THE PALAUAN STORYBOARDS:
From Traditional Architecture to Airport Art

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As tourism has steadily increased in the Pacific, the sale of local handicrafts has become a profitable source of income for islanders. Among the handicrafts to be found in airport shops throughout Micronesia in the storyboard, Palau's unique contribution to what has been termed "airport art." Although the tourist may recognize that the board tells a traditional story in pictographic and representational form, he is unlikely to realize that it is a modern descendant of a traditional architectural form. Its architectural parents were the carved beams and gables of the lini, a man's club house which traditionally formed the social nucleus for males in a Palauan community.

The Palau Archipelago is the westernmost group of islands in the Western Carolines (Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands), just north of the equator and 500 miles east of Mindanao. Archaeological data suggest that Palau's location, tropical climate and rich sea life may have attracted settlement as early as 1800-1300 B.C. Since that time, Palau has been augmented by people,

ideas or artifacts from the islands in Indonesia, Malaysia and the southern Philippines. By the time of initial Western contact (1781), Palau was described as a highly stratified society divided into competing, warring confederacies of shifting alliances.

From the time of recorded contact until the present, Palauan currency (udaul) has been an important economic and social aspect of Palauan life. This currency, consisting of a limited amount of small beads and bars of glass and minerals, was introduced at some unknown time into Palau, possibly coming from the Philippines. It is not "money" in our sense of the word. Large pieces were highly prized valuables, each piece having its own history of previous owners and possessed only by high chiefs. Small pieces functioned as currency and could be used as units of exchange for other items of manufacture or for food. Today, all types of pieces are classified as valuables, necessary for ceremonial exchanges which take place at marriage, the birth of a first child and death, while American money (also called udaul) is used for purchases of commodities.
The desire to obtain Paluan currency was a major motivating reason for warfare, and this currency was the source of prestige for an individual, his clan and his community. Men's clubs, housed in the bai, formed a ready source of labor upon which a chief could call for both warfare and community construction projects. The number of bai in a village reflected its power, prestige and wealth since a bai was purchased and not constructed by its own members. A bai was usually prefabricated by the builders and then moved to the site of the purchasing village. Being able to afford to pay for the construction of an elaborate bai showed the club was successful in warfare and in amassing Paluan currency. The two major preoccupations of men. An important village would have from three to six bai.

Clubs were ranked within a village, and seating within a bai was also by rank. Males were recruited into a club in early childhood, and the bai was the center for a man's activities throughout his lifetime.

While men's club houses are common throughout Micronesia, the Paluan bai is distinct in that architecturally it is the most elaborate. The way in which interior tie beams and exterior gables combine decorative and symbolic art with functional architecture so that the whole bai structure is to be viewed as a single entity in perspective, with no one decorative element standing apart, is unique to Palau. The complex series of joints which hold the bai together without nails, pegs or screws is a technique utilized in Indonesia. However, builders in Malaysia-Indonesia have long had iron tools while the Palau bai was accomplished with only stone and shell tools. One of the standing bai, the Egi zu Nesechi or Cherbar of the Palau Museum, is 34 long and 15 wide, with six doors and partial walls to permit light and air to enter. The interior is one large expanse of wood, broken only by two center fireplaces. Such a large expanse of uncluttered floor is also typical of the Paluan house.

Points used in decorating the bai were made by mixing lime, soil and ochre with oil from the parinarum nut, producing soft earth shades of white, black, red and yellow. Decorative elements fall into two categories: (1) designs, both symbolic and stylized, found on both the exterior and interior of the bai; and (2) the pictographic art on the exterior gables and interior tie beams which are mnemonic devices to recall legends. Both decorative elements have influenced the modern storyboard, so it is necessary to discuss bai decorations before we can understand the boards.
The symbols utilized on bai are limited in number, and where symbols may be used is standardized by tradition. There is some variation to be seen in which symbol was selected to be placed in a specific location. Symbolism most frequently seen on bai are: [1] the rooster, a male symbol and an important figure in the legend of the building of the first bai by the gods; [2] the Palauan currency symbol (dolot); [3] the clan (Tridacna gigas or tik) symbol, which also appears in various forms as a border design; [4] a demigod with earrings containing the currency symbol, usually located at the top of the bai; [5] a bird (delefetchi) who is credited with bringing their currency to Palau; and [6] a spider symbol of Mingidadabkoel, a demigod who taught Palauan women natural childbirth (before Mingidadabkoel, infants were delivered by Caesarian section). These symbols occur on both exterior and interior posts, as border designs along the partial walls, and with less frequency on the interior rafters.

