

Decorated Canoe Prow-boards from the Trobriand Islands

by Adria H. Katz

The University Museum recently came into possession of three canoe prow-boards (Fig. 1) collected in the Trobriand Islands in 1983 by Ruth Radbill Scott (see box). The Trobriands, part of the independent nation of Papua New Guinea, are one of a number of far-flung island groups lying off the southeast tip of New Guinea. The people of these islands speak Melanesian (Austro-nesian) languages and share a common culture; they are known collectively as the Massim. The traditional economy of the Massim area is based on agriculture, fishing, and inter-island trade.

The large sea-going canoes used by Trobriand Islanders for fishing and trade have dugout hulls stabilized by single outrigger floats, and large triangular sails woven from strips of dried pandanus leaf. Since such canoes must be sailed with the wind coming from the outrigger side, the ends of the craft are reversible, and both ends of the hull feature decorated "prow" boards (Figs. 2, 3). A set of prow-boards includes a lobed, asymmetrical board like the one illustrated here, mounted transversely, and a second board which projects at right angles towards the end of the hull. Both boards are elaborately carved and painted red, black, and white.

The most beautifully decorated Trobriands canoes are those engaged in traveling the Kula Ring, an extensive overseas trade network encompassing all the various island groups of the Massim area. Along the Kula routes, as first described by Bronislaw Malinowski in *Argonauts of the Western Pacific* (1922), there circulate two kinds of ceremonial objects: long necklaces of red shell disks (*oulava*) that move in a clockwise direction,



Fig. 1. One of three Trobriand Island canoe prow-boards now on display in the Ruth Radbill Scott New Acquisitions Case in the Main Entrance Lobby. Such carved and painted boards adorn the large sea-going fishing and trading canoes of the island groups of the Massim culture area, off the southeast tip of New Guinea. Boards typical of the Northern Massim, and of the Trobriand Islands in particular, feature human figures carved in the center of the top margin.

UPM 2001-10-1. H. 56 cm; W. 64.5 cm. Gift of the Estate of Ruth Radbill Scott

and arm rings of white shell (*mwali*) that move counterclockwise. Associated with this ritual exchange of valuables is a secondary trade in other goods, such as yams, pigs, sago, and pottery, available in the different islands visited.

The building and launching of a large trading canoe involves the performance of ceremonial rites to make it swift, safe, and successful in the Kula. Malinowski described the rites associated with the construction of a Trobriands canoe, as he observed them when he was in the islands from 1915 to 1918. When a canoe was built, the dugout hull, the carved and painted prow-boards, and all the other parts of the vessel were brought down to the beach. Assembly began with the performance of a special rite, *mwasila*, which accompanied the inserting of the decorated prow-boards at the ends of the hull:



Fig. 2. Trobriands canoe under sail. These large, sea-going canoes are sailed with the wind coming over the outrigger side, so that when the canoe tilts, the outrigger float rises. To sail with the wind coming from the opposite quarter, the mast of a canoe like the one illustrated here must be unstepped from one end of the hull and resteped at the other, thereby reversing the bow and stern. For this reason, the canoe has "prow" boards at both ends.

From Malinowski 1922: pl. XXII

These ornamental parts of the canoe are put in first of all, and this is done ceremonially. A few sprigs of the mint plant are inserted under the boards, as they are put in, and the *toliwaga* (owner of the canoe) hammers the boards in by means of a special stone imported from Dobu, and ritually repeats a formula of the *mwasila* magic...After the prow-boards are put in...another magical rite has to be performed. The body of the

canoe, now bright with the three-coloured boards, is pushed into the water. A handful of leaves, of a shrub called *bobi'u*, is charmed by the owner or by the builder, and the body of the canoe is washed in sea water with the leaves. All the men participate in the washing, and this rite is intended to make the canoe fast, by removing the traces of any evil influence... (Malinowski 1922)



Ruth Radbill Scott (center) and Mary Bert Gutman purchasing canoe prow-boards on the island of Kiriwina in February 1983.

RUTH RADBILL SCOTT 4/20/26-12/29/00

One day, while playing golf with Mrs. John Hyland Dilks, Ruth mentioned her interests in archaeology and travel, which ultimately led to her becoming a member of the University Museum's Women's Committee in 1971. However, Ruth was not a newcomer to the Museum. She had already earned a BA in anthropology. After the completion of the Academic Wing, she was active in overseeing the start of the Potlatch lunchroom (now The Museum Café), as well as in setting up the Mobile Guides program.

Ruth and her husband, Earl, had a great love for the American Southwest and visited the area many times. When the Museum's Southwest gallery was refurbished, it was Ruth and Earl who generously financed the undertaking. The Museum benefited in many ways from Ruth's enthusiasm and tireless spirit. We will all miss her warm smile.



Fig. 3. Trobriands trading canoe. At the ends of the canoe, transverse prow-boards close off the longitudinal planking that raises the sides of the dugout hull. Other oval-shaped boards project from them at right angles. The space between the dugout hull and the outrigger float is spanned by a platform on which cargo is carried. This Trobriands canoe is being loaded with large clay pots from the Amphlett Islands.

From Malinowski 1922: pl. XLVII

The Kula trade, so central to life in the Massim area in Malinowski's time, survives to some extent down to the present day. The manufacture of canoes and prow-boards appears to have died out, however, on a Trobriand island formerly known as a source of exceptionally fine work. The Italian anthropologist Giancarlo

Scoditti, who has been working on the island of Kitawa since 1973, reports that no canoes have been made there for the last several years. Towitara, a master carver of prow-boards, who was probably in his eighties when Scoditti first met him, has died, and no new carvers have been initiated. 🐼

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