

Conservation Panel

There is little recorded provenance for the Papua New Guinea items to provide details on their origins or history. The collection was reportedly acquired from a Mr. Nicholas Whitely, who purchased the pieces in 1946 when he stopped in Papua New Guinea during a trip to India. Upon acquisition by the university, the collection was appraised, only to be deemed relatively worthless. The little text available regarding these works reduces any importance held by these items to their relevance to European artists. This is an incredibly problematic statement, drenched in racial bias and primitivism. In terms of the art world, primitivism refers to works that have been influenced by the styles of so-called savage and uncivilized cultures, most often alluding to African and Indigenous societies. Artists like Gauguin, Picasso, and many modernists of the early 20th century borrowed, or in more appropriate terms, stole, imagery from these cultures and incorporated it into their works. Primitivism and other distinctions like it exist to separate the "high" art of the Western world from the "low" art of indigenous and nonwhite cultures, placing the latter in the distant past and implying an underdeveloped state, where art is crude and barbaric.



Right side (Figure 1), center from top to bottom (Figure 1a, Figure 1b, and Figure 2a), left side (Figure 2)

Due to this line of thinking, a precedent has been set for works such as these to be mistreated and disregarded, seen only for their value to Western artists. These particular pieces have been improperly stored and displayed for a significant period, causing a variety of issues. Two examples of the damages inflicted on these pieces are the items shown in Figure 1 and Figure 2, which show extensive cracks and gapping, broken pieces, and areas where hot glue has been applied. The primary aim of conservation is to preserve works of art by either slowing or completely halting the processes that can cause damage; secondary to this is the repair of already present issues. Controlling the rate of deterioration is extremely important because even if a work cannot be entirely restored, its current state can at least be protected, with methods like utilizing proper storage in controlled environments. Monitoring potentially harmful elements such as temperature and humidity avoids future issues. Cleaning is also a crucial part of the process. In these situations, wooden objects are particularly sensitive to moisture, so dry cleaning is often the best course of action. Dust and loose dirt are most commonly removed using a soft lint-free cloth/soft brush in combination with a vacuum. The last aspect to take into consideration is repairs. Waxes and resins are used to fill cracks and broken areas, providing a solid structure that seals the fracture. As a whole, the lifespan of these items from Papua New Guinea has been turbulent at best. While a full restoration may not occur, the proper methods of storage and handling can be enacted to prevent any future mishaps.