The gables and interior tie beams were artistic mnemonic devices to recall myths or events important to a local club or village. Each beam was approximately fifteen feet long and a foot wide, telling a complete story on one side. There were approximately eight beams in a bai, and many beams were decorated on both sides. From six to twenty scenes might be depicted in a composition, thus permitting a pleasing repetition of the common motifs of people, houses, canoes and trees, with zigzag lines representing speech. The length of the beam permitted the scenes to convey a strong feeling of action and movement. Stories were intended to influence behavior—some might stress punishment while others showed the rewards that came from bravery or good conduct. As the legends were known only to certain chiefs and elders, they selected the stories. The selection of stories to be depicted and of symbols to be used was considered by Palauans to be the most creative aspect in bai decoration since the gables and beams were visual statements of the values, histories, exploits and virtues of a particular club or village. The stories having been selected, boards were sketched by a master artist and then delegated to other workmen to be incised and painted.

While the bai is Palau's most impressive architecture, skills in producing items of wood, shell and tortoise shell were highly developed. Spirit shrines were built as miniature bai, complete with thatch. Houses were of the same sturdy plank construction as the bai. While somewhat plain in appearance and frequently using woven pandanus walls rather than wood, the houses of important people had their exterior gable boards carved and decorated with shapes of the diamond, sun, clam shell (kim) or the currency bird (deleetchi). The size of the house and the number of doors a house could have were determined by the owner's wealth and rank. Elaborately carved and inlaid tables to protect tao (another form of wealth) from rats, carved wooden dishes and containers, tortoise, wood or shell objects of adornment, pottery lamps with figurines, and carved currency jars, all could be purchased from skilled craftsmen. In fact, one never built his own house or canoe, because that would result in a loss of prestige; rather, all manufactured items were bought, and their possession reflected the owner's wealth and rank. People from low clans did not have the right to own such items or to have a house with many doors.

Within the past century, Palau has completely emerged from isolation into full participation in the modern world. Since 1955, Palau has been administered, in turn, by the Spanish, Germans, Japanese and Americans. Warfare and club life were weakened with each change in administration. Spanish and German missionaries eliminated the practice of women serving as sexual companions (in exchange for Palauan currency) in the bai. Germany sent scientific expeditions to Palau, but in their zest for collecting and with the intention of destroying club life, they cut beams from bai, or dismantled entire bai, to be sent to museums. The Japanese administration (1914-44) had the most lasting effect on Palauan life, remodeling every aspect of Palauan culture for participation in a modern world and economy. In an effort to increase exports to Japan, their administration sought ways of developing "authentic" Palauan handicrafts which could be sold to Japanese tourists and as exportable art.
3. The Airot Bei, southern Babelthuap Island (completed in 1974). The design with carvings of the currency symbol is found at the top of the faa, and a pattern of the clan (Tadrumu Gyanuruk) symbol forms the decorative design all the way down the sides of the roof beams. The rounded gable beams are used to depict a single story, and they are bordered by a zigzag line from which hangs the currency symbol. If one looks closely, one can see two faces on the door posts. These are representations of the currency god or gods of leading women in whom these posts are dedicated. Below the faces are another border of the clan symbol, the rooster, and two bands of the currency symbol. The lower decorations are repeated on all sides of the faa. The entire structure consists of sleepers placed on a stone platform (adnoenog).}

2. Interior beams and rafters (about 1910). The clan symbol is found on the upper rafter and in profusion on the strips which circle the interior of the faa. The currency symbol appears on some of the posts. In the stories depicted on the beams, the hills and trees, seen in the foreground, slightly another location or traveling a great distance.

