it best. Eastern Iatmul procure all materials used in traditional and touristic art—including feathers, shells, putty, pigments, paints, and shoe polish—from outside the village. They rely on trading partners, town markets, and trips to distant villages. Even the wood is hauled from the bush, or floats down the river. Aesthetically, Iatmul art has always been *en route*. Indeed, Mead (1938, 1978) long-ago dubbed Sepik cultures as “importing” and “exporting.” Mead also brilliantly recognized a key quality of Iatmul villages: “an absorptive and retentive ability in excess of their powers of integration” (1938: 163). The accretive disposition of Sepik cultures was augmented by the ability of objects to transgress ethno-categories (Mead 1978). Ironically, Mead identified in the pre- or just-contacted Sepik a very postmodern art-culture system!

### **Introducing the New Guinea Sculpture Garden**

In 1994, a remarkable “contact zone” occurred in California. Under the directorship of Jim Mason, a graduate student in Anthropology, a group of Sepik River men (Iatmul and Kwoma) carved the New Guinea Sculpture Garden at Stanford University. While my goal here is to identify taxonomic ironies set in motion by the Garden, I also want to underscore the extraordinary feat accomplished by Mason and the Sepik men. The Garden is an fantastic artistic context. The artworks and landscaping are nothing short of breathtaking. Intellectually, the Garden encourages visitors to rethink basic

concepts and categories pertaining to art, cultural differences, morality, and creativity.

The New Guinea Sculpture Garden is located in a small, wooded grove on the Stanford campus next to a dormitory. In addition to the artworks, the garden is also horticultural. The landscaping and plants were organized by Wallace Ruff, a retired professor of architecture who taught for many years in Papua New Guinea, and Kora Korawali, one of his students. The garden evokes the Sepik environment and the central plaza of Sepik villages through the careful placement of Californian vegetation. The river is evoked by a bike path (Leccese 1994). The entrance to the Garden is an open space, like the Sepik flood plain. But one quickly walks into a forest of sculptures and trees reminiscent of a majestic Sepik cult house.

The Garden is roughly organized into four zones. Near the entrance is a large, wooden eagle atop the shoulders of an ancestresses. This statue resembles the finials that often adorn Iatmul cult houses. Behind the eagle is a cluster of about a dozen, enormously tall wooden poles carved with exquisitely elaborate Iatmul and Kwoma motifs and patterns (Figure 1). A series of brightly painted Kwoma poles forms another aesthetic cluster, while the third area of the Garden consists of large sculptures in pumice, an entirely new medium for the carvers since stone is rare in the Sepik flood plain. At night, the objects are aglow from ground-level spot lights.



*Figure 1. A Forest of Ambiguous Art: The New Guinea Sculpture Garden at Stanford University (Photo by E.K. Silverman)*

The artworks are breathtaking. The stone sculptures largely represent Sepik methodological creatures modeled after Western sculptures found elsewhere on the Stanford campus (see below). The carved poles subtly blend traditional and modern motifs so that, for example, ancestresses wear grass skirts. Many of the carvings beautifully wind around the natural contours of the wood, a sense of three-dimensionality that was not traditionally incorporated into Sepik carving. One of the most brilliant works in the Garden is a bare pole that contains only a hint of the sculpture it might have become. This work, titled "untitled" (Figure 2), expresses the processual aspects of the Garden, and the unfinalizability and partiality of any interpretation.

The Garden wonderfully plays with themes of light and shadow, revelation and concealment, nature and culture. It is and is not mysterious, contemplative, quiet, and surreal. The popularity of the Garden, and its refusal to remain contained with any scholarly discourse, is a powerful commentary on anthropology. The Stanford Anthropology Department was so apprehensive about the project, and so unwilling to participate in an event that could have become an unsettling spectacle of savagery, that it largely shunned the Garden until its completion, where it now holds an annual diploma ceremony. In this sense, the Garden both resists and accedes to anthropology.



