



Paint dish

Not on display

Title/Description: Paint dish

Object Type: Dish

Materials: Fibre, Wood

Measurements: l. 330 x w. 130 x d. 20 mm

Accession Number: 574

Historic Period: Early 20th century

Production Place: Middle Sepik River, New Guinea, Oceania, Pacific

Cultural Group: Iatmul

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1978

Artefacts that come from Iatmul society, such as this paint dish, are covered all over with traditional designs and patterns that symbolise certain beliefs about the object. This paint dish is sculpted as a crocodile, with the head and tail sticking out at both ends. The round shape in the middle, which forms the dish, symbolises the stomach part of the crocodile. The carved paint dish is covered with artwork which indicates that the maker of this piece had a lot of ideas and stories to share.

Provinces in Papua New Guinea have specific animals, insects and objects that represent them. For example, in Goroka we have *Nokondi*, a mythical bush spirit that's well known in the province. In Sepik society, the image of the crocodile will always remain one of their main subjects. Crocodiles appear in many of their stories, and Sepik society have a very strong relationship with crocodiles in their customs. Magical songs are practised during the whole process of making this type of artwork: in the preparation of wood, during the selecting of pigments to be mixed as paint for the wood, sculpting, painting and in making finishing touches on the artwork. These practises were historically part of Sepik culture and beliefs and continue today.

Pax Jakupa, February 2023

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

Among the Iatmul hardly any artefact was left uncarved or undecorated. This paint dish, resembling a miniature canoe with boar] crocodile prow piece, is carved with a humanoid face on the chest and has a further mask as the tail, through the back of which is looped a suspension cord. The recessed areas are filled with grey-white pigment, which dramatically sets off the surface patterns. Stylistically it closely resembles a wood mallet in Berlin, which was collected at Timbunke in 1912/13 (Kelm, 1966: I: 443).

Paint made from mineral and vegetable pigments, is an important substance in New Guinea societies, and therefore it is not unexpected that dishes for mixing paints should be carefully made. Forge (1962) has stressed the magical potency of certain types of paint used in sorcery, and also noted that the painting and repainting of house fronts, sculptures and trophy heads was a sacred and dangerous activity.

Steven Hooper, 1997

Entry taken from *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, Vol. 2: Pacific, African and Native North American Art*, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997) p. 53.