3. Interior, Palau Museum Faai (constructed in Koror by men from Ngerulmud, Babelthuap Island, 1909). The design with currency carvings is located on each post, and the clan design occurs on the side strips of the faa and on the curved mat-holders (peklo). On the underside of the mat-holders is the spider symbol, and the tie-beam in the foreground tells the story of Mingeflorokkot. See page 16, err. 1.

4. Traditional Palauan house (about 1910), with woven pandanus walls. Only one such house is standing today in Melvords. In the foreground is a spirit house (adnoenog or shielcl fl); which traditionally was built in the shape of a Faai. Ancestors were buried in the stone platform (adnoenog) of a house, and food offerings were left for them in the spirit house or in a special part of the house. It was necessary to communicate with ancestors for advice or to learn the cause of sickness or death, so one offered them food or betel nut to keep them well-disposed toward the inhabitants of the house. At times of sickness, the ill person might be moved into the shrine. Other small shrines built and decorated in even smaller, last than the nunnery are dedicated to other gods or spirits (te shimunot te is a small basket which serves as a purse).
The transition from a story depicted on a bar beam or gable to a small portable board for expert came about during this period. This innovation was more or less the work of one individual, Hisataka Hijioka, a Japanese artist and folklorist who came to Palau in the 1930s to study art and encourage carvers still remember Hijioka and credit him with "teaching us how to make the board small." One of Hijioka's close friends disclosed how the teacher held classes in villages on Belauh Island and in the district center of Koror. Hijioka would visit the homes of the Paluans, request the elders to sketch stories. He then took these sketches to his students and told them to copy them on wood, making one copy per day until they had mastered their technique. Legends and myths were thereby moved from the realm of private knowledge into the public marketplace. This master artist was regarded as a purist, insisting that his students adhere strictly to the simple lines and colors of the beams and gables. It is reported that boards produced under his direction were difficult to distinguish from the original beams. Hijioka taught his students only approximately twenty of the several hundred stories depicted on beams, and many carvers are still reluctant to do boards other than those they learned from him.

The greatest changes in style and quality of storyboards came in the period following World War II. The American administration recognized the commercial potential of storyboards and encouraged their production. Then, as now, demand exceeded supply, and there was a proliferation of carvers of varying abilities.

The Japanese are said to have preferred painted storyboards. After the war, painted boards began to be done in glossy commercial paints (with the addition of blue and green to the traditional colors). When it was observed that Americans preferred deeply carved unpainted boards, this type of board became the major type to be produced. To add visual interest to the unpainted boards, backgrounds became more pronounced. Carvers experimented with various styles of depicting stories, settling on those styles which sold the best. In interviews with carvers, I learned that the motivating reasons for the changes that have come about since the war were always to accommodate style and content to the market, and the carver sells his best.

The district center of Koror today is "urban Oceanic," a jumble of iron and wooden buildings resembling those in Japanese or "American style," crowded together in a town that continues to grow too rapidly as people leave the more traditional outer islands for the city. While all communities still have a public building called a hea, these are generally a simple rectangular structure of sheet iron or concrete, used for meetings or public gatherings. In 1968, the Palau Museum constructed a hea on its grounds because it was feared knowledge of this traditional architectural would soon disappear. However, Palau is changing rapidly, as it has over the past century, and there is now a growing interest among Palauans in their traditions and history. By the summer of 1974, a community on southern Belauh had completed an old-style hea which they say is to be used in the traditional way: "rubik (elders) will sit inside and talk; young men can sit and listen outside; mecha (women) can dance inside." More "modern" Palauans suspect the community plans to charge tourists to photograph their hea.

