

Decolonizing "Primitive" Collections: Representations and Perceptions of Asmat Art in Western
Institutions

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Abstract

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Throughout the era of colonization in Oceania and Southeast Asia, collectors have often neglected to use ethical practices when acquiring objects or artwork, much of which was deeply important to spirituality or culture. Many of these artworks ended up in museums, which are also inherently colonial institutions. It has only been in recent years that institutions have actively been working to decolonize and ethically research their collections. Though much work has been done on collections from certain locations, this level of research has not been popularized for art pieces from Papua, specifically the Asmat region. This lack of research and information about collections affects the level of education museums can provide to the general public. I argue that the way museums present the data and information about Papuan art, specifically Asmat, and display its objects affects the way museum visitors perceive culture. To achieve my goals, I will draw on documents, journal entries, Papuan and Indigenous studies scholarship, and my personal experiences as someone who has worked with museum collections.

In this thesis, I will discuss how the colonial history of Papua has affected Papuan art collections, and how museums are changing in their processes to actively decolonize these

collections. I address how the Dutch and Indonesian colonial presence changed the Papuan landscape and collection practices done by early colonials who traveled to this region. After this, I showcase how collection practices and then displays of Asmat art impact the way art, and thus culture, can be perceived in the West. I then conclude this research with my final chapter by discussing what collaboration can look like with Asmat communities and Western museums. Through my work, I aim to educate about the harm of colonial legacies left on Papuan people and artworks, providing frameworks on how to dismantle such structures in the museum space.

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Ethics

In the third chapter of this work, I include information from an interview I conducted with an organization based in Agats, Asmat called Asmat Archives. I have included this interview in this work as the information discussed is vital to share with institutions. However, I must discuss the ethics of this interview, as I am not an Asmat person and I am studying in a university, which can lead to unequal power dynamics. Thus, it is important I acknowledge my position and explain my ethics while conducting the interview.

I became connected to this organization through my previous work and have worked with one of the members for the past year and a half to build a collaborative relationship and to figure out how we can ethically incorporate more perspectives into this work. In my research, I do not intend to let this interview be the end of my relationship with the organization, but only the start of a long-term relationship built on trust, respect, and transparency. All information shared in this work was done so consensually and with the knowledge of how it would be used by the participants. There are aspects of this interview I chose intentionally not to include for privacy.

There are certain limitations to what I can know as a researcher due to my positionality. As a non-Asmat and non-Papuan person studying at a university in the United States, there are lived experiences and information that I do not know. There are plenty of scholarly resources I have access to, but I do not have personal accounts of the situations Papuan people encounter daily while living in Papua. My background, working in museums and with collections directly shapes my interpretation and how I approach topics of museum representation, ethics, representation, and preservation, which may be different from how community members view these topics.

The interview was conducted over Zoom, as I could not be in Asmat for a few reasons. Thus, the interviews were done remotely, which does limit the information available. Often, information is lost when a person cannot experience a place firsthand. Because of this, there are limits to what I can know as someone who has not lived there. The only ways I have learned about this region are from literature, film, interviews, and the first-hand accounts of others who have visited, which limits the information I have been able to learn. It is important to note that what I know about this region is, unfortunately, not from my own lived experience.

Additionally, Papua is currently being occupied by the Indonesian military and police, with citizens sometimes encountering severe forms of violence. People who have openly opposed the Indonesian government's rule in this region have been targeted for their beliefs and identities. Because of political tensions and military violence, I chose to be careful in the questions I asked, and did not ask, to make sure no person in the interview felt uncomfortable or afraid. This, in turn, limits the amount of information I know about this area, as people may be hesitant to speak on certain topics in fear of retaliation.

While conducting the online interviews, I let the participants know they did not need to answer any questions they did not want to answer and allowed them to speak about what they wanted to. By letting them guide the conversation and ask me questions about myself, my positionality, and my research, I worked to ensure they retained agency over what information they wished to share and how they wished to engage with the interview process.

I view this interview not only as a source of information, but as the start and part of an ongoing collaborative relationship through which knowledge, feedback, and perspectives can continue to be shared.

Introduction

Throughout the era of colonization of Oceania, collectors have often neglected to use ethical practices when acquiring objects or artwork, much of which was deeply important to spirituality or culture. Many of these objects have ended up in museums, which are also colonial institutions (Onciul 2015). Institutions have actively been working to decolonize and ethically research their collections over the past 40 years, with laws and policies such as NAGPRA (Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act) going into effect. Though much work has been done on collections from certain locations, this level of research has not been popularized for artworks from Papua, specifically the Asmat region. This lack of research and information about collections affects the level of education museums can provide to the public.

I argue that the way museums present the data and information about Papuan art, specifically Asmat, and display cultural artworks affects the way museum visitors perceive culture. The idea of the "primitive" was created to other people of color and to assert concepts of inferiority over another ethnic or racial group (Hsu 1964). Although many argue that this term is outdated and choose not to use it anymore, museums and other institutions still perpetuate this idea through their collections and practices and the information they make publicly available. This thesis has three chapters, each highlight the entanglements, as Eben Kirksey created, Asmat people and their art find themselves in. Papuan people exist within colonial entanglements, along with their governmental colonizer, Indonesia, and extraction agencies. Building on Kirksey's concept of colonial entanglements, I bring new agents into this structure throughout the work.

The first chapter, *History of Colonial Contact in Western Papua*, is about the colonial history of Papua, setting the framework for chapters two and three. Papua's first colonial

occupier was the Dutch, which were looking to expand their colonial empire with the resource rich but rough landscape of Papua. Papuan people were able to negotiate with the Dutch colonizers, as they both came to rely on each other for certain skills, including traversing the mountains, and resources, such as food. The Western half of the island was then taken by Indonesia, where this relationship changed. Indonesia was not looking to engage with negotiations, resulting in increased violence and silent assertions of power by Papuan people. Unlike other parts of Papua, another agent took part in colonial entanglements Kirksey discusses. The Crosier Missionaries were the first Catholic missionaries to enter this region and are still doing missionary work in Asmat.

The second chapter, *Collections and Visualities*, discusses the idea of the "primitive", illustrating how museums and other educational media forms have perpetuated this concept in the West. These conceptions do not simply go away when museums choose to not include them anymore, as this concept is now part of the ethnic group or art collections the word was assigned to. Western representations of Asmat art have been crafted in a way that reflects prejudice against Asmat people. The representations of Asmat art and culture in the West have exoticized Asmat people whilst also centering male voices. Such practices have warped perspectives on fact versus curated narrative, which directly correlates to the collections of art Western museums now have.

The third chapter, *Museums and Communities Now: What Can Museums Do*, discusses the state of museums and collections now. Drawing on decoloniality theory and Indigenous ontology theory, I argue why museums and institutions must connect with Asmat communities to start the process of dismantling the colonial structure in museums that actively harm Asmat communities. Using interviews conducted with Asmat Archives, an educational and cultural

organization based in Agats, Asmat, I highlight the key aspects of collaboration Asmat community's desire.

I would like to discuss my positionality for this research. I am not a person of Asmat or Papuan descent, as I am a biracial South Asian and European American researcher, thus the culture I am writing about in this research is not my own. I came to research Asmat Art during my undergraduate at the University of St. Thomas, where I worked at the American Museum of Asmat Art (AMAA). While there, I became interested in displays and representation of Asmat art, as I noticed that other institutions did not treat their collections with the same care as the AMAA's. As I have continued my research, I have connected to individuals and communities that are connected to Asmat communities and who are Asmat themselves, as I wanted to better understand the cultural and political nuances of what I am discussing. My experiences working with Asmat collections have greatly shaped the topics I analyze and my understanding of museums. Even though my positions working at institutions such as the American Museum of Asmat Art and the Burke Museum have shaped my viewpoints, I do not represent any of these institutions, as my research was fully conducted as student researcher, not on behalf of any institution or organization.

There are several limitations to this research, such as not being able to visit Asmat or other global collections of Asmat art, as there was not enough time nor funding to do so. Because of this, my primary sources have been books, exhibitions, research papers, and meetings. While this project does not claim to speak for Asmat communities, I aim to center Asmat community voices on how they envision collaboration with Western Institutions. I hope that from my work, readers are better able to understand how to connect with Asmat communities and collaborate,

building meaningful relationships, dismantling the biases in their collections, and giving authority to Asmat communities on how they want to be represented.

Chapter 1

History of Colonial Contact Throughout Papua

The colonial history of Papua is long full of strife between the many countries involved with this occupation. In this section, I will provide background on the colonial history of Papua, providing evidence to showcase how colonial relationships between Papua and their colonizer shifted when Indonesia assumed control of the land. I argue that although Papuans used to be able to negotiate with the colonial power when they were under Dutch authority, they now find themselves in a more challenging entanglement with their current colonizer, Indonesia. West Papua is now at the center of many global superpowers, as it is rich in resources that are widely profitable. Papua now finds itself in a relationship of silent negotiation and more violence than they previously experienced.

Authors such as Danilyn Rutherford explore colonial relationships with Papuan people through books such as *Living in the Stone Age: Reflections on the Origins of a Colonial Fantasy*, which discuss increased Dutch occupation in Papua in the 1930s. The Dutch colonials made outposts throughout the island, and due to the desire of colonial expansion wanted to go to the interior regions of Papua, such as the Highlands. Throughout Rutherford's book, she illustrates how even though the colonials came to Papua to conquer the land, they could not and heavily relied on Papuan people for survival. The colonials thought they were the ones conquering the land and the people, but Papuan people also possessed power. Rutherford argues that colonial authority was performative and negotiated between both parties.

Although the Dutch had access to more powerful technology, such as guns, which both instilled fear and curiosity from Papuan people, the Dutch heavily relied on Papuans to survive this landscape, as it was very different from their previous lived experiences (Rutherford 2018).

The Dutch hired guides and translators, people to carry their belongings as they hiked into the highlands, because they could not navigate this place themselves. This shows how the Dutch heavily depend on the Papuan people and emphasizes the need of Papuan people for the Dutch to assert control over the western half of the island of New Guinea. Papuan people did not do this for free, as they also benefited by receiving items in return for their services or even elevated social status. Rutherford argues that Papuans were the hospitable host, and the Dutch were the guests of the land, with Papuan's choosing which people to help and negotiating their own power. This is not to say that violence and fear was not used by the Dutch to colonize Papua, as it widely was. Many Papuan people were murdered by the Dutch due to the Dutch desires for conquest and compliance. While a negotiated relationship occurred between Papua and the Netherlands, this relationship ended in the 1960s when the Dutch relinquished this territory.