*Figure 2. The unfinished sculpture titled "Untitled," (Photo by E.K. Silverman)*

*Figure 3. Art or Mechanical Reproduction? "The Thinker."(Photo by E.K. Silverman)*

The logistics of the project were enormous. Mason raised \$250,000 in individual donations. One could sponsor a fern for \$250, a palm tree for \$500, a bench for \$750, and so forth. Large donations are acknowledged, like the artworks themselves, by name. Corporate donors included Bechtel Corporation, Chevron, and Airnuigini. Funds were also supplied by the National Endowment for the Humanities, Stanford University, and wealthy Palo Alto families. The University allowed him a permanent site. He arranged for several dozen hardwood trees to be shipped to Stanford from Asia.

Ten carvers were flown to California from the Sepik by way of Hong Kong, a journey that far exceeded previous travels. Once they arrived, the carvers were the toast of affluent Palo Alto and multicultural Stanford. They dined at catered events in mansions and performed with African-American drummers outside dormitories.<sup>2</sup> The carvers received 6-month, educational visas. Mason arranged for health insurance, and a host of local individuals, organizations, and businesses supplied food, medical care, clothing, transportation, recreation and a trip to Disneyland. The community also lent various skills, materials, and labor during the creation of the Garden. While the event centered on Papua New Guineans, it also enacted the wider liberal aims of American participatory democracy.

Jim Mason graciously allowed me to spend a week or so with the carvers in the early summer, prior to my return to the Sepik. I personally knew two of the men from my own fieldsite, one of whom was a primary fieldwork collaborator. We attended a party in the hills of San Francisco, cooked the standard Sepik fare (boiled chicken and rice) and drank Budweiser beer, and viewed Arnold Swartzenegger's blockbuster film "Terminator 2" while discussing differences between Kwoma and Iatmul cosmologies. As a reporter for the San Jose Mercury News said (Steinmetz, 1994), "One has a hand-made ax in his hand and a Harley-Davidson cap on his head; they converse in their native dialects and pidgin while they await boxed lunches of Kentucky Fried Chicken and Pepsi."

### **A Grove of Ironies**

The "spirit of the project" framed the carvers as "artists" and not, as in older taxonomies, exotic specimens of primitive savagery and mystery. The project labeled the Sepik men as "master carvers." In so doing, the project positioned the men in Western category defined by rare artistic genius, a category defined by the very terms of connoisseurship that once marginalized Melanesian art as something less refined than Western masterpieces and High Art (see Price 1989). This way, visitors approached the carvers and their works not as primitives and crafts but as authentic artists and art. However, there is no comparable category of "master carver" in the lexicon or social

structure of Iatmul society. Ironically, the Garden fostered the Western appreciation of non-Western art by substituting one western category for another. This is no to cast any doubt on the moral vision of Mason. Quite the opposite: it is to indicate the ironies that arise from the processes of categorization when we seek to engage artworks created in a contemporary, transnational “contact zone.”

In Mason’s vision, a significant goal of the project was *not* to recreate a traditional, Melanesian setting. Rather, the Garden was “an opportunity to experiment with and reinterpret New Guinea aesthetic perspectives within the new context of a Western public art space.” The carvers could thus create art that blended traditional themes with the ideals of modern sculpture such as individual expression and the generation of art solely for a contemplative gaze. The carvers were explicitly encouraged to shun traditional forms and motifs. Instead, they were counseled to experience and express their individual artistry in ways not possible, or so it seemed, in the village. But this effort proved problematic for the artists, and frustrating for the organizers, since the carvers initially hewed traditional, clan-specific motifs and forms. Ironically, some art/artifact dealers implore Eastern Iatmul in the village to refrain from creating anything that deviates from the traditional canon.

The project, we might say, tried to synthesize yet separate the Papua New Guinean carvers into two categories: Melanesians *and* artists. It was on the basis of the former identity that the men were brought to Palo Alto. Once there, the Garden tried to encourage these men to shift their identity into the latter category. But the carvers, I believe, understood their identity firstly as Papua New Guineans and only secondly as artists. In the main, they created variations on Iatmul and Kwoma art or varied, we will see, modernist “masterpieces.” At Stanford, we might say, innovation was more elusive than in the touristic Sepik. Ironically, it was not a “public art space” in California that readily fostered aesthetic innovation but the pursuit of money in the village.