Jets now bring visitors from Guam, and there is an air-conditioned American resort hotel to accommodate them. Japanese and American tourists come planning to buy a storyboard, and carvers are harassed by tourists who want boards on demand. When Koror is crowded with visitors, all boards are sold and people willcape or hire carvers to produce a board. Some carvers have instructed taxi drivers not to tell tourists where they live, preferring to leave boards at the hotel giftshop or to ship them to outlets in Guam or Kwaicelain, One of the places most likely to have boards available is the jail, where inmates have turned the carving of storyboards into a profitable business. The boards at the jail frequently emphasize the sexual aspects of old legends and legends to such an extent that they are called "porno boards."

In a situation where even bad boards can easily be sold, there is a wide range of talents among carvers, some of whom are students of Hijioka and regard themselves as "artists" in the Western sense, while others are not so knowledgeable and are simply trying to earn easy money. There is a small group of carvers who do not participate in the tourist trade but carve bowls or tables for other Paluans. While a skilled carver can produce both painted and natural boards, many young carvers say that paints are too much trouble. A board for the tourist trade can be produced in a few hours since it is automatic that carving for an outsider does not require the same care as for a friend or relative.

Price is determined by the square inch rather than by the space required in which to depict or represent a story. Perhaps for this reason, while carvers maintain they can carve any story, only a few themes repetitively appear on boards (although a different story might have been requested)—the breadth of legend, the history of Yapese coming to Palau to mine limestone for their currency, the story of two ill-fated lovers (Surech and Dulet), and several versions of legends of deceived husbands. Not all legends can be compressed into a small board. A board made for the Museum in the "old style" by the
1. Musanum is a diminutive, "goodbye and farewell" gift popular among the Grebes. Two good friends, held together, and when fishing was good, one stayed out fishing, while the other brought the catch to their homes. One of the friends asked his partner for sleep, and the other mixed sand and mud into the coconut shell and sent his body. That day, the acquisitive husband stayed out to fish and asked his partner to bring fish to his home. This friend brought the fish to the man's wife, and they slept together, afterwards rubbing their bodies with coconut oil.

When the adulterer rejoined the husband, the husband saw the black ink all over his hand and knew what had happened. He remained silent and waited until the next time. They had a lot of fish. He again asked his partner to bring fish back to their homes, and the partner agreed and visited the man's wife. The husband then sent a spear of hard wood and set sail for home. Shaking up on the reef, he hurled the spear through the reef, piercing the two bodies together. The board is identified by the couple being squared. Status of divorced husbands usually stress the devotions of the husband in learning the identity of his wife's lover. Many boards and boards have sexually explicit scenes.

2. In the traditional manner, boards are sketched by the carvers and given to young apprentices to be carved and finished in a white with "Kiri" brown shoe polish. Major carvers have developed their own individual styles, and young carvers hold the same successful ones.

3. The Breadfruit Tree (Njaujali). The female domesticus. Milon, female palms how to grow trees. In return, where she sailed to Njaujali Island (between Melanesia and New Guinea), she was welcomed by the gods with a breadfruit tree which yielded fish through its branches, thus ensuring the old woman of a steady supply of food. The villagers grew jealous of the woman and chopped down the magical tree. The ocean came up through the hollow branches and drowned all the villagers except Milon. The sunken island can still be seen below the water.

4. Based on the style of the Kau. Not all stories can be successfully reduced to a single symbol or a moderate sized board. The upturned canoe in this board can signify two different stories. An upturned canoe is the usual symbol for the story of Tengan, a son who rebelled against the control of his parents and left home. In a neighboring village club Tengan gained enough prestige and wealth to have a canoe made. The canoe was built in a period of time. Tengan had to call upon his father, an expert in magic, to say magical pronouncements to destroy the canoe. Tengan realized the value of parental love and, with his apology, was welcomed back into the family.