In 1962, after tense situations between the Netherlands and Indonesia, the UN became involved with the political situation (Kirksey 2012). It resulted in the two signing a treaty called the United Nations Temporary Executive Authority, meaning that the United Nations would temporarily take control of West Papua, and ownership would soon be handed over to Indonesia. When Indonesia gained independence from the Netherlands in 1949, they argued that they should also get Papua because it was part of the Dutch East Indies, to which the Netherlands countered that Papuans are very different ethnically from other groups in Indonesia. As part of this treaty, a vote was supposed to be held for Papuans to say if they wanted independence. However, this became the concrete gateway of Indonesia attaining colonial power over Papua. In 1969, the "Act of Free Choice" was signed, in which over 1,000 Papuan delegates, hand selected by the Indonesian government, stated they wanted to join Indonesia. This event has been widely

criticized, as the delegates were threatened and forced to vote to join Indonesia despite the protest of Papuan people.

Beginning the 1960s, there have been multiple Papuan political groups advocating for and demanding *merdeka*; freedom (Kirksey 2012). In Kirksey's book, *Freedom in Entangled Worlds*, he chronicles the history of the independence movement in Papua, weaving in historical documents, Papuan stories, and his first-hand accounts as an advocate for Papuan independence on an international stage. He argues that Papua is entangled in many global networks, trapping them in an international position without the freedom they desire. According to Kirksey, the Papuan Independence movement started gaining traction in the 1960s, with guerilla groups such as the *Organisasi Papua Merdeka* (OPM) leading protests, like the uprisings they organized in the Birds Head area during 1965. Tensions between Indonesia and Papua escalated after the Act of Free Choice, as many Papuans believed this was a rigged election and did not reflect their desires to become independent from Indonesia.

Since then, multiple independence groups have been fighting for self-sovereignty, however, all these groups protest in different ways. As Kirksey puts it, these groups are not only guerilla fighters, which is what modern media portrays, but they are also non-profits, churches, philosophers, and students who protest and advocate for the future they imagine for Papua. Even artists, such as The Black Brothers, were involved in this movement and advocated for Papuan independence through music (Webb-Ganon and Webb 2019).

Papuan people have faced state sanctioned violence in the fight for independence. After the fall of Suharto in 1998, mass protests erupted in West Papua, with people voicing their desire to be independent from Indonesia (Kirksey 2012). Kirksey claims there was a buzz in the air; one could feel *merdeka* coming close, with many people hoping for it. Some even hung the Morning

Star Flag with pride, which was dangerous to do. As police and protesters clashed, the police shot into the crowd, killing many Papuans. This event is now referred to as the Biak Massacre, a tragedy and mass killing still in the minds of many. Although many were afraid after this mass killing, others pushed forward in the fight for *merdeka*.

After 1998, there have been many people who have tried to unify the campaign and advocate for Papuan freedom on the global stage (Kirksey 2012). Arguments, such as how the original deal negotiated between Indonesia and the Netherlands was supposed to be for the ultimate West Papuan sovereignty, have been presented at multiple international meetings and councils, such as at the United Nations, but little has been done. Kirksey makes the point that Papua is entangled between many global superpowers who have a vested interest in Papua, or more exactly its land, so the fight for recognition is difficult. Sovereignty is gained through global recognition, not just given. Until other countries recognize West Papua as independent from Indonesia, sovereignty is difficult to attain. Instead of acknowledging Papuan independence, other countries have allowed the occupation of West Papua by Indonesia as there is international economic interest in the Western half of the island of New Guinea.

Kirksey sets the political stage, highlighting the United States' involvement in the Indonesian colonial occupation of Papua and why the U.S. aided in this takeover. Both these countries have interest in Papua because of its natural resources. Papua has some of the world's largest metal mines, such as the Freeport McMoRan mine in Timika, South Papua. The U.S. has direct involvement in this mine, as it is owned by an American company and brings in billions of dollars a year. The vested interest in natural resource extraction via mining in Papua is one of the reasons why Indonesia has refused Papuan independence; it is lucrative to the bureaucrats and government officials of Indonesia.

Another natural resource multiple other countries benefit from is palm oil, or *sawit*. Palm oil is the oil extracted from the fruit of the palm oil tree, and is used in a variety of items, such as in consumable goods. This crop is incredibly lucrative for Indonesia's economy, as palm oil has a vast international demand and Indonesia is the world's largest producer of it.

As governments' desire for palm oil grows, palm oil plantations are creating ecological and cultural damage to local communities. In her book *In The Shadow of the Palms*, published in 2022, Sophie Chao discusses the impact palm oil has on local Papuan communities, specifically in the Merauke Regency of the South Papua Province. Chao uses a blend of Marind, the ethnic group she spent time with, and Western frameworks to analyze what is happening in this area and how it is affecting the people. According to Chao, Marind people are grappling with the changing landscape due to palm oil. More non-Papuan people are entering the region, changing the culture and community without the community's consent. Palm oil plantation owners come to this area, often scamming people or offering enticing offers for them to sell their land so palm oil can be planted in monoculture plantations. Sometimes, the government sells the land to palm oil companies without consulting local communities. This has led to the displacement of both people and biodiversity.

Chao illustrates the connection of the Marind community to the environment, which includes plants and animals. No longer can Marind people go to their ancestral lands as, instead of forests, they are met with oil palm plantations where diverse life cannot survive. Parts of the remaining forests have been closed off to them as well, including forests where they collect sago and other vital foods, because the guard working for the corporations owning the land prevent people from entering even though it was their land before Dutch and Indonesian colonization.

Papuan people have no control over the loss of their lands and are often the last to know about their changing landscape. Chao recounts:

“...a much-anticipated rambutan- gathering trip organized by Bayau villagers was intercepted by a sign declaring that the area was now under the ownership rights of a heretofore unheard-of agribusiness company. Meanwhile, in the neighboring village of Khalaoyam, a sacred agarwood grove had been razed overnight, leaving behind only bulldozer tread marks and Marlboro butts.” (Chao 2022, 48)

Palm oil represents the long and violent colonial history of resource extraction in Papua, as many countries have conquered this region, exerting their control over the land and people. Much like the Indonesian government’s other natural resource extraction projects in Papua, such as the Freeport McMoRan mine, palm oil plantations are poisoning the land and its people. Chao discusses growing health concerns, such as chronic illnesses, birth defects, and sterilization amongst Papuan communities due to exposure to harsh chemicals and pesticides used in the palm oil plantations. The Indonesian government does not have any relief efforts or protections for Papuan people, causing what Chao claims is a “government-endorsed genocide (pg. 103).” From this, one can see how corporate profit is more important than Papuan people’s lives to the Indonesian government.

Even though this land is Papuan land, the Indonesia government has direct control over the land and its resources. Understanding the exploitation of Papuan land and the impacts it has on the lives of Papuan at the hands of the Indonesian government is key to understanding the current political tension between Papuan people and the Indonesian government. Palm oil is a major aspect of Papuan people’s changing landscapes, as they have no control over how their ancestral lands will be capitalized by the Indonesian government. This relationship between Papuan people, their land, and how the Indonesian government chooses to use their land shows the power dynamics between Papuan people and Indonesia. The companies that own the oil palm

plantations claim that palm oil is lucrative for Papuan people, as it will bring in new jobs and pay well, yet these companies rarely hire Papuan people showing the hierarchy the colonial power has put in place to attempt to remove power from Papuan people.

In the earlier colonial history of Papua, one can see how the colonizers, the Dutch, relied on Papuan people as the Netherlands expanded its empire (Rutherford 2018). Dutch explorers needed Papuan people to maneuver around the environmental challenges they faced. When Indonesia assumed power over the land, the relationships shifted. Because of resource extraction in Papua, many Indigenous groups are being displaced and becoming sick from the harsh chemicals used (Chao 2022). Papuan people may receive things in return for their cooperation with Indonesia, such as money, clothing, boots, food, and other items, but I argue Indonesia is taking from Papuans without giving back or being a “hospitable guest.” Both parties, the Dutch and Indonesian governments, needed Papuan people to not resist their authority, which each party has done in a different, yet still violent, way.

Indonesia does not use the same tactics as the Dutch, instead deciding to start a military occupation in Papua. Even so, some methods, such as fear, were used. According to Danilyn Rutherford, the Dutch used technology as a fear tactic to make Papuans comply with the demands of the Dutch. Showing off their guns and sheer power in weaponry, and how it can easily kill, the Dutch made it clear that Papuan people did not pose the same caliber of weaponry as they did, which asserted the Dutch’s authority. Indonesia used, and still uses, this same tactic to silence Papuan people and induce terror to assert their dominance and rule over the region, as Papuan people do not have easy access to guns. There are many examples of this, such as during the Act of Free Choice in 1969, when Papuan people were threatened with violence to vote a certain way, or the many massacres of Papuan people advocating for Independence, with

many people being assaulted and murdered. This can also be seen in the assassination of key figures of the Papuan independence movement, such as Theys Eluay, who was killed by the Indonesian military.

Through scholars such as Rutherford, Kirksey, and Chao, the change in relationship dynamics between Papua and their colonizer becomes clear. What once started as a negotiated relationship has now become one of dominance. Each party, West Papua and Indonesia, are trying to become the dominant power over the land of West Papua. While negotiation does happen, it is violent and unequal. For example, Kirksey recalls the story of a young girl who was kidnapped, imprisoned, and repeatedly raped at an Indonesian military barracks (Kirksey 2012). Instead of letting herself become only a victim in this situation, she used her position to negotiate the safety of her family, even if she herself was being brutalized. On the ground, every day, Papuan people are negotiating in their relationship, however, similar to the Dutch, their relationship is unequal due to the technology, guns, bombs, and other weaponry, that Papuan's do not have access to. Papuan people are brutalized by Indonesian military, and Indonesian military are killed by activists fighting for *merdeka*. Indonesia attempts to guide the narrative of Papua, feeding into harmful theories such as the "Stone Age" that Rutherford discusses, making it appear to the world that Papuan people are "primitive" and must become pacified.

Indonesia tries to control this narrative by deciding who can and cannot enter this region, blocking journalists, scholars, and NGOs from documenting the violence occurring here (Kirksey 2012, Chao 2022). Even non-violent activists, such as The Black Brothers, fled West Papua due to fear of assassination at the hands of the Indonesian government (Webb-Ganon and Webb 2019). There is no longer reliance on Papuan people to navigate their land, there is only reliance on their resources and how much money it can bring the multiple political powers

investing in resource extraction, mainly Indonesia, The United States, and China. The colonial negotiations Rutherford discusses are no longer possible in this region due to the international demand of resources and Papuan compliance Chao and Kirksey describe.

