

Exhibition curated by Virginia-Lee Webb, art historian and former research curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

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PUBLIC PROGRAM

Paul Wirz and New Guinea

Dadi Wirz

Friday, May 6, 8:00 p.m.

Between 1916 and 1955, Swiss anthropologist and collector Paul Wirz made several research trips to the island of New Guinea, where he took hundreds of photographs, some of which are included in this exhibition. His son, Dadi Wirz, who travelled to the island with his father in 1953 and on his own in 1955 and 2004, talks about their visits while presenting a selection of his father's remarkable images.

EXHIBITION CATALOGUE

Edited by Virginia-Lee Webb with contributions by Anna-Karina Hermkens, Philippe Peltier, Andrea Schmidt, Dirk Smidt, David van Duuren, Kristina Van Dyke, and Muridan Widjojo

This volume brings together full-color plates of objects from Jacques Viot's landmark collection, the exquisite photographs of Paul Wirz, and other equally superb examples of the region's art, accompanied by essays from the field's leading scholars.

Available at the Menil Bookstore; 136 pp., 98 color illustrations; \$50

Cover: Man Ray. Untitled (*Le Lys*), ca. 1933. Gelatin silver print, 11 x 5 inches (27.9 x 12.7 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Photograph Study Collection, Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas (PSC 2004.8)
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THE MENIL COLLECTION

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Ancestors of the Lake

Art of Lake Sentani and Humboldt Bay, New Guinea

The Menil Collection May 6–August 28, 2011



Figure, Lake Sentani, Papua, Indonesia, carbon dated to 1790 +/- 40 years. Wood, 47¹/₄ x 9 x 8 inches (120 x 22.9 x 20.3 cm). Collection of Gordon Sze
Photo: Hendrik Smildiger

The western half of the island of New Guinea, once a Dutch colony and now the Indonesian province of Papua, is home to Lake Sentani and Humboldt Bay. These areas are known for their exquisitely carved wood figures and objects and delicately rendered paintings on barkcloth, or *maro*. Like art from other parts of the Pacific Islands, works from the region have intrigued viewers and inspired artists since their arrival in the West. Though shown widely in Europe, the art of this small but dynamic locality has been seldom exhibited in the United States. It is with great pleasure that the Menil Collection presents “Ancestors of the Lake,” the first U.S. exhibition in over fifty years to focus on the art of Lake Sentani and Humboldt Bay, highlighting works collected by two pioneering visitors: Swiss anthropologist Paul Wirz and French art dealer Jacques Viot.

As Europeans increasingly explored the Pacific Islands in search of trade in the early twentieth century, their involvement expanded beyond commercial opportunities to an interest in studying the regions’ cultures and acquiring indigenous objects. Paul Wirz was an early admirer of the Sentani and Humboldt Bay peoples and developed a deep appreciation for their cultures and artistic traditions during his 1921 and 1926 journeys to the island, describing it as “paradise.” He not only collected traditional sculptures and quotidian objects but also used motion picture film, audio recordings, and, in particular, still photography to meticulously document the cultures. Though originally viewed as supplemental to his anthropologic research, Wirz’s sensitive, technically accomplished photographs are works of art in their own right. This exhibition provides the opportunity to display a selection of these images printed posthumously from his original glass-plate negatives, many of which feature the sculptures he collected and are exhibited alongside the objects themselves.

Jacques Viot was also active during the notable period of research and collecting that occurred in the 1920s, though his original motivations to travel and acquire artworks may have been more about his financial livelihood than a desire to gain a comprehensive understanding of Sentani and Humboldt Bay cultures. Viot realized that there was great interest in Pacific Island art in Europe, especially among the Surrealists. Appreciative of the formal artistic qualities, many artists were riveted by the abstract patterns and distinct sculptural forms they saw



Maro, Humboldt Bay, Papua, Indonesia, 19th–20th century. Barkcloth with pigment, 29 x 60 inches (73.7 x 152.4 cm). The Menil Collection, Houston. Photo: Paul Hester

and incorporated the linear clarity of the decorations and motifs into their designs. In 1929 Viot, who was the art dealer for a number of Surrealist artists in Paris, including Joán Miró and Max Ernst, took the opportunity to repay a debt to a gallery owner by collecting objects in the Lake Sentani and Humboldt Bay region. Returning to Paris one year later, Viot brought with him an impressive group of barkcloths and sculpture as well as his own photographs featuring his Malaysian cook or local men posing with the wood figures Viot collected.

This show would have special meaning to John and Dominique de Menil, who made one of their first purchases of art, two Humboldt Bay *maro*, from Viot. Bought in 1932, over a decade before the couple began collecting in earnest, the acquisition foreshadowed not only the de Menils’ later interest in the art of the Pacific Islands but their burgeoning enthusiasm for Surrealism as well. In the decades after their first purchase from Viot, the de Menils bought a number of other works originally collected by him, and he introduced them to some of the very artists, including Max Ernst, whom they would later champion. It is thus fitting that the Menil Collection’s first exhibition devoted to art of the Pacific Islands, focuses on the region. “Ancestors of the Lake: Art of Lake Sentani and Humboldt Bay, New Guinea” brings together, among earlier acquisitions, a meaningful portion of the long-dispersed collections of Wirz and Viot along with their in situ photographs, showcasing an interwoven story of the people, objects, collectors, and admirers of this region’s art.