



Ceremonial shield

On display

Title/Description: Ceremonial shield

Object Type: shield

Materials: Cane, Gum, Shell, Wood

Measurements: h. 875 x w. 260 x d. 60 mm

Accession Number: 632

Historic Period: Early/mid 19th century

Production Place: Central region, Oceania, Pacific, Solomon Islands

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1978

These rare shields are among the most outstanding achievements of Solomon Islands art, yet little is known of their use or significance. Twenty-one examples are currently known (Waite, 1983b: 120-1), and all have the same general appearance, though they differ in details of decoration. Few have any associated historical information and none of the late nineteenth or early twentieth century writers in the field makes direct reference to them. The earliest reliable information relates to an inlaid shield in the Brooklyn Museum (*ibid.*: 119-23), which had been acquired by the Montrose Museum in 1852 and was probably collected in the Solomon Islands during the 1840s. The present shield also came to light in Scotland, in an antique shop in 1975, though without documentation. It seems that decorated shields ceased to be made after the mid nineteenth century, by which time only a few had been acquired by Europeans.

This example consists of a basic central Solomon Islands wickerwork shield, to the front of which has been applied a layer of gum made from the kernel of the 'putty nut' (*Parinarium laurinum*), which is pale when fresh, but black and hard once dry (see Ivens, 1927: 151 for details). Some areas of the gum are painted red and tiny segments of nautilus shell have been applied to make up the main designs. These give a beautiful opalescent turquoise effect when the shield is moved in the light. While the front of the shield is remarkably well preserved, the back (also illustrated here) is missing the vertical hand grip and three of the seven original cross-struts. Black designs are painted at the top and bottom.

Interpretation of the designs on the shield is problematic, given the lack of historical or local information. However, bearing in mind the usual protective function of a shield, it is possible that the figures represented are tutelary spirits or deities, although Sillitoe (1980: 497) has suggested, on the basis of an analysis of Wola shields from the New Guinea Highlands, that anthropomorphic designs are connected with the practice of revenge killing, for which a human victim was required.

The precise place of manufacture of this type of shield is also uncertain. Wickerwork shields were made in New Georgia, Santa Isabel and Guadalcanal, but Waite's review of the evidence shows that even on this point there is no firm information (Waite, 1983b: 115-16). Shields were also used as

valuables in exchanges, for Woodford (1926: 485) noted that plain shields (and probably formerly also the inlaid type) were 'articles of barter amongst the natives of the islands where they are in use', thus suggesting that the place of collection need not necessarily correspond to the place of manufacture.

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) pp. 68-69.