Similar colonial entanglements are occurring now in the Asmat region of Papua, except with an actor not yet discussed- Catholic missionaries. Although there are many agents that are a part of the entanglements in Asmat, the Crosier missionaries specifically play one of the more vital roles in negotiated power between Asmat people and the government controlling their area, whether that be the Dutch or Indonesian. Acting as a mediator between Asmat people and the colonial government, the Crosier missionaries specifically were both colonizers of Asmat and advocates of the people. To better understand their role in this structure, one must understand the history of Asmat and how their role had become solidified in Asmat communities.

Before missionaries entered the region, Asmat had been occupied by the Japanese and the Australians during World War II (An Asmat Sketchbook 1982, Peitermeier 2021). Additionally, Asmat became a battle ground for both parties, as Mimika was invaded by the Japanese, and Merauke was invaded by the Australians. Both parties used Asmat people to fight their war, as Asmat people could navigate the landscape better than the Japanese and Australians. If Asmat people resisted, they would be tortured and killed, forcing Asmat people to fight in a violent war due to the demands of their colonizers. Asmat people were trapped between colonial powers, with negotiations not available to them, unlike how Dutch explorers hired Papuan guides to conquer other parts of Papua (Rutherford 2018). Asmat people were to either do what Australia or Japan wanted or be harmed. After the war ended, Asmat allegedly became more violent, with villages engaging in warfare more often due to the belief that the spirits were upset and the world was unbalanced due to the war (Peitermeier 2021). Because of this unrest, missionaries entered

the region to help end the violence occurring and enforce the Dutch colonial law. Their initial presence in this region was not to negotiate with Asmat, but to serve as an extension of the Dutch empire to pacify people.

After the war, some of the first non-Asmat people to enter the region again were Catholic missionaries (An Asmat Sketchbook 1982, Peitermeier 2021). The first Catholic missionaries entered the Asmat region in the early 1950s, with the first mission being opened by Father Zegwaard of the Mission of the Sacred Hearts in 1952 in Agats to teach Asmat people mathematics and to end the warfare continuing in Asmat. Missionization became competitive in Asmat as other missionary groups came to the region, such as Protestant missionary groups. The Order of the Sacred Hearts wanted to expand their influence more than the other religious groups that attempted to convert Asmat people. Father Zegwaard worked on developing relationships with local communities as a strategy to convert them to Catholicism, with him being one of the only non-Asmat people known during this time to be fluent in Asmat local languages. Negotiations of power need understanding of language, which Rutherford expresses in *Living in the Stone Age*, showing the power mutual language understanding has with colonial relationships (Rutherford 2018). This marked the start of the Crosier missionaries' entanglement in Asmat colonial relationships.

The 1960s became an era of instability and change within Papua, much like the other regions of Papua. In the early 1960s, the first sawmills were opened in Asmat, and advertised as a positive change for the region (Peitermeier 2021). These companies claimed that these mills would open jobs for Asmat people and allow them to earn a good income, but reality was far from this. In addition to destroying the local environment and decimating the forests Asmat people sustained themselves by, both physically and spiritually, these companies did not employ

large numbers of Asmat people. For those they did employ, it ended up becoming difficult for local villages, as all the men left and the women had to earn a living and tend to the home alone.

1961 marked a pivotal year for Asmat history, as this was the year Asmat was put on the global radar. Michael C. Rockefeller, son of New York Governor and later Vice President Nelson Rockefeller, was traveling throughout Papua to collect art pieces from Papuan people in addition to learning about their cultural practices (An Asmat Sketchbook 1982, Peitermeier 2021). On November 19 of this year, he and his team decided to venture into the interior regions of Asmat. During Michael's voyage, his boat capsized, with two of the guides volunteering to swim to shore and get help. After a day at sea, Rockefeller decided to try to swim a few miles to shore, believing the other two were unsuccessful. The rest of his team was rescued days later, but Rockefeller was not.

This event launched one of the most intensive search efforts in recorded history to locate him, with the Dutch and American government being dedicated to this search given the Rockefeller family name and international connections (Peitermeier 2021). Michael was never found, and thus rumors started circulating about his disappearance. According to Peitermeier, several villages in Asmat claimed they hunted and ate him and allegedly showed his glasses to others, but no remains were ever found or shown, resulting in Rockefeller's disappearance being up for debate and interpretation. Instead of reporting on the unclarity of the situation, global media branded Asmat people as "headhunters", "exotic", and "cannibals"; clickbait titles the media still uses when describing them, such as *Sleeping with Cannibals* by the Smithsonian Magazine (2006), *Asmat: The Tribe Where Cannibalism Makes You A Real Man* by The Guardian Nigeria News (2018), *The Cannibalistic Tribe Of New Guinea | Asmat* by TRACKS-Travel Documentaries (2023), and *World's most dangerous people, they eat brain and flesh of*

humans, they live in... by India.com (2025). This narrative affirmed colonial power of Papua, as global citizens now thought of Papua, specifically Asmat, as an unsafe place full of “Stone Age” individuals who needed to be pacified by the government. This framing helped to affirm colonial control over Papuan people and allow it so that Papuan’s have less power and voice compared to that of their colonizers.

During his time in Asmat, it is alleged that Father Zegwaard started to see Asmat people not as "primitive" but as fellow people, which affected Crosier missionary attitudes towards Asmat people (Peitermeier 2021). Unlike protestant missionaries in Asmat, who viewed Asmat people’s traditional practices as sinful and against the Christian god, the Crosier missionaries saw their actions as not inherently sinful. Taking the approach of blending Catholic and Asmat spiritualities, the missionaries aimed to missionize and convert Asmat people while allowing them to retain aspects of traditional spirituality that the missionaries deemed permissible by the Vatican. Being a trained anthropologist, Father Zegwaard was able to see aspects of Asmat culture being lost because of the government banning traditional religious practice in an effort to end headhunting. The Indonesian government banned the creation of *Jeu*, men's long houses used for ceremonies and men's gatherings, in 1964 as part of this (An Asmat Sketchbook 1982, Peitermeier 2021). The missionaries advocated for certain aspects of Asmat culture to be legal to perform and encouraged Asmat to partake in condoned cultural practice. This advocacy against the Indonesian government’s laws and for the culture of Asmat people is the start of the alignment of Crosier missionaries with Asmat communities.

The Crosier Missionaries and the Indonesian government did not get along during this time, with missionaries reporting the tense interactions between the two powers (Peitermeier 2021). In 1965, Sukarno made statements that missionaries interpreted as “anti-American”,

causing distrust between the Indonesian government and the Crosier missionaries. Tensions came to a head in 1965 with the murder of Father Smit. On the morning of January 25th, the local government held Asmat families at gunpoint, making them go to the new public school and not to their usual Catholic school, threatening to shoot anyone who resisted. January 27th, Father Smit met with William Fimbay, head of the local government, Fimbay to discuss the situation, in which Father Smit left. After this, Fimbay sent an official request for them to meet again. During this meeting, Fimbay allegedly did not like the answers to the questions he asked Father Smit, which included a comment about Papuan Independence. Fimbay ordered police to escort Father Smit to the pier, where Fimbay promptly and publicly shot him in the face and torso multiple times.

This event ignited major backlash against the local government, with the police arresting Fimbay for murder and the Crosier community grieving the loss of the priest (Peitermeier 2021). The local community did not feel safe and thus caused the Crosier missionaries to all turn against the Indonesian government, working harder to protect Asmat people and each other. This event created an environment where the missionaries no longer served the local government but became more independent actors than they were previously.

In the late 1970s, Indonesian laws had changed, making it difficult for missionaries to stay in Indonesia, which started the “Indonization”, or the training of Indonesian missionaries, of the parish (Peitermeier 2021). Non-Indonesian missionaries started to train Indonesian young men to be clergy members of the church in case the missionaries were removed from Papua. This resulted in a more multicultural environment and more missionaries in Asmat.

Throughout the late 1960s to the early 1970s, Crosier missionaries wanted to blend Asmat beliefs with Christianity, as they acknowledged the harm done to Native American

communities and wanted to prevent such occurrences in Asmat (Peitermeier 2021). During this era, events such as the Asmat Art Project and more schools started to take place. This belief was further encouraged by the Vatican, who encouraged missionaries to blend Christianity with local culture. Projects such as the Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress, in 1973, and the *Lomba Ukir*, in 1981, started to promote Asmat culture and keep tradition vibrant amongst the community. This shows who the missionaries were aligning themselves with, as it was no longer the government. Missionaries started to become independent actors in this situation, acting less as devices for government control and more as its own colonial power with the mission to convert Asmat people to Christianity by blending the practices the Indonesian government did not approve of with Catholicism.

1973 marks the first-year oil companies arrived in Asmat, which was harmful to Asmat people (Peitermeier 2021). According to Peitermeier, there were accounts of Asmat people being beaten for going against the oil company's desires. In the 1980s, land mapping efforts began, being spearheaded by Father Trenkenschuh and local Asmat communities because of concerns over land rights. The maps showed who owned what land, as there was growing belief that the government had no right over Papuan land, and that it is owned by Papuan people. This advocacy paved the way for the creation of the Mayarakat Adat Asmat in 2000, who served as advocates for Asmat communities' desires. This organization successfully barred Barito Pacific from entering Asmat for logging and halted PT Wanam from construction plans in Asmat, as these companies were environmentally harmful to Asmat and the people did not want them there. Unlike in Merauke, where the people had to advocate for themselves, Asmat had the backing and support of the Catholic Church. This relationship allowed them to negotiate more with extractive industries and the Indonesian government.

Sophie Chao recounts in her book, *In The Shadow of the Palm*, how palm oil companies simply stole land from Marind people because their land was not considered to belong to the people, but instead to the government (Chao 2022). This limits the people's authority over their lands and causes more plantations to appear, which causes ecological damage. While I am not saying that ecological damage and land theft has not or does not occur in the Asmat region, what I am saying is that because of the Catholic churches connection to the region and continuous support, Asmat people have had more resources and entities advocating for their land and ecological protections than perhaps other regencies in Papua.

