

***Ancestors of the Lake:
Art of Lake Sentani and Humboldt Bay, New Guinea***

On View at the Menil May 6 – August 28, 2011

Exhibition Preview: Thursday, May 5, 7 – 9 p.m.

For the first time in more than 50 years American audiences can discover rarely seen treasures from the South Pacific

Exclusive U.S. venue

Houston, April 11, 2011 – European navigators began traveling to coastal areas of New Guinea in the sixteenth century, but it was not until 1858 that the Dutch Etna Expedition reached Humboldt Bay and Lake Sentani (in the present-day Indonesian province of Papua, located in western New Guinea). Subsequent scientific and surveying expeditions piqued mounting interest from the West and prompted Europeans to visit the region, observe the culture, and collect works by living artists.

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features works acquired by two of those pioneering visitors to the region: Swiss explorer, ethnologist, photographer, and collector Paul Wirz and French adventurer, art dealer, photographer, and author Jacques Viot, both of whom were active during a notable period of research and collecting that began in 1921.



On view at the Menil from May 6 through August 28, ***Ancestors of the Lake*** features 50 works, including a group of highly stylized and abstracted wooden sculptures and decorative designed barkcloths (called *maro*), presented along with rare photographs of these objects in situ. In the twentieth century

these exquisitely carved figures and objects and delicately rendered *maro* inspired Surrealist artists and caught the attention of notable collectors – including John and Dominique de Menil.

Curated by Virginia-Lee Webb, an art historian specializing in non-Western art and a former curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, ***Ancestors of the Lake*** juxtaposes selections from the Menil's permanent holdings with pieces drawn from public and private collections in Australia, Europe, and the United States.

As Westerners became more exposed to the art of the Pacific Islands, they began to appreciate its formal artistic qualities: modernists identified with its linear elegance and Surrealists found



kindred spirits in its abstract patterns and pure sculptural forms. The art of Lake Sentani reached its greatest acclaim in the West in the 1930s. On the impetus of renowned Parisian gallery owner Pierre Loeb, a champion of Surrealist artists such as Joan Miró and Max Ernst, Viot journeyed to New Guinea to collect carved sculptures and purchase *maro* samples from local artists. Galleries in Paris and New York highlighted works brought back by Viot, which were shown to a wide public at New York's Museum of Primitive Art groundbreaking exhibition of 1959. More than half a century has passed since that landmark exhibition.



Ancestors of the Lake unites the famed Viot collection with equally superior examples of Sentani and Humboldt Bay art gathered by Wirz and others. Among the illuminating pairings in the exhibition: Viot's photograph of the sculpture *Double Figure from a Housepost (The Lilly)* with the sculpture itself, presented alongside newly discovered stills by Man Ray. This visual chronology highlights the unique dynamism of Lake Sentani art. Among the eight *maro* works on display are two collected by Viot in 1929 and purchased by the de Menils in 1932. In the following years, the de Menils would add three

Sentani sculptures and another barkcloth to their collection – all the results of Viot’s expeditions. Today, these works form a core strength of the Menil’s collection of art from the Pacific Islands – a sampling of which is now on view in the museum’s newly installed Pacific Islands gallery.

Ancestors of the Lake will be accompanied by an extraordinary catalogue, edited by Virginia-Lee Webb, including essays by leading scholars as well as historical photographs of Sentani and Humboldt Bay. The 128-page volume features new scholarship on Western explorations of northern New Guinea, including Viot’s journey, as well as the stills by Man Ray. Never has a publication so keenly represented masterpieces from these regions.

This exhibition is generously supported by Art Mentor Foundation Lucerne, National Endowment for the Arts, Anne S. Brown, Ballard Exploration Company, Inc., George and Mary Josephine Hamman Foundation, Dedalus Foundation, Bettie Cartwright, Pride International, Inc., Stardust Fund, Texan-French Alliance for the Arts, W.S. Bellows Construction Corporation, the City of Houston and by proceeds from Men of Menil. Exhibition underwriter United Airlines is the Preferred Airline of the Menil Collection.

Public Programs:

Tuesday, April 19th, 8:00 p.m. Film Screening “Oh What a Blow That Phantom Gave Me”

This 2003 film draws on Edmund Carpenter’s 1972 book of the same name about the effects of film media on the population of Papua New Guinea. Footage showing what were once secret tribal ceremonies alternates with discussions by American anthropologists about the ironic consequences of using film to document and preserve cultures. Does documentary filmmaking encroach upon and irreversibly alter those cultures? (running time 52 minutes)

Friday, May 6th, 8:00 p.m. Illustrated Lecture by Dadi Wirz

“Paul Wirz and New Guinea” – Paul Wirz’s son Dadi – who traveled to New Guinea with his father in 1953, and alone in 1955 and 2004 – will speak about his visits to Lake Sentani, and illustrate the talk with Paul Wirz’s remarkable photographs, rare visual records of a culture.

Photo credits:

Standing Man, 19th-20th century, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A. Rockefeller, 1979, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Michael C. Rockefeller Memorial Collection, Bequest of Nelson A.

Rockefeller, 1979, Copy photograph © The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Source: Art Resource, NY.

Maro (barkcloth) Painted bark cloth (tapa), The Menil Collection, Houston, Photo: A. Mewbourn

Figure, [Le Lys] Double Figure from a Housepost, Le Lys), 1929 National Gallery of Australia, Canberra

For more information and images,
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