Mason expressly sought to counteract Western moral and artistic hegemony. As Clifford (1997b: 196) remarked, the sculptors at Stanford were engaged in an interactive process that was at least as important as the finished products of “art” and “culture.” The community was not so much invited to observe the carvers, which it did, but to participate in various collaborative programs. In addition to daily site tours, bamboo flute performances by the carvers, and a public lecture series, there were Friday night barbecues, “story-time” with the artists, and a variety of outreach programs for school children, such as on-site bark painting. These interactive encounters are vital to the authenticity of the works.

The artists were not brought to Stanford as savages for festive display to Western viewers (see Rony 1996). However, not only did thieves make away with a few of the sculptures (they were later returned), but the pronounced phallos on several of the carvings proved somewhat controversial.<sup>3</sup> While the “master carvers” were brought to Stanford University precisely because they hail from another space-time in the western

imaginary, Mason and the project explicitly tried to reduce the chronotopic distance between Us and Them. The carvers were artists, not ethnographic spectacles. They were allowed an opportunity, or so it went, to negotiate with wealthy Californians on their own terms. They also negotiated with Mason on the setting of their works, thus contesting an older model of artistic re-presentation in which curatorial authority was absolute (see Clifford 1991; Ames 1992). Indeed, Mason specifically made several trips to the Sepik to negotiate the terms of the entire project. The garden was created by young and elderly men, for example, an idea proposed by the Iatmul and Kwoma themselves, not Mason. The Garden was an intentional effort to disperse curatorial authority.

The Garden emphasized artistic individuality, not timeless anonymity—much like tourist art. Beneath each work is a label that identifies the title of the piece and the artists' names. The overall message seems to be that *authentic* art drives from the consciousness, subjectivity, and creativity of individuals. While it is true that the idea of anonymity which once defined “primitive art” derives from western myths of the pre-modern Other, the contrary assumption is equally problematic since it presupposes pan-human concepts of self, personhood, art, and creativity. The relationships between artistic work, name, and identity remain problematic—especially since tourist art, even when signed by the artists' name, is rarely featured in authoritative art spaces.

A newspaper report on the Garden spoke about “exotic ...representations of carvings that would appear on or inside a Papua New Guinean spirit house” (Hayde 1996). From this angle, the Garden was a failure. The carvings are *not* totemic insignia. They are supposed to be viewed as art, not exotica. And the Garden was intended to provide Papua New Guineans with a setting in which to express the Western aesthetic ideals of individual expression and innovation, not traditional motifs. That is to say, the press was largely unable, or unwilling, to share Mason's moral and taxonomic vision. For them, the Garden sustained, not subverted, Western categorical hegemony.

The sculptures that receive the greatest amount of press and notoriety are two carvings in wood and pumice respectively that expressly resemble Rodin sculptures that can be seen elsewhere on the campus of Stanford, “The Thinker”<sup>4</sup> (Figure 3) and “The Gates of Hell” (e.g., Hayde 1996). This fame reproduces an earlier taxonomic moment in the 20<sup>th</sup> century when Primitive Masterpieces were defined on the basis of modernist ideals. In the “Features” section of The Stanford Daily (Quinones 1997), the latter sculpture is “a nice example of art free of cultural boundaries.” One wonders if those boundaries were also absent when “the figures become positively lurid in moonlight.” That aside, the lack of “cultural boundaries” is of course incorrect. The Garden is thoroughly framed by Western artistic categories. It is, after all, a “public art space” at an elite University! The project sought to re-humanize people once dubbed as Primitive. This moral vision replaced one set of Western categories (primitives mindlessly replicating ancestral forms) with a new set (High Art, “master carvers,” and so forth). The Garden, I am suggesting, is perhaps best viewed as a conversation of shifting taxonomies.