Much like other parts of Papua, during the 1998 political changes, the buzz of freedom filled the air of Asmat (Peitermeier 2021). Stories of spirits bringing freedom popped up in multiple villages. Militia groups in Asmat formed, mirroring the militia styled government, with the people dreaming of and demanding independence. Similar to Kirksey's accounts from West Papua, Asmat people were also flying the Morning Star flag as a sign of protest. Relationships between Asmat people and the Indonesian government were already strained, which the missionaries saw (Kirksey 2012). The Crosiers went to various villages in Asmat, including interior villages, to hold open discussions in a way that missionaries claim could not have been done with the government, resulting in Asmat people becoming less vocal about independence because of the repercussions from the government. Once again, the Crosier missionary entanglement is shown as advocates for Asmat people but also the colonial power above them. While they did acknowledge the harm and violence occurring at the hands of the Indonesian government against Papuan people, they still wanted the people to not outwardly protest. By using Asmat traditional stories, the Crosier missionaries conveyed their point of patience, not giving up, which is an important aspect. The Crosiers did not tell Asmat people to give up, but

instead negotiated patience with Asmat communities, encouraging them to wait and not demand independence at that moment.

The presence of Crosier missionaries in Asmat essentially acts as a buffer between extraction agencies, Asmat people, and the Indonesian government, with their bias leaning towards supporting Asmat people in the ways they believe is best for them, which can differ from Asmat people's opinions. The missionaries are both advocates and colonizers for Asmat people to their governmental colonizer, which is now the Indonesian government. While there was cross-cultural exchange between the Crosiers and Asmat, as can be seen from countless stories of blended cultural traditions, Asmat people did not have the same power as the Crosier missionaries. The Indonesian government did not want to directly negotiate power with Papuan people, but was more willing to listen to the Crosiers, showing the entanglements all parties exist within. By having the missionaries in Asmat acting as a middle-ground between Asmat people and the Indonesian government, the government manipulates the missionaries to do their work of "pacifying" Papuan people. However, when missionaries resisted or could not meet the demands of the government, the government reacted with violence to both Asmat and Missionary peoples.

Even though the missionaries act as a buffer, they do not eliminate the violence that occurs at the hands of the Indonesian government, as sometimes the missionaries have been at the receiving end of the violence. As Sophie Chao discusses during her field work in 2010s, violence still occurred between the Indonesian military and Papuan people (Chao 2022). Although Asmat is considered by many to be a less violence region, they are still heavily occupied by the military, with Catholic Bishops even calling for a decrease in the amount of military in the region, as they are creating fear amongst local communities (Lato 2026). In

September of 2025, military officials started shooting indiscriminately into a crowd of Asmat people after calls of a disturbance and the fatal shooting of an Asmat man, resulting in 5 people being murdered and many more being injured by the Indonesian military (Human Rights Monitor 2025). While one victim was armed with a spear and was violent to others, the other four were innocent civilians, one being a child, caught in the crossfire. After the shootings, the military also dropped a bomb in a residential area that, luckily, did not detonate.

According to Project Multatuli, an independent journalism collective based in Jakarta, Indonesia, Papua has significantly more military presence than other parts of Indonesia, with the government having plans to create more military specifically based in Asmat, South Papua. (Supriatma and Salam 2025). A total of 83,177 soldiers and police are based in Papua, which is 58 times larger than the total amount of people in the Papuan independence groups the military claims to fight. This highlights the overwhelming and borderline illogical amount of military presence if the Indonesian government's only goal is to fight the separatists. Instead of only fighting separatist movements, the military has been known to attack and murder innocent civilians. This makes people question the government's true intentions with the military occupation of Papua, as if they were only there to keep peace, they would not target and assault Papuan people. Papuan people must negotiate these ever-changing entanglements, with new agents and players asserting their power, and Papuan people fighting to assert theirs.

Chapter 2:

Collections and Visualities

Starting in the 1950s, when missionaries and anthropologists started arriving in the region, Asmat art migrated to Western institutions as colonial powers expanded their control of the region. These collections have since become rooted in countries such as Germany, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands, and the United States. Collections include a variety of items, including sensitive cultural objects. Thus, it is important for museum staff to question where this large volume of Asmat art was coming from and how it was acquired. Papua has been under heavy colonial occupation since the 1930s, thus the increase in unbalanced power dynamics and constant negotiations between Papuan and non-Papuan individuals (Rutherford 2018). While working for multiple Western institutions with large collections of Asmat art, museum staff are constantly questioned about the ethics of our collections and how they were acquired. By doing provenance research and being aware of the legacies of our collections, institutions have been able to make content and update museum information that is more accurate and culturally sensitive.

According to *Cities, Museums, and Soft Powers*, by Gail Lord and Ngaire Blankenberg, museums have the power to affect people's perceptions on topics because of their soft power, or the ability to influence others without pressure, within communities (Lord and Blankenberg 2016). Museums are considered trusted places for education and learning, meaning that they have the power to affect how the general public or their audience perceives a topic. In addition to trusting museums, many Western audiences have deep trust in media companies, such as National Geographic, that emphasize research and educational approaches (Lutz and Collins 1993). Because of the deep-rooted trust Western communities have, museums and publication

companies have the power to change people's perceptions about cultures and information that the public may not have accessible information.

In this section, I will be discussing the display and representation of Asmat collections in the West. Firstly, I will be discussing gender roles in Asmat and how it relates to collections practices. I will then talk about a few of the notable exhibitions and publications focusing on Asmat since the 1960s, such as the 1962 exhibit called *The Art of the Asmat, New Guinea: Collected by Michael C. Rockefeller* at the Museum of Primitive Art; *Primitivism* at the Museum of Modern art in 1984; and the February 1996 publication of National Geographic. After this, I explain Asmat art collections practices, illustrating how societal gender roles are a major aspect of what art is collected and by who, relating it to the collections Western institutions display. I argue that Western representations of Asmat art have not been neutral and show inherent bias against Asmat people due to Western desires to exoticize and "other" Indigenous peoples. These representations center male-created artforms while marginalizing Asmat women. These actions shape global perspectives, market value, and contemporary art trends.

Western representations of Asmat art predominantly focus on art made by men, not art made by women artists, which affects not only the public's perception of what Asmat art is, but also the items collectors now place worth in. The colonial legacies from collections not only affect what objects museums have, but also what information, or misinformation, they share with the public. Colonial desires for Asmat people and their art also impacts the art market, what they choose to produce, and for who. According to Tom Powell Davies (2021), "Asmat people use their indigenous semiotic strategies in innovative ways to elicit high auction prices from state actors (pg. 180)." This means that Asmat people are an active part of the art market, and use their skill to create artworks that are valued by future patrons, in this case the government officials.

Gender and Collections

To better understand Asmat collections in the West, comprehending social structures and gender roles in Asmat is vital. In this section, I discuss contemporary gender roles in Asmat, explaining the complexity of the situation and how this impacts art production, thus what is sold to Western collectors. I argue that gender roles and historical structures have created imbalance in museum collections, which then dictates what aspects of Asmat culture are celebrated. I also discuss the importance of materials being used in the production of women's art, and how contemporary weavings metaphorically explain the entanglements Asmat women are in.

Although there is not much research on Asmat gender, there is research on gender in Papua and Melanesia, which can help strengthen the information that is available on gender in Asmat. Throughout New Guinea, there has historically been a clear divide in roles: Men would seek prestige and power through roles such as war, spiritual practice, and local politics, leaving domestic work to the women (Choi, Jolly, and Mowbray 2014, Pouwer 2010, Strathern 1988). Because of the clear divide in roles, each party often stays in the roles assigned to them by society. Examining Asmat today, one can see such examples through the artwork being produced. In Asmat, men are the ones who make objects with historically spiritual value, such as shields, *bis*, *det*, and figure carvings, whereas women are the ones who create woven objects for non-spiritual purposes (Konrad 2002). Even though these objects are now created and sold more for commodification than for spiritual use, men and women still stick to the roles they are assigned.

The Festival Asmat Pokman, the annual art and cultural festival in Agats, Asmat, is a platform for Asmat artists to sell their artworks to a variety of people (Powell Daves 2021).

Collectors from all over the world, mainly from Western countries and other parts of Indonesia, visited this event to purchase Asmat art from artists whose work was selected to be in the festival. People and institutions can attend the festival to acquire Asmat artworks. Now, however, there has been more government official and agencies attending the festival, which has in turn priced out individual collectors. The auction catalog divides the two groups by their gender, only accepting entries by men who make woodcarvings and women who make woven textile objects (Pesta Budaya 2009, Festival Asmat Pokman 2023, Festival Asmat Pokman 2024). According to these catalogs, there has never been a carved object created by a woman that was selected to be in the auction. Women were not allowed to participate in this annual art auction and cultural event until 2009 despite the event being created in 1981 (Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress Agats 2009, Peitermeier 2021). This means that in order for women to sell their weavings, they needed to do so privately without the assistance of popular events.

According to Tom Powell Davies (2016), about two-thirds of all pieces examined to be in the auction are women's weavings, but these types of artwork are significantly more likely to get rejected compared to artwork made by men. The 2023 Festival Asmat Pokman auction catalogue displayed 195 artworks made by men and 53 made by women (Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress Agats 2023). This means that 21% of all people in the auction were female artists even though many women submit artwork to be included in the auction. The 2024 Festival Asmat Pokman featured more women artists than the previous year, with women making up 72 out of 267 total entries (Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress Agats 2024). This historical structure of gender has more impacts on women than just deciding what type of art they are societally allowed to create- it also designates their quality of life.

In her book, Desi Linggasari (2008), discusses how Asmat women are sometimes ensnared in a vicious cycle of being subservient to men, which is also corroborated by Petermeier (2021). Linggasari claims that many Asmat girls and women, specifically in Agats, fall in love and end up marrying young, sometimes marrying a man who ends up being abusive. Linggasari claims that men force women to work, whether that be web-fishing or going into the forest to collect sago, even if they are heavily pregnant. Women often do this out of fear of being beaten. With that, Linggasari argues that women become the breadwinners of their families, either making enough money through work or gathering enough food to feed their families, while men do not contribute to the well-being of the home. She mentions how when not working, women spend hours creating weavings and textile art, some of which are sold for profit to foreigners.

Though Dewi Linggasari's initial field work took place between the late 1990s to the early 2000s, according to Joshua Irwandi, domestic abuse is still common for women to endure (Irwandi 2017). While there aren't many statistics to help support his claim for Asmat specifically, we can analyze crime rates from Indonesia as a whole. According to the Indonesia 2021 Human Rights Report, conducted by the United States Department of State, racism among people of Indonesian descent towards people of Melanesian descent is common and affects the way Melanesians in general are treated (United States Department of State 2022). Father Virgil Petermeier, who lived in Asmat from 1974 to 2010, also discusses the racial targeting and violence people of Papuan descent endured by people of Indonesian descent (Petermeier 2021). This, mixed with the lack of police officers, could cause many women to not report domestic abuse or violence. The societal strains Asmat women may encounter throughout their lives can

pressure them into working harder and being more self-reliant. This can then drive women to become financially independent and sell made goods, such as their woven artwork.

