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 (Austronesian) 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 Trobriand 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 (sulua) that move in a clockwise direction, and arm rings of white shell (muaili) 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 Trobriand 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, muaili, which accompanied the inserting of the decorated prow-boards at the ends of the hull.

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 toliago (owner of the canoe) hammers the boards in by means of a special stone imported from Dobu, and ritually repeats a formula of the musili 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 boki, 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 4/20/26-12/29/00

One day, while playing golf with Mrs. John Hyland Dills, 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 Postwatch luncheon room (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.
The Kula trade, so central to life in the Massim area in Malinowskii’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.

Bibliography

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Adria H. Katz is Keeper of the Oceanian Section of the University of Pennsylvania Museum.