The same symbol can also suggest Speikob Rufel and Speikob Cheole ("outside child" and "inside child"). An adopted child was given poorer food than the natural child of the adoptive parents. The adopted child remained with them until he was grown. He then asked his father to build him a canoe. The father did, and in moving the canoe from the mountains to the ocean, it became stuck in the two swamp. The adopted son said magical words which made the canoe fly into the water. The boy then left, ruling the parent-child relationship with a curse that the adoptive family will have beneficial women but they will be plagued by misfortune and greed for food. This story teaches women not to mistreat adopted children.
The Deceived Husband of Ngelukau: In Ngelukau there lived a man who went to sea each day to fish for shark. The man had a wife who was unhappy with his behavior and wished to get his husband out of the house. One day when her husband was fishing, she saw a group of men waiting for the return of the canoe. Recognizing the need to leave, she went to her neighbor and asked for help. Her neighbor inspected the man's absence and found out that he was gone. To make matters worse, she murdered his neighbor and threw his body into the sea. The man returned and was shocked to see his neighbor's body. The story is retold by an invertebrate shark near the canoe.

2 Yap Currency Theme (Belau ni Bebekulreheini). The Yapese would use the lime stone for their currency and transported the huge disks a distance of some 200 miles by canoe to Yap. Several thousand pieces of the currency, some as large as 7 feet in diameter, remain in Yap, and pieces of incompletely mined limestone can be seen today in every corner. Most mining occurred during the middle of the 19th century, after European contact.

Storyboards use the doughnut-shaped disk as the requisite symbol, and some storyboards describe how to construct a story to tell about the story. The story is usually retold by a storyteller near the canoe.

Suggested Reading
Kramer, A.
1920
"Palau" (a representative of the Exposition der Süddeutschen-Exposition, 1920. 1920 -1921.
H. H. Schlesinger, Band 3. Tafelband 3, Hamburg, Friedrichshain: Dr. Gruyter; Part V is devoted to his sketches of scenes and their stories. Tafelbands 2 (1920) and 3 (1921) also have pictures of the currency and other items of Yapese material culture.
Kabary, J.S.
1925
McKnight, Robert K.
1987
"Palauan Storyboards." in Low, Milwaukee Public Museum Art Gallery (Spring issue).

master artist who sketched the Palau Museum huai boards depicts an upturned canoe in a large swamp, and this can suggest two different stories.

It is interesting to note that the boards most commonly produced for the tourist trade are of stories which can be represented by a simple symbol. If one sees an upturned shark (a sign of trouble at home to the fisherman), he knows it is one of the "deceived husband" stories. The doughnut-shaped disk is the requisite symbol for the Yapese currency legend, no matter what the size of the board. Fish coming through a tree trunk signify the breadfruit story. Most boards contain a representation of their origin, the huai, usually decorated with the currency demised or with the Palauan currency symbol. If a very small board is requested, the symbol can be used to suggest the story; a large board permits the carver to depict the central action of the story and the number of scenes can be further expanded to suit the size of the board. However, none of the modern storyboards actually depict a story in the traditional manner of the huai boards.

The use of symbols on boards is an element borrowed from the design elements of the huai. Woven carvings are still experimenting with styles other than those taught by the Yapese (representative by a large board). The symbol of a tree element in other traditional carved objects, is now used in storyboard borders and faces. Bowls were decorated with carvings in the round, and the workers in the jail are experimenting with producing "stories" in the round. "Some carvers are producing boards with the old style of shallow inscribing in response to the tourist demand for boards like those seen on the beams of the Palau Museum huai.

That storyboards are a link between life as depicted on huai boards and modern life can be seen in the following sequence. The beam in the foreground of the photograph of the interior of the Palau Museum huai depicts the story of Mingsibalukalo, who taught Palauan women how to deliver children naturally rather than by Caesarean section, and it shows the ritual stampings (mesroth) and public presentation of the new mother (ngosch) which take place at the birth of a first child. The same legend is still depicted in a modern storyboard by a student of the Yapese (representative by a large board). The public presentation of the new mother (ngosch) seems at the left of the storyboard, is a custom which died out under the Japanese but which has been revived by young Palauans, now frequently college students, who are finding renewed pride in Palauan traditions. Ngosch are now held each weekend for young women who have undergone the ritual baths and stamping (mesroth).
First Natural Childbirth Boi Bean. Reading this legend from left to right. (1) Mingadatukatuk is a spider in the trees. He looks down upon a beautiful girl, Turon, and wishes to marry her. (2) The design transforms himself into a man and assures the permission of Turon’s mother for the marriage. (3) Turon becomes pregnant and when it is time for her to deliver, the woman of her family come to be with her during this dangerous operation. Instead of the expected procedure of cutting the mother open with a broad knife, Mingadatukatuk shows her how to deliver a child naturally, and the tiny infant is seen coming from the mother. To the right of the house, women are mostly discussing the event. (4) Turon is sitting inside the house with her child, while people begin to prepare a steaming hot bath for her purification and healing baths (measure). (5) Mingadatukatuk goes to cut wood for this ritual, and in the mangrove swamp he is swallowed by a fish. He is seen inside the fish’s stomach. (6) He cuts himself out and returns to his home village.