Local churches often commission female artists to create *pir* or other woven artworks for the churches, which can become a valuable source of income for women (Petermeier 2021, Powell Davies 2021). Women will create artworks that blend spiritual Asmat beliefs with iconography depicting Catholicism while also earning an income. While these job opportunities are ultimately beneficial for Asmat artists, both economically and culturally, because weaving is a continued art form, they also result in a change of visual culture. Asmat women's weavings have been changing in visual form, especially with the examination of weavings from the early 2000s to now. No longer are *pir*, Asmat mats, and *noken*, Papuan bags, decorated in only Asmat symbols, beads, feathers, and rubbed pigment, but they now feature new symbols and materials, such as symbols of Christianity and materials such as rice bags. This is all a reaction to the changing Asmat landscape and the need to earn income.

The examination of materials used by artists is vital to understanding how the art form is changing. Woven artworks from pre- to early Dutch colonial times were made of various plant fibers (Konrad 2002). Woven objects were created by hand, often with women coming together to weave in each other's company. These weavings were colored with three pigments: red ochre, crushed white shell, and black charcoal. These pigments were rubbed onto the surface of the woven piece, thus coloring it. Depending on the object and function, other materials were added to these pieces, such as feathers from cassowary or cockatoo birds, seeds, shells, and sago leaves, but all these materials were organic and directly from the Asmat region. Women would go out to collect these materials so they could create their art.

Though textile creation methods have remained similar throughout time, there is one major component that is starting to change: the materials used. Since the late 2010s, one can observe synthetics being used in Asmat weavings. With the influx of colonials coming into Asmat, specifically people coming from other parts of the nation of Indonesian, came the wave of prepackaged goods. Rice, a consumable commodity not from Papua, was brought into Asmat because of the desires of Indonesian colonials (Petermeier 2021). Rice is packaged in bags of synthetic fibers and once imported became a good many people wanted to purchase and consume, including Asmat people. Chao (2022) explores the idea of gastrocolonialism for the relationship between sago, a starch, and rice. Gastro-colonialism is the forced assimilation of culture by the dominant colonial power through food and dietary means. Sago is the traditional staple food of Papua, with many Papuan cultures centering their diets and gender roles around it. Sago in Papua is harvested from the sago palm, where harvesters, typically women, take the starch out of the sago palm and filter the sago with a sago filter and water. From there, the sago can be cooked in a variety of ways, from being fried to being boiled to achieve a gelatinous texture.

In *The Shadow of the Palm*, Chao discusses the gastro-colonialism Marind people are encountering. Chao discusses the pressures Marind people face due to the settler-colonialism they are enduring by Indonesian occupation. People, and even animals, are switching their diets from sago to rice. According to Chao, some community members believe rice cannot replace sago because of sago's cultural influence and because rice cannot fill your stomach like sago does. Similar to Merauke, Asmat also faces gastro-colonialism. In Asmat, sago is collected in the same way as the Marind people collect it, with the women going out to collect the sago with their children, and sometimes their husbands. But now, sago is now being replaced with rice due to

the influence of outside settlers coming to this region. Rice is much easier to buy, as one can purchase it from non-Papuan vendors in towns such as Agats with more ease than harvesting sago. The harvest of sago is hard and tedious labor, and often takes a day of work to harvest, prepare, and cook. Another element to this is the shaming of sago by the Indonesian settlers coming into the region. This phenomenon is like other parts of Indonesia, including in the Togean Islands of Sulawesi, Indonesia (Lowe 2013). According to Celia Lowe:

“Likewise, the Togeans used to be a place for people; now they are a place for people classified as “poor.” Sago consumption and production imbued Sama identity with a derogated positionality within hierarchically joined regions” (Lowe 2013).

The “othering” of sago places social pressures on individuals to not consume sago and instead convert to rice. This is a tactic the Indonesian government has done, and is still actively doing, throughout parts of the nation of Indonesia to homogenize cultural groups and place hierarchy on traditional food sources, thus pressuring Indigenous groups to change their diets and practices.

Some individuals find it easier to buy rice instead, as it takes less time, manual labor, and is considered more proper by the Indonesian colonial entities in Asmat. Although buying these outside goods is more convenient to many, it does create a major issue; plastic waste. According to Peitermeier (2021), there is a large pollution and waste issue in Asmat due to the difficulty of exporting trash. Instead of sending it to facilities, people throw trash out of their houses, resulting in the local environment becoming littered and polluted with plastic waste. However, instead of letting waste destroy local ecosystems, Asmat women have been using materials from single waste imported goods and turning them back into art that is then sold to non-Asmat people.

Such examples include a skirt from the American Museum of Asmat Art’s collection, accession number T2011.11.018. The director of the AMAA, Gretchen Burau, says this skirt was made of rice bags, in which the fibers were pulled out of the bag and woven by hand (American

Museum of Asmat Art 2021). This skirt is an interesting example of how women are changing materials used with the influx of non-Asmat people entering the region.

The use of synthetics in woven pieces is still something that is occurring in Asmat weavings, as one can see from the most recent Festival Asmat Pokman in October of 2024 (Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress Agats 2024). The *pir* created by Regina Efbot and labeled as the eighth artwork from the female artist part of the catalog, specifically mentions that it was made of synthetic materials. It is unknown if this is the only artwork submitted that contains synthetic materials, as many others do not list the exact materials used. The Festival Asmat Pokman is a prestigious art auction for artists, with many of them using the auction to earn a yearly income (Powell Davies 2021), so the fact that a piece was accepted into the auction and is labeled as being created from synthetics is of significance and shows that this is likely a growing trend for female weavers.

Though the use of synthetics in the 2024 Festival Asmat Pokman is noteworthy, this is not the first time it has been used, as demonstrated by C4.2008.6.82 and T2011.07.004 from the American Museum of Asmat Art collection. These skirts feature synthetic dyes, with purple and green colors, which is incredibly different from the traditional red, white, and black colors. In recent auctions, there have not been woven objects dyed with synthetics listed, but that does not mean women are not creating them, and these pieces show that at one point the use of synthetic dye was something consumers desired (Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress Agats 2023, Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress Agats 2024).

Understanding gender roles in Asmat is vital to comprehend why certain artworks are in Western institutions. Firstly, many more men's objects are sold as part of the Festival Asmat Pokman, which has historically limited women's opportunities to see their artworks to tourists

who attended internationally renowned art auctions and festivals. Even though this is still prevalent now, this structure has been in place for a long time. According to people trained in anthropology such as Tobias Schneebaum (1985), it was difficult for men to approach Asmat women and talk, as the men protected the women. This is something other researchers, such as Tom-Powell Davies (2021) have encountered.

By not having direct contact with the foreigners on their lands, women were not able to market their skills and artwork to foreigners like the men were able to. Much more study and research are done on male-centered aspects of Asmat culture because of the difficulty many researchers had trying to connect with women. Because men were the ones speaking to outsiders about their culture, the global view on Asmat art became male-centered as there was little to no female representation. When collectors came to Asmat to acquire Asmat carvings, they often saw weavings made by women as mundane objects, with some people collecting *noken*, but not nearly as many compared to *ajour* or shields. With major exhibitions of Asmat art in the West displaying male-created Asmat art, such as *The Art of the Asmat, New Guinea: Collected by Michael C. Rockefeller* at the Museum of Primitive Art (1962) and “*Primitivism*” in *20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* at the Museum of Modern Art (1984), Western audiences desired carvings made by men because that is what world renown institutions were displaying.

This practice now deeply affects contemporary museum collections. As donors share their collections with museums, museums receive the objects donors once bought. For Asmat collections, donors could have acquired their artworks in a few different ways; either through buying directly from artists in Asmat, through the Festival Asmat Pokman, or through third party art sellers and auction houses. While the donor can directly choose what they want from the

individual artist, going through a third-party seller creates its own interesting relationship. In this instance, the art seller will go to Asmat to purchase artwork from there that they think will sell. If many collectors and third-party agencies predominately purchased and sought out carvings, then many museums will receive a high number of carvings. This then creates a cycle where the art being bought and sold is what others, such as museums and other institutions, is what others think will sell and thus more value and desire is placed in. Museums are often not the ones that curate collections; this is the work of donors and the general art market. At the Burke Museum, the institution has a total of 177 Asmat artworks in the collection. From these 177, less than 25 objects are weavings made by women, meaning that 14% of the total Asmat collection is art made by women, and 86% of the collection is art made by men.

The imbalance between artworks by men and women shows how historical collections practices impact institutions, and how institutions center male-created art versus that of women. Although the situation has changed since early colonial contact, allowing women more opportunities to sell their artwork to tourists and collectors, the historical precedent has now created an environment where women's arts are not valued or coveted nearly as much as the carvings made by men, as can be seen by the value gap of men's versus women's art at the Festival Asmat Pokman's annual auctions and the volume of accepted artworks. Asmat women encounter in a variety of oppression and lack of representations; economically, culturally, and with cultural representation globally.

The underrepresentation of Asmat women's arts is not solely due to patriarchal societal structures in Asmat society, but instead exists due to multiple structures in place. Gender roles in Asmat do determine who makes what art, however, missionaries made more market opportunity for men to sell their works through the *Lomba Ukir*, which started in 1981 (Peitermeier 2021).

This action by the missionaries limited women's involvement in the direct sale of their art to the art market and collectors, unlike their male counterparts. Additionally, collectors and museums have then placed more value in art made by men (carvings), which in turn has made carvings the most iconic example of Asmat culture to display in the West. In addition to display, male carvings have been much more researched than women's weavings. The lack of reliable academic information about women's work further buries their artworks from the forefront of representing Asmat visual culture in the West. All of these structures intersect and overlap, and resulting in the overrepresentation of Asmat men's art in museums, media, and research, and the severe underrepresentation of Asmat women's works.

The use of new materials, such as the rice bag made into the skirt or the use of synthetic dyes, is not a phenomenon that occurs solely in Asmat, as this is something that happens among many Indigenous cultures and communities globally. One such example of this can be observed from many Aboriginal Australian artists' artistic practice (Mitchell 2015). By examining recent exhibitions, such as *Yirrkala: Art from Australia's Top End* at the Seattle Museum of Art, one can see that this phenomenon is still occurring and vibrant in many Indigenous communities through the Pacific. In this exhibition, the Seattle Art Museum features artworks by artists from Yirrkala, with a few of them being made of metal. This metal is not a traditional material but is the result of metal signs left to rust by the Australian Government. After obtaining special permission from the community to use this metal to make artwork that was traditionally spiritually important, they repurposed the large metal waste into an artform that reflects both Aboriginal artists' resistance and the impact of the colonial state they are in. Not only are artists able to keep art traditions vibrant, but they are able to profit. By finding metal road signs and

changing them into artwork that is then sold to non-Aboriginal Australians, they are engaging with their colonial entanglement, profiting from their colonizer and asserting their agency.

