

# THE TRADITIONAL POTTERY OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA

By PATRICIA MAY and MARGARET TUCKSON.

Hindmarsh (South Australia), Crawford House Publishing. (Also released by University of Hawai'i Press and Hurst UK). 2000. Revised edition. xii, 380 pp. Maps, charts, graphs, copious color and b&w illus., cloth. A\$76.95 including GST (ISBN 1-86333-172-7)

This book review was published in 2002 in *Pacific Arts* 23-24: 129-31  
© 2002 Rod Ewins and Pacific Arts

---

It would require temerity to write a critique of a book that has already become the classic reference work in its field, and which has already been reviewed many times. My position, rather, is that the publication of a new, revised edition permits the celebration of the authors' achievement, and a note of encouragement to those who may have not yet seen the book, to seek it out.

There have been few surveys of single artforms for any Pacific country, and none that I know of even approaches this combination of regional comprehensiveness, technical detail and social analysis. Part of the secret is its co-authorship by a practising artist-potter (Tuckson) who could both understand and talk artist-to-artist about technical and aesthetic detail, and an art historian (May), who was able to provide a theoretical and analytical framework for the information..

The authors point out in the Preface that their research started in 1965. The time-lapse until publication by Bay Books in Sydney in 1982 reflects the massive task they undertook. This was the first comprehensive survey of the ceramic productions of the enormous number and bewilderingly diverse cultures of PNG. Given the change that is occurring in that country, much that it documents will have disappeared or changed dramatically before another such survey could possibly be undertaken. They relied hardly at all on the fieldwork of others, but rather undertook to visit the hundreds of remote communities themselves to talk to the makers and watch and document their work, an undertaking that would have made lesser hearts quail. Their dedication honored the artists concerned, and the resulting book provides a challenging benchmark for all of us who write about art in *any* social context.

As Jim Specht of the Australian Museum says in his foreword to this new edition, although the authors painstakingly researched the literature related to their topic, this is not a history or prehistory book — other works dealing with those matters have been published, some during the past decade. Nor, though the book is replete with wonderful evocative pictures, did they emulate the plethora of picture-books on Pacific (and African and American) art that generally feature skillfully-photographed but totally decontextualized museum objects, presented primarily for our aesthetic delectation, but often with only superficial reference to those objects' social lives.

The "tradition" in the book's title relates not merely to the form of the pots, but to the whole cultural context within which living artists produce their art, binding history, aesthetics, and practical and social function, into objects that have multiple layers of meaning for the societies. There is throughout the book a clear account of the

ceremonial exchange and non-ceremonial trade that characterize craft industries throughout the Pacific. The authors certainly recognize that pots are “precious objects and [for example] valued for bride price payments” (p.147), but just how the societies conceptualize “preciousness” is not explained. It is, to be sure, extremely difficult to fathom such subtleties in the relatively short contact periods necessitated by such comprehensive surveys, and in fairness to the authors, this is an area that has challenged (and defeated) great numbers of ethnographers and economic theorists to date, and no doubt will continue to provoke debate.

Nonetheless, in an ideal world I would have liked to see the issue teased out a bit more. In Pacific societies as a whole, *both* the objects and the exchange mechanisms associated with them carry meaning. The totality goes far beyond being merely social contracts for the production and acquisition of utilitarian or even economically valuable objects. At the second level, these systems are important for regularly exchanging symbols of identity and thereby maintaining social and kinship networks, avoiding war and maintaining alliances. But overarching these concerns, they are the means of sustaining social, gender and cosmological balance for the groups. It is the loss of this balance that causes greatest indigenous concern when traditional mechanisms of production and exchange are disrupted by externally-generated change, not merely sadness at the erosion of traditions.

All that said, there is much in the book that has, during the two decades of my use of it, provoked me into new areas of thought and investigation in my own (non-New Guinean) researches, and not merely into ceramics. For example, in the Introduction there are some excellent maps and tables that highlight some interesting connections and disjunctions, such as those between the language groups makers belong to, whether the pots are made by men or women, and what technology they use.

Women appear to be the principal potters among Austronesian speakers, and they tend to favor paddle-and-anvil pottery. This is consistent with Austronesian-speaking potters elsewhere in the Pacific where women alone are the potters (such as the Solomons, Vanuatu and Fiji), and use paddle-and-anvil beating, though they often do some preliminary slab-, coil-, and/or ring-building. But there are paradoxical exceptions. To take one region as an example, most of the potters in the Morobe district are Austronesian-speaking, but while in the coastal areas it is the women who make pots, those of the Huon Peninsula use paddle-and-anvil beating, while those of the Huon Gulf use spiral coiling. To further confuse the issue, in the hinterland (such as among the Watut) men alone make pots, using spiral coiling and finishing off with beating.

In the non-Austronesian speaking potter groups, both men and women generally make pots, and the predominant technology is spiral coiling, though there are exceptions to both. There are, for instance, areas scattered from the West Sepik eastward through the East Sepik and Madang to the Eastern Highlands, in which men alone are the potters, using spiral coiling.

While the general patterns appear to bespeak strongly persistent cultural norms particular to original settlement groups still identifiable by their languages, the exceptions leave an anthropologist pondering issues such as whether, and how, male/female relationships are different in the exceptional groups, and whether the technological exceptions to the general tendencies are a product of diffusion from

neighboring groups or are the result of parallel technical evolution. The questions are very consciously raised in this book, opening rich seams for future researchers to mine.

Apart from the technological differences between coiling, ring-building and paddle-and-anvil, the book provides rich detail of the different forms of pots, from functional cooking-pots and storage vessels to anthropomorphic cult-objects. It also describes fully and illustrates copiously the very great differences in decoration, from plainware through impressed, incised and appliqué decoration such as that done by the women of the Amphlett Islands in Milne Bay Province, to the deep curvilinear carving done by men in different parts of the Sepik. The density and completeness of the different stylistic complexes cannot fail to provoke wonder and admiration in any artist or scholar of comparative ethnology.

Finally, as a designer I can't resist a few remarks about the book as physical object. Crawford House Publishing have produced previous PAA Conference paper collections, Artistic Heritage in a Changing Pacific and Art and Performance in Oceania. Those were quality productions, yet this surpasses them, doing full justice to the quality of its contents. Handsome as the first edition was, it was cumbersome, both very large and very heavy (about 2.3 kg). Crawford have made the wise decision to reduce the size by about 25% and the weight by 40%, resulting in a book that is far more likely to be readily picked up and browsed. The resulting reduction in size of most of the illustrations loses them little or nothing in clarity and sometimes they gain in richness. The type-face chosen, while not as individualistic or stylish, is more readable than the rather dense Novarese of the original. Page redesign has also been successful; 2.5-column text layout has been substituted for the original 2 columns, a flexible template that facilitates a more dynamic arrangement of pictures, and parallel captioning. The nice feature of page captions has been retained to identify the particular Province being discussed, so that if one is browsing, it is not necessary to leaf back in search of chapter headings.

To die-hard collectors, revised editions seem to lose some of the magic of first editions. But in this instance not merely some of the information, but also its presentation have been updated to advantage, and keep an important work available in exciting form to a new generation of readers. It is a pleasure to be able to commend it both for the excellence of its scholarship and for its elegant production.

School of Art, University of Tasmania, Hobart, Australia

Rod Ewins

