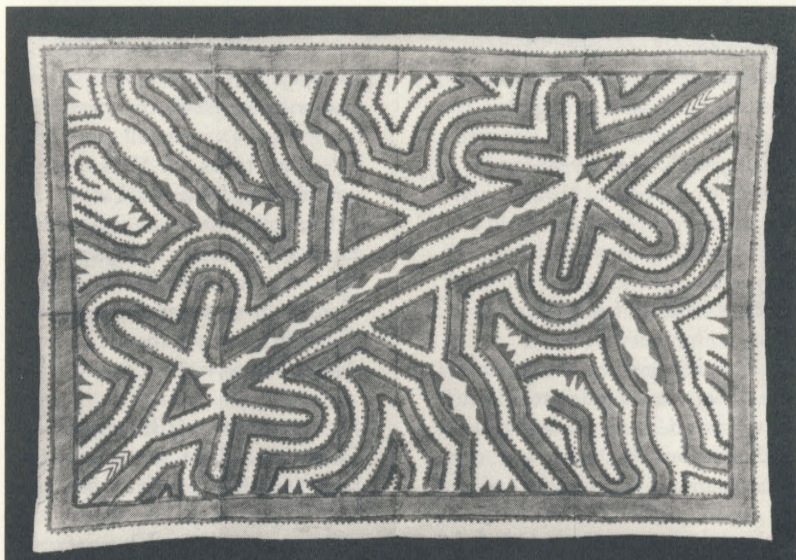


Jumping Lines: Maisin Art and
Rainforest Conservation
MATRIX/BERKELEY 165

University Art Museum /
Pacific Film Archive
mid April -early July 1995

Nathalie Rarama, Untitled, ca. 1994



This MATRIX exhibition is based on the belief that museums can serve as bridges between seemingly disparate cultures of the world that are, in fact, linked by their common need for aesthetic and spiritual practices, healing arts, environmental conservation, cultural survival, education, and economic well-being.

Working in collaboration with Greenpeace International, the museum contacted artists of the Maisin people of Papua New Guinea to propose an exhibition of their extraordinary tapa cloth paintings. The exhibition was developed through a year-long dialogue between the curators and the Maisin people. We traveled to the Maisin region on Collingwood Bay in the summer of 1994 to work directly with the tapa artists and other community leaders in determining the scope and nature of the exhibition, including works to be displayed, methods of display and interpretation, and accompanying programs.

Tapa cloth is made by pounding the outer layer of the mulberry tree until it is almost paper thin. The pigments used in the painting are derived from various rainforest plants. While tapa cloth painting is widely practiced in many equatorial regions of the world, the art of the Maisin people is distinctive for its vivid, abstract compositions and for the wide-ranging, imaginative variety of the works.

The Maisin use painted tapa cloth as clothing, for healing rituals, for trade, and as art for placement in domestic interiors. All of the works in this exhibition were made as works of art and have no utilitarian or sacred function. With a few

exceptions, such as occasional images of plants, insects, or imagery derived from dreams, the Maisin paintings are typically non-representational and non-symbolic. Most tapa paintings are composed of four sections: the artist first paints one section from their imagination, then—with only the second section visible—they repeat the first image from memory. This process is repeated in the third and fourth sections thereby creating an impression of the imagination seen over time and through a veil of memory. Working within a traditional emphasis on linear designs and a very small range of colors and tones, the Maisin artists are able to produce works that are individually distinctive and boldly expressive. The vast majority of tapa artists are women, although there has been a recent increase in the participation in this art form among Maisin men.

For this exhibition, the museum commissioned the creation of a new large-scale collaborative work to become part of the permanent collection. While such large pieces involving the joining of numerous individual tapa cloths are rare, an interesting precedent is a work produced by commission for the Archbishop of Canterbury in the early 1990s. The collaborative method of the piece done for this museum was encouraged by the Maisin leaders to help foster stronger community ties between the villages and clans.

The Maisin people are hopeful that by presenting their tapa cloth paintings in America they will be able to build bridges that will help them to insure the survival of their culture and environment. The sale of tapa cloth paintings is, at present,

one of the few viable alternatives identified by the Maisin people to selling the rights to log the estimated 100,000 acres of tropical rainforest under their jurisdiction. Although in need of cash for medicine, education, and transportation and under heavy pressure to sell their timber rights to foreign logging corporations (the value of their timber has been estimated at 500 million U.S. dollars), the Maisin have nonetheless decided to preserve their environment and are exploring possible designation of their land as a National Park or World Heritage Site.

In conjunction with this exhibition, the museum and Greenpeace are sponsoring a visit by two Maisin artists who will be present to discuss tapa cloth painting. In addition, one clan leader will come to the Bay Area in order to develop long-term tapa marketing strategies as well as to confer with those interested in setting up limited ecotourism in the Maisin region.

The museum and Greenpeace are collaborating with Nicholas Bowness of San Francisco-based Petroglyph Productions on the creation of an interactive multimedia kiosk that will provide information concerning the tapa cloth art form and its relation to the current efforts to ensure a sustainable future for the Maisin people.

Lawrence Rinder
Curator for Twentieth-Century Art
University Art Museum and Pacific
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Lafcadio Cortesi
Forest Campaigner
Greenpeace Pacific

Works in MATRIX:

All works are untitled, tapa cloth and pigment, executed between 1993 and 1995, and are lent from private collections with the exception of the large-scale collaborative work commissioned for the museum's collection. Represented in this exhibition are: Marjorie B., Emily Barran, Grace Dona, Violet G., Constance Godina, Jera H., Velma K., Elizabeth N., Rachel N., Ori, Nathalie Rarama, Frances Mary Ribeyo, Franklin Seri, Josephine Seri, Lucy Y., and several unknown artists.

Previous group exhibitions:

Thomas Burke Memorial
Washington State Museum, *Tapa Cloth of Papua New Guinea*, organized by John Barker Ph.D., Seattle, WA '87. The Maisin have also participated in exhibitions in Edinburgh, Scotland and Fiji.

Selected bibliography:

Mikloucho-Maclay, Nikolai Nikolaevich. *New Guinea Diaries: 1871-1883*, trans. by C. L. Sentinella (Kristen Press Inc.: Madang, Papua New Guinea '75).

Mosuwadoga, G. N. *Traditional Techniques and Values in the Lower Musa River* (The Trustees of the National Museum and Art Gallery: Waigani, National Capital District, Papua New Guinea '77).

Barker, John. "Maisin Christianity: An Ethnography of the Contemporary Religion of a Seaboard Melanesian People" (Ph.D. thesis, University of British Columbia '85).

Smith, Gar. "Pimps, Pay-Offs and Death Threats: The Battle for Control of PNG's Forests," *Earth Island Journal* (Winter '93-94), p. 18).

Shenon, Philip. "Isolated Papua New Guineans Fall Prey to Foreign Bulldozers," *The New York Times* (5 June '94), pp. A-1, A-14.

Cortesi, Lafcadio and Ka'au Kena'e. "In Death of Rainforests, We're All Accomplices," *The New York Times* (20 June '94), p. A-10.

Rinder, Lawrence, Lafcadio Cortesi, Nicholas Bowness, et al., "Jumping Lines: Maisin Art and Rainforest Conservation," *HotWired* (11 April - 2 July '95), <http://www.hotwired.com/>.

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