These creations using new materials are starting to be put in collections. Although Asmat women's art often makes up a small percentage of total Asmat art in collections, their art that uses newer materials, such as rice bags, is significant. These creations directly show the complexity of their situation. Asmat women must work and sell their artwork to survive in a society that is not equally as supportive of them as it is supportive of men, but they have agency in what they create. They create desirable artforms but also use their skill to repurpose plastics and waste materials to reduce environmental impact and create works that inadvertently illustrate their colonial entanglement, such as T2011.11.018 at the American Museum of Asmat Art.

Asmat on Display

The disappearance of Michael C. Rockefeller, the son of former United States Vice President Nelson Rockefeller, caused hysteria in the news around Asmat people as “cannibals”. This idea stems from former headhunting practices done by Asmat people are part of ritual, but these practices were banned before Rockefeller's disappearance. By labeling Asmat people as “cannibals” and “primitive”, foreign powers, in this case the United States, Netherlands, and later Indonesia, give themselves authority to commit violence against Indigenous peoples; a practice that can be seen in other cultures as well (Rothera 2009, Lindenbaum 2004). This idea of the primitive was enforced in the West through the media. Asmat specifically has been brought to the forefront of Western media through exhibits, such as *The Art of the Asmat, New Guinea: Collected by Michael C. Rockefeller* at the Museum of Primitive Art (1962) and *Primitivism” in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* at the Museum of Modern Art (1984),

and through printed media, such as the February 1996 edition of National Geographic, with the article called *Irian Jaya: Indonesia's Wild Side*.

Despite evidence of the West engaging in activities deemed as "uncivilized", such as cannibalism, the West weaponized the word "cannibal" to both exoticize and primitivize Indigenous people globally, including throughout Oceania (Lindenbaum 2004). Historically, Western nations have used this term to then reinforce the concept of "noble savage" as the pure, good, earliest state of humanity. This form of othering was used in literature and large-scale exhibits to engage audiences, offering them stories and insight to uncivilized peoples and further perpetuating harmful beliefs about non-white individuals. Through media, the West has used their power and influence to create a narrative about Asmat people, othering them in the Western mind, to profit from their Western assigned "exoticness".

Exhibits

In 1962, the Museum of Primitive Art in New York City held an exhibition for Asmat called *The Art of the Asmat, New Guinea: Collected by Michael C. Rockefeller*. This exhibition featured the artwork Michael C. Rockefeller had collected during this time in Asmat, including the pieces he had acquired directly before his disappearance in 1961 (Museum of Primitive Art 1962, Peitermeier 2021). This exhibit was held in honor of his exploration and dedication to collect Asmat art, as he believed the culture was disappearing and wanted to preserve it. This exhibit only used the English translated names for all the art displayed, which includes, but is not limited to: Ancestor Poles (*Bisj*), soul-ships (*Wuramon*), and drums (*tifa*). The exhibit was held in the garden of the Museum of Modern Art, which had dirt floors, a canopy ceiling, and an

outdoor area with large plants, perhaps trying to simulate Papuan terrain (Museum of Modern Art 2018, Stanley 2018).

The key objects of this exhibition were the wood carvings from Asmat, with most using spotlights shining directly on them, creating a darker environment with a clearly illuminated focal point (Museum of Modern Art 2018). From the exhibit catalog and the publicly available installation photographs, a lack of art produced by women is apparent. Not one textile or weaving is displayed; only woodcarvings made by male artists are displayed, and listed as made by Asmat people, not specifically by Asmat men. In the exhibit catalog, no mention of who creates art in Asmat society is mentioned, only that art is made and what it is. Additionally, when introducing the viewer to who Asmat people are, the beginning of the second paragraph describes them as “Head-hunters and cannibals before the spread of European influence” (Museum of Primitive Art, Michael Clark Rockefeller, A. A. Gerbrands, and Eliot Elisofon 1962). This wording implies that European influence was needed in the region, as it ended the perceived violence that was occurring, leading the visitor to believe that the West was needed. However, this only exists because of Western ideals and morality. This was not the last time Asmat art was represented in this way; in the 1980s, another museum would create another controversial exhibit.

Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern was a 1984 exhibition by the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York City. The concept of this exhibition was to use “tribal” artworks, which were considered primitive, and discuss how they shaped and influenced some of the most influential modern arts (Museum of Modern Art n.d). While the concept of the exhibition was to center Indigenous arts and demonstrate how excellent they are, a few flaws of the exhibition execution resulted in a different interpretation. The

exhibition placed objects from Indigenous groups globally, with many being from Oceania, next to modern art to compare artistic form (Rubin 1985). In this exhibit, Asmat art was displayed and compared to Western art, however, the names, dates, and cultural significance of the Indigenous cultural heritage were not named. The Indigenous artwork was loaned from a variety of institutions and private collectors, with Modern artists displaying objects they owned for this exhibit.

Culturally significant artworks that were owned by private individuals were exhibited and compared without community consent, such as a carving of A'a of Ruturu was displayed next to *Force of Concentration of M.K* by Victor Brauner, and Hoahakaknai of Rapa Nui was compared to *Hieratic Head of Ezra Pound* by Henri Gaudier-Brzeska (Gallery98 2023, Rubin 1985).

Though this exhibit perhaps meant to empower Indigenous art, it instead only framed its “worthiness” in the lens of Western use. This exhibit resulted in critics, such as Anna Laura Jones, interpreting it as erasure of Indigenous identity, historical contexts, instead focusing on the modern artwork being displayed and unintentionally appropriating non-Western cultures (Jones 1993). By comparing Indigenous art to Modern Western art, the exhibit inadvertently appeals to the colonial mindset in that Indigenous art is good as a tool of inspiration for Western artists. The exhibition is regarded as a pivotal part of conversations regarding what is thought of as primitive art in the West because of the conversations that emerged from it, such as the display and representation of artwork, and what constitutes art (Kisin and Myers 2019).

Kisin and Myers argue that the concept of art is not neutral, and changes meaning based on the constructs of what each Western museum considers it to be. Some institutions consider some items as only “cultural artifacts” whereas another institution considers the same type of object “art”. The idea of “art” is subjective and changes with time and debate. Contemporary

anthropological work focuses on destabilizing this concept and working to decolonize the category to better include voices and perspectives that have been historically excluded by the West (Kisin and Myers 2019). In both the exhibitions discussed, the cultural heritage displayed is considered “art” because it is displayed in that way. Both exhibits are in “art” museums, not only ethnographic collections or anthropological museums. The moment objects are put in this context, they are now what Western institutions and collectors consider “art”. However, in both instances of display, *The Art of the Asmat: The Collection of Michael C. Rockefeller* and *Primitivism” in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, the exhibitions both introduce the cultural heritage into the sphere of “art” while simultaneously assigning it as "primitive", not up to the Western standard of greatness.

Both exhibitions fail to attribute the artworks to the artist who made them, which is the first difference of many that sets the display of these objects apart from that of “great” Western artists. This is perhaps due to collection practices, which will be discussed later, but this also ties into the larger question of why Western collectors took no care to record the name of the artist from whom they purchased cultural heritage. If they respected these art pieces as much as that of Western art, then attributing the original creator should have been vital. While it is important to note that the MPA exhibition did include a description of the objects, the description was general, not area specific, and did not include the names of any artists. In addition to the exclusion of artist names, both exhibits have excluded Asmat textiles- an artform predominantly made by women. While there was the display of *det*, spirit masks, there were no *pir* or *noken* displayed, excluding these art forms, and Asmat women, from being initiated into the “art world” by these exhibits.

Publications

National Geographic, an organization known for its educational materials and magazines, has a history of exoticizing Indigenous groups and people of color, which according to the NPR article *'National Geographic' Reckons With Its Past: 'For Decades, Our Coverage Was Racist'*, the company admitted to in 2018. Although they are now trying to reconcile with their harmful history, articles such as “Irian Jaya: Indonesia’s Wild Side” published in the February 1996 edition still exist without any specific acknowledgment. On the front page of this article, an Asmat man wearing a *bipone*, nose piece, sits center middle, with the following text below:

“Ignored for centuries, the island of New Guinea was like a lost world, where Stone Age tribes practiced cannibalism and ferns grew to giant size (right). In the 1960s Indonesia laid claim to the western half, later naming it Irian Jaya “victorious hot land.” Despite modern efforts to tame the land and pacify the people, an unyielding wildness remains, etched in the face of an aging Asmat warrior (above).”

This introduction to the article makes National Geographic's positionality clear; Asmat people live in the “stone age” and that the people are unable to be “pacified” by the Indonesian government, making them “wild.” The language being used here is not exclusive to National Geographic as it is the language that colonial entities permitted themselves to use when referring to their colonized. As Rutherford states, the concept of “stone age” is a tactic used by colonials to assert their sovereignty over Indigenous peoples and create Western-justified inequality (Rutherford 2018).

Throughout the National Geographic article, something interesting to note is the clear distinction National Geographic makes between “Indonesians” and “Irians.” In this article, Thomas O’Neil, the author and senior writer at National Geographic, refers to “Irians” (Papuan people) as primitive, and “Indonesians” as a civilized entity (National Geographic 1996). Throughout the article, O’Neil questions how Indonesian can make “Irians” become

“Indonesian”, asking explicitly “How does one make Indonesians out of people emerging only now from the Stone Age (pg.8).” This othering is the typical framing that colonials have used in reference to Papuan people (Rutherford 2018). This article seems to be reinforcing that Papuans are not Indonesian but are their own people who are not nearly as civilized as their colonial occupier. This paints the narrative that Indonesia is the tolerant savior in this situation by pacifying the unruly Indigenous peoples and are accepting them, but reality is far from this.

All these instances of Papuan representation in modern media affect the way they are perceived by Western audiences. When the first words used to describe a group of people are "primitive," “stone age,” or “cannibal,” that group of people are automatically othered and exoticized by the consumers of said media. Instead of using languages that facilitate similarity between Asmat people and Western audiences, historical exhibitions and trusted publications used language that creates differences in a negative way. This language affects the pathos of the viewer, creating a disconnect between the Western audience and the Indigenous people and reinforcing stereotypes. When most of the media about a specific group of people refers to them as something, this often becomes fact, and is replicated repeatedly, becoming normalized. Cementing the idea that Asmat, in addition to other Papuan people, are "primitive" makes its way back to the general public.