First Natural Childbirth Modern Storyboard. (1) The panel to the right shows how the infant needs to be cut from the mother. If the new mother survived, she underwent hot baths, massages with coconut oil, herbs and tumeric, and a final steaming hot bath (nuwata). This procedure served to honestly her skin, help her heal, and make her “strong” so she could again work long hours in the hot sun. In this board, the new mother is seen sitting in a pan of boiling water (nuwata) since the new mother doesn’t sit in the water. (2) The center panel shows the infant being delivered naturally, while angry women shake their fists outside. (3) The left panel depicts the new mother’s first public appearance (ngireshe) after childbirth and the hot baths. “The scene given to this appearance, ngireshe, means to elevate,” and in some parts of Palau, the new mother was elevated on a high wooden platform. In other parts, she simply stands in front of a house.

Modern Nausch. The public presentation of the new mother to her kinmen, and to those of her husband to taking place in front of a newly built modern house of sheet iron, built on the stone platform of an old house. The girl is wearing a traditional multi-colored grass skirt and tight belt to accentuate her hips. On her neck is a piece of Palauan currency, placed there by the husband’s relatives in public recognition of the wife and child. The young mother is stained yellow with coconut oil mixed with tumeric. She stands on the woven mat on which she sat during her hot baths. Next to her is a basket of leafy leaves and herbs which were used during her final steaming with tumeric. A close female relative of the husband must dance for the new mother and child. While she is dancing, she will take some of these leaves and wash the girl’s feet. An unmarried mother cannot be said to “nau-sch.” Although she passed through the same series of baths and steamings and makes a public appearance, the day of her public presentation is called umberu or ngireshe, which means that there is “just water (nuwata) and nothing else.” The important ingredient—a husband to bring the valued currency—was missing.

Because storyboards of varying workshop are produced for the tourist trade, it has been suggested by some critics that all such items be considered merely “airport art” and not an “art form.” Such a view of the storyboard ignores the history and function of this art form in Palauan culture. It will be recalled that the board’s parent, the boi, was not intended solely as an aesthetically pleasing structure, and that the major content in boi decorations was in the selection of the story to be depicted. Instead, the boi served as a visual statement of the wealth and prestige of a clan and community. The wealth complex is still functioning quite strongly in Palauan social organization, and most of one’s efforts are devoted to acquiring Palauan currency and American money for one’s kinmen. It does not seem strange to me that the profit motive should be so firmly combined with Palauan carving today. These visual statements of another way of viewing the world would not have survived without the profit motive.

DeVeese Reed Smith collected the storyboards for this exhibit during fifteen months of residence and research in social organization and adoptive practices on Hoholup Island, Palau. She is presently completing her doctoral dissertation in the Department of Anthropology at the University of California at Berkeley, with a scholarship from the American Alpine Club Fellowship in Women’s Studies.

The long debate whether New Guinea masks or African carvings might be considered “art” has brought into focus two different ways of viewing art—the approach of anthropologists, who examine an item’s function and place within a specific culture, and the approach of art critics, who react to the aesthetics of an isolated piece stripped of its context and symbolic meaning within that culture. Palauan storyboards—popular items created simply for profit, but based upon a traditional art form—again raise the question of “what is art?” and “who decides what is art?”, “primitive art” or “airport art?”