The opening celebration for the sculpture garden, which I did not attend, was a chaotic, somewhat anarchic hybrid of late 20<sup>th</sup> century artistic practices that involved some 3000 people: performances by the Center for Computer Research and Acoustics at Stanford, improvisational theater and dance, piano and violin music, complementary wine and cheese, “formal attire requested,” an all-night drum and dance ceremony by the carvers with “Congolese, Tahitian, Native American, Taiko and Korean drum groups.” Performance artists enacted Sepik creation myths. There was a “potluck barbecue and free drinks.” Guests were invited to “bring your own drum.”<sup>5</sup> The carvers spoke to the crowd, and wept. The event both sustained and subverted the intent of the Garden. On the one hand, it allowed for otherwise muted expressions of ethnic diversity. Indeed, many people in the community valued the Garden during its creation precisely because it brought together ethnic and class groups that do not ordinarily interact. But the Garden seemed to throw together all differences into a grand cacophony such that no unique difference was heard. Or, rather, the opening event, like the Garden itself, sought to mute conventional categories in a type of taxonomic chaos.

Since its completion, the Garden remains a central space on the Stanford University campus and the wider community. After a tsunami devastated a coastal village in Papua New Guinea, the Garden was the site of a fundraising potluck dinner. “Many people on campus feel closely connected to the island as a result of the Garden,” said the Stanford [Online] Report (<http://news-service.stanford.edu/news/july29/papua729.html>). A West African Drum Circle invites the community to participate in drumming, dancing, and song every Friday night during the warm months at the Garden, “a beautiful, sacred place very conducive to good vibes” ([www.drums.org/djembefaq/CA\\_drumcircles.htm](http://www.drums.org/djembefaq/CA_drumcircles.htm)). A vast array of organizations use the Garden for dinners, meetings, and discussions. A quick search on the Stanford University website reveals a discussion among transfer students, a National Science Foundation dinner; lunch by the Women’s Community Center and the LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered) Community Resources Center, and a welcoming party for new Civil & Environmental Engineering students, an event organized by the Stanford African Students Association, and, to repeat, the annual diploma ceremony by Stanford’s Anthropology Department.

## Conclusion

The collaboration at the Sculpture Garden “resulted in concrete expressions that visually challenge the constraining narratives of art/artifact, authenticity/inauthenticity, and primitivism that are often forced onto non-western artists.” At the same time, the Garden supported the very same categorization scheme that generated these distinctions—if, for no other reason, than the fact that the Garden is commonly mentioned in connection with the Rodin Sculpture Garden, also located at Stanford. But this, I believe,

ve, is the great success of the Garden. Like tourist art, the New Guinea Sculpture Garden both sustains and subverts dominant categories and categorization.

The aesthetic force of these works lies not solely in the appreciation of their visual qualities, which is substantial. Rather, these works are important because they resist the dominant art-culture system and its institutionalization of authenticity. At the same time, the juxtaposition of the Stanford sculptures and the Sepik tourist works re-created traditional categories such that Tourist Art becomes High Art while High Art became Tourist Art. Finally, Sepik River tourist art and the New Guinea Sculpture Garden, as artistic “contact zones,” encourage us to rethink the usefulness of aesthetic categorization. Rather than ask what these works are, we might best ask what they are not.

## Notes

1. This essay is based on fieldwork in the Eastern Iatmul village of Tambunum in 1988-1990 and June-August 1990, whose residents kindly tolerated my presence and questions. I gratefully acknowledge support from a Fulbright Award, Institute for Intercultural Studies, Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, University of Minnesota Department of Anthropology and Graduate School, and DePauw University. I also thank Jim Mason and, for inviting me to write this essay, Pamela Rosi and Eric Venbrux.
2. Unless otherwise stated, quotations are from the quasi-official website of the New Guinea Sculpture Garden.
3. See Hayward (1995:15) for a more vocal controversy over the sexual imagery in Papua New Guinean sculptures at the University of Technology in Sydney. One of the carvers at the project apparently approached Mason with the idea of doing likewise in America.
4. The Melanesian “Thinker” graces the cover of a recent Stanford University Press book about the oedipus complex in world myth and folklore (Johnson and Price-Williams 1996).
5. Reported in the *Palo Alto Weekly* ([http://www.paweekly.com/PAW/morgue/cover/1996\\_May\\_24.ARTSID24.html](http://www.paweekly.com/PAW/morgue/cover/1996_May_24.ARTSID24.html)).

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