In James Clifford's work *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (1988), Clifford explains how art described as "primitive" can only be deemed as art by institutions, and once it is deemed art it stays that way. The display of Asmat art pieces in art institutions permits them to enter the sphere of art, but this same framework can be applied in other aspects. Media and institutions have soft power, and can affect perceptions about people, places, and ideas. If the media deems cultural groups as "primitive" or

"uncivilized" to the general Western masses, then it is deemed as such. This permission to include ethnic groups in media allows them to be known but also branded as "exotic".

Western representations of Asmat culture are situated and have historically othered this cultural group while also excluding Asmat women from the celebrated aspects of Asmat culture. These actions have, and still do, impact museum collections, and thus public perceptions of Asmat art. Museums and print media can impact the minds of many consumers, as these are often trusted educational sources for Western audiences. Examining pivotal exhibitions that feature Asmat culture, *The Art of the Asmat, New Guinea: Collected by Michael C. Rockefeller* at the Museum of Primitive Art, *Primitivism* at the Museum of Modern art in 1984, and the February 1996 publication of National Geographic, the Western desire to create the other is clear, as this is profitable. The creation of the narrative these media forms have done has centered art and cultural aspects that are male centered, excluding Asmat women and their artforms from the limelight.

Women's art makes up a small percent of what is sold in auctions, such as the Festival Asmat Pokman, and in museum collections, such as in the Burke. Contemporary art made by Asmat women is innovative and reflective of their colonial situation. By using waste materials such as rice bags, women are subtly commenting on their climate situation, with the amount of growing pollution due to colonial occupation, and of the gastrocolonism taking place. As rice is being pushed onto Papuan people, the act of crafting weaving out of rice bags to sell back to their colonizers creates an intriguing dynamic between artist agency, environmental degradation, and colonial relationships.

As museums have the power to define what is and is not art, the exclusion of women-created Asmat art is important. By not including these voices, museum collections are

reaffirming the structures put in place that value Asmat carvings over women-made weavings. This in turn affects public knowledge about Asmat women's arts and people's abilities to research collections and learn from them. The misrepresentation of Asmat art and culture, the centering of male artists, has severe impacts on the livelihoods and visibility of Asmat women. By acknowledging the structures that have led to these collections being made, and the bias the general public already has about Asmat, museums can be better equipped to curate educational materials for people to learn about Asmat culture. Museums are trusted educational institutions, so what they say and display matters just as much as the things they choose not to say or display. Museums do not solely house or display culture and history, as museums can directly be involved with defining it and deciding whose voices are included.

Chapter 3:

Museums and Communities Now: What Can Museums Do?

In the past two sections of this thesis, I have discussed how the West has continued to frame Asmat communities as "primitive" through exhibitions, print media, and the framing of history. This in turn has affected the way the global West has perceived Asmat people, and thus their visual culture in museums. Collections are not neutral; they are often defined by the history of the community they originate from. For many Asmat collections, they are defined by histories of repeated colonization, colonial occupation, and missionization. Many collectors came to Asmat to collect "primitive" art, because of the way Western institutions displayed it and media discussed it. It became trendy to collect art from this region, but these ways of collections were biased and "othered" Asmat people and their craft.

In this section, I will be using the Burke Museum as a case study to examine how museums can dismantle colonial legacies in their collections. The Burke has a sizable collection of Asmat art, and it is where I work as a student collections assistant. The Burke is a museum that is actively trying to include community and decolonize the legacies of their collections, but for this thesis I will specifically only analyze their Asmat collections. I argue that ethically, museums with Indigenous collections must connect and build relationships with Indigenous communities to shift authority and to give communities the platform to tell their own histories and cultures. Without the inclusion of community, museums continue to perpetuate racist and incorrect information about a group of people, which causes harm.

Museums must do more than stop using language that is considered outdated, as just because they stop outwardly using this language does not mean that they have stopped causing

harm. Projects such as Mana Taonga at Te Papa, have proven that bringing Indigenous communities into museums is vital (Rowlands, Were, and Stanley 2025). However, it is a process, one in which shortcomings are expected. Thus, it is not an immediate solution. Power imbalances between museums and Indigenous communities are present, as ultimately the institution has legal authority over collections. They often, but not always, are the ones who choose what to research, who to connect with, and on what timeline. Through long term collaborative projects, museums and communities can work together to dismantle the harmful structures of racial othering, such as the idea of “exotic” and “primitive” that museums can inadvertently perpetuate.

Since October of 2025, I have been working in the Heritage: Arts & Cultures Department of the Burke Museum, specifically in the Diasporic Oceania and Asia (DOA) collection. In my position as a Student Collections Assistant, I work on preventative conservation, collections care, processing incoming artworks, and researching collections. These projects have included restructuring our database’s-controlled vocabulary to more accurately reflect place and culture and working on rehousing the Burke’s collection of Asmat shields to better preserve them. Additionally, I have been working on adding to individual object records to help improve cultural accuracy and sensitivity.

The Burke has over 150 Asmat art pieces in their collection but has not yet had the resources or opportunity to build meaningful relationships with Asmat communities, as there are many obstacles that affect both parties. One such obstacle is the language barrier, as this can be intimidating for both Asmat communities and the Burke to reach out to one another without fluency in the other’s language. Another obstacle has been knowing who to reach out to. It can be difficult to locate which institution has what in their collections, and it can be hard for

institutions to locate what Indigenous organizations to reach out to. In 2022, a major cyber-attack caused the Burke to lose public access to their online collections, and only recently restored access to the public. This has created difficulty for communities to see if the institution has any of their cultural heritage in their collections. Although the two previously discussed obstacles are sizable, the most difficult obstacle is time and resources. Everything takes time and funding, as the Burke Museum only works with communities if the museum can fairly compensate them. In this section, I will first discuss starting points for institutions, as many places may not have the resources to start a large-scale project. Institutions can, however, start small. From there, I will discuss what larger collaborative projects can look like, and how Western institutions can connect with Asmat communities through museum collections, even if both parties are continents away.

Small projects

As of 2025, museum funding is in a difficult situation because of the federal funding cuts being put in place by the United States government (Merritt 2025). Many museums apply and receive grants from the federal government to go towards their yearly operating budget, ensuring the institution stays running smoothly. However, with these cuts, many institutions are having to scale back on personnel and other expenses. Historically, museums have been able to recover financially from global events, such as the 2008 Recession, after many years and strategic planning. This is to say that the field will need years to recover from the economic pressures' museums are now facing due to a lack of federal support. With that, it is understandable that many institutions are simply not able to start large-scale projects to connect new community

organizations with their institution. Nevertheless, this should not stop museums from doing decolonizing work within their collections.

As a first step, museums can start by critically analyzing how their collections have been cataloged, examining how long it has been since someone had viewed these object records in their system. By critically analyzing collections, museums can target records, or even an entire accession, to update the record to the best of their ability, even if that is to only update the language used. From these records, institutions can start to update records and give context to the harmful language that is outdated now, including “primitive”, “stone-age”, “savage”, or “cannibal(s)” when referring to Asmat people. While these terms should not be used actively, it is important to preserve the data and not erase such language because institutions must remember historically the way language was used to assert hierarchy over groups of people (Briscoe, Laura, Mare Nazaire, J. Ryan Allen, et al 2022).

According to authors such as Rachel Lynn Denagy, databases are inherently colonial. They often include perspectives and thought processes that differ from the community the artwork originates from (Denagy 2024). The perpetuation of these types of information being in records directly impact Indigenous communities. While museums cannot change the way in which their collections were acquired and the way the artworks have been documented previously, they can change what information is presented within their institutions. This ability to change can bring Indigenous communities and institutions closer.

Denagy argues that, although institutions have limitations, they can implement practices into their everyday work that dismantle the colonial ideologies that exist within datasets (Denagy 2024). The database, or museum catalog, is a vital part of the institution. Without all the records or information about how objects came to be in collections, museums would have less

information than they already have about an object or culture, which sometimes is not a lot. Museum databases are at the core of how people learn from museums, which is why they must present information that is respectful to and accurately represents the ontologies of Indigenous communities. In everyday practice at museums, Denagy claims that museum professionals can use Indigenous terms for the works in the collection, as often the original names cannot be translated to English. Names can lose meaning and power when translated to another language, which is why using the name that communities use is important (Griffin and Paroissien 2011). For example, with Asmat art, instead of saying “spirit mask” or “body mask” in reference to the outfit worn at the *jipae* ceremony, using the term *det*, *bi jumbo*, *dat jumbo*, *dato*, or *doroe* (depending on the region in which it is from) is better terminology (Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress n.d). Additionally, this is something that Indigenous communities also want. In a meeting with staff of Asmat Archives and the Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress, the staff shared how Asmat communities want their language to be used in museums in reference to their cultural heritage. The use of language is vital, as it can show who has autonomy over how a culture is represented through museum collections.

Community Input

To more accurately reflect Asmat community desires, it was vital to my work to connect with organizations in Asmat to reflect their perspectives. I connected with an organization called the Asmat Archives, whose primary goal is to digitize archival material and cultural heritage to teach Asmat youth about their culture. In this meeting, using Zoom as our platform, I discussed the needs of Asmat youth with Rosa Dalhia, a researcher and curator of Asmat art at the Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress (AMCP), Andres Wahyu, an archivist and researcher of Asmat culture, Martha Clau, an Asmat English language and culture educator, and Natalis Subade, an

Asmat educator who focuses on health and culture. As educators and researchers, they are passionate about the preservation and accurate representation of Asmat culture, both in and outside of Asmat. Through this meeting, I aimed to learn more about the needs and desires of Asmat communities, and they aimed to learn more about my research and work in Western institutions. We discussed their perspectives on global Asmat representation, and how they can connect with global institutions to learn from collections.

We started with simple introductions, letting everyone get to know one another, switching languages from Bahasa Indonesia to English as needed for everyone to better ease into the conversation, as I am not yet confident in Indonesian and people in the Asmat Archives are not yet confident in their English. The first topic we discussed was how the Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress (AMCP) uses museum collections for educational purposes. Dalhia started, saying how the museum and their organization designs programs specifically for Asmat youth to learn about their culture by connecting them with elders as mentors. The elders give lectures, and the students learn how to create artforms with recycled materials decorated with Asmat motifs and symbolism. While the AMCP does have a collection, they do not have the ability to store many artworks in their collections due to climate and facilities, which is why the institution does not prioritize collecting, and why global collections are so important.

Next, I asked how Asmat communities use global museum collections for education. Because of limited internet access for the entire Asmat region, Asmat Archives is creative in how they share information with those from villages who have limited or no internet access. The team explained how they usually bring a tablet or laptop with them on each visit, downloading the page or information so it can be accessed without the internet. From there, they show the villagers the information the respective museum has made publicly available about the Asmat

artwork. From the PDF or downloaded file, they usually go over the artwork, deciphering where it is from, and even who made it. The team recounts how sometimes they will go to villages and ask about who made an artwork, with villagers recounting stories or remembering the artist. Sometimes, the person who is the attributed artist is not the *real* artist, as the work could have been made by one person, then sold or entered into an auction by another. Villages and Asmat people are the only ones who have these stories, which is why connecting with villages is often vital for learning the deeper history of an artwork.

According to Wahyu, villagers are usually very curious about what museums do with the artwork and the purpose of it in the collection. For many, though, having Asmat artworks in global collections is a source of pride. Several communities in Asmat believe that Asmat art being able to travel so far and be desired by Western people is positive and shows how amazing their skill and ability is. Wahyu says “they become very happy there are a lot of people who want to know about our culture” showing that communities feel seen when Asmat art is held in global collections. Additionally, this often serves as motivation for Asmat youth. By the younger generation seeing their visual culture displayed all around the world, young people feel motivated to continue making traditional artwork and to learn about their culture. However, the way museums then represent the collections to Western audiences can sometimes be offensive.

At an exhibit in Europe a few years ago, members of the Asmat Archive attended and described feeling offput, as the exhibit said Asmat people were actively “cannibals” and had incorrect information about traditional Asmat stories. They talked with the curator, saying this is not accurate information. The team says that because the curator only learned about Asmat from books, they do not fully understand the culture or nuances. Asmat Archives says that curators, researchers, and others who represent Asmat culture in the West need to visit Asmat if they want

to display visual culture, as many misunderstandings and misinformation about Asmat come from a lack of understanding and first-hand experience with Asmat culture. However, this is quite difficult to do.

As previously discussed, Papua has much higher rates of active military and police compared to other parts of Indonesia (Supriatma and Salam 2025). The military and police presence in this region is not for the protection of Papuan people, but can be the oppressor, as some people in positions of power abuse their role and inflict violence onto Papuan people (Kirksey 2012). This creates an environment that is unsafe for everyone, and can make outsiders hesitant to visit. At the Festival Asmat Pokman, one of the largest events for tourists to visit Asmat, military and police stand guard and watch over the festival, which can be seen in social media videos and photographs (Nato Revolusi Leisubun 2019, Om SiL 2023). To some, this would make them feel protected, but to others, knowing what they have done, this can instill fear. It was only last September when military officials shot indiscriminately into a crowd of civilians during the

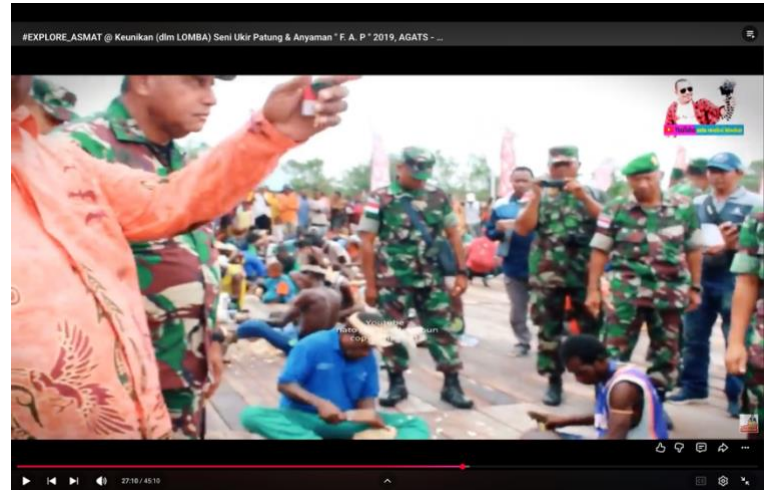


Figure 1 Screenshot from “#EXPLORE_ASMAT @ Keunikan (dlm LOMBA) Seni Ukir Patung & Anyaman " F. A. P " 2019, AGATS – PAPUA” by Nato Revolusi Leisubun on Youtube



Figure 2 Screenshot of Tweet by Om Sil that says "Berapa hasil karya ukiran dan anyaman dlm Festival Asmat Pokman ke 36 🏆 Nasaruddin idris" with a photo of a man holding a carving. Behind the man is a crowd of people, including members of the military and police.

tourist season (Human Rights Monitor 2025). The tension in the region can make curators reluctant to visit because of their own safety.

Asmat Archives believes that if institutions have collections of Asmat art, they should be showing this work to the public, so long as the artworks are appropriate for the public to view. However, to start this process, institutions must understand Asmat culture and nuances. The team suggests that museums do mini exhibitions centered not just on the material object, but on the culture. Exhibits should be multi-media, combining not just Asmat artworks and labels, but sound and video. To show people Asmat culture, Asmat Archives believes displays should be comprehensive and not just a curated view of the objects. By playing traditional Asmat music, printing off stories of Asmat folklore, and playing videos/documentaries, museums can better help visitors understand the sights and sounds from Asmat, and not just the sanitized version that museums have. While this total representation can be critiqued and hard to execute, especially if there is no community locally, it is a start to representing Asmat how some Asmat communities want to be showcased.

During this interview, I asked if global institutions connect with Asmat communities, and if they also try to connect with other institutions. In short, Asmat communities only know about a handful of museums in Europe, the United Kingdom, and the United States that have collections of Asmat art, and before I reached out to them, they did not know the Burke Museum had the collection it does. Certain museums have been in contact with Asmat communities because of the relationships between the missionaries, collections, and the creation of the Asmat Museum of Culture and Progress, but outside of that it is quite difficult. According to Wahyu, less than ten of the museums they know about have online collections, and even then, the information museums make publicly available is limited. They are usually able to see what region of Asmat the art

pieces are from and what time they were made, but not much more than that. The team recounts how in museum object descriptions, Western institutions usually only state that the artwork is from Asmat, and not much more, making the record incomplete. This could be due to a variety of reasons, with a major aspect being that donors may not have placed care into figuring out this information before buying the artwork, then donating it to a museum. After this, the museum may not have had the resources or capacity to find this information, if publicly available. If artwork is in a museum collection yet has no information about what it is or its purpose, museums should research more about why the work was created, what purpose it serves, and what ceremony it is part of if it is a ceremonial object, as ultimately it is now part of the institutions collection, thus in its care. Without realizing it, Western institutions create narratives about Asmat culture that are not fully truthful or comprehensive.

From this, I asked how museums can make educational materials to send to communities so that they can use Western museum collections for cross-cultural learning. From what the team said, educational materials should be translated to Indonesian; English is not an accessible language, yet many records are in English. From there, there are a few ways that institutions can create educational materials to then share with Asmat communities. The first is to share complete object records, with the full object description, as this is not always publicly available yet is vital for Asmat communities to better understand how exactly Asmat art came to the specific Western institution. This can also give communities a better idea of where an object may have originally been from, who made it, and when it was collected if the museum has access to this information, which they do not always possess. The second is for institutions to make digital exhibitions in collaboration with communities in Asmat. This way, communities in Agats, the capital of the Asmat region and where the internet is strong, can interact with the collection, even though the

institution may be oceans away. Though this may be difficult due to internet access, time zone difference, and language barriers, there are strategies that can be used to overcome these challenges. With careful planning, a slower paced timeline, and translation services, either through online means or a translator, this is something that can be made possible.

Sample Educational Materials

From my conversations with Asmat Archives, I was able to get better insight on how Western institutions can better share collections information with Asmat communities. In this section, I will display the sample materials I created and discuss my methodologies. Through these educational materials, the aim is for Asmat communities to better access the information that Western museums possess. By using a PDF format and a different language, the structural barriers that Asmat people encounter will be eliminated, allowing for better understanding and thus education for those who want to learn.

The sample materials are geared towards Asmat youth and Asmat elders who are interested in learning about what cultural heritage items are in the Burke Museum's collection and how they arrived at the Burke. I will be using one object record from the Burke's database. The specific work I chose was an Asmat shield from the 2011-57 accession, as this accession has detailed documentation of the donors' journeys throughout Asmat and other areas of Papua, meaning that the provenance is easily traceable for Asmat community members who are interested in learning the specifics about the collection (Burke Museum 2011-57 collection and Burke Museum 2012-99 collection). From the records, I have chosen to redact non-essential sensitive museum information, such as donor names and object locations, as this thesis will be

made public. The example record in this research will be sent to Asmat Archives for educational use, then revised with input from Asmat Archives. The first record will be in English, and the second in Indonesian.

Ethnology Catalog Report

Catalog ID: 2011-57/40



Accession Data

Accession ID	Accession Date	Accession Type
2011-57	03/31/2011	Accession.Gift

Dates

Date Range	Early Date	Late Date	Type
1993-1997	1993	1997	Date Collected

Source Data

Date, End
03/29/2011

Description

OBJECT NAME Shield

CULTURE OF ORIGIN Asmat; Yaor

USED Asmat; Yaor

COLOR White; Orange; Black (color)

MATERIALS Wood; Paint; Charcoal; Ochre; Lime

TECHNIQUES Carved; Painted

SUBJECT Geometric

ID LOCN on the lower left hand edge of the back

REMARKS

Asmat shield carved from a single piece of wood with a narrow, pointed top and a wide, flat bottom. The front of the shield is decorated throughout with relief carved designs of unknown meaning painted orange on a white background. The handle on the back was carved separately and then nailed in place. The entire shield is 30" long and 9" at it's widest point (in the middle). Some of the white paint (likely lime) has been rubbed off of the top point of the shield.

This shield was purchased in Yaor. See the archives, 2012-99, for more details (journal file "010 Asmat Journeys & Other Ledger etc.").

Fide donor: Collection of contemporary art and ethnographic objects made by the donors on trips to the Asmat area of New Guinea ca. 1993-1997. They stopped in local villages and met with many carvers, and documented their trips with photographs and journals.

PHOTO SL-DMT

Dimensions

Dimensions	English	Metric
Height	30.00 in	76.20 cm total length
Width	9.00 in	22.86 cm in the center of the shield

Ethnology Catalog Report

Catalog ID: 2011-57/40



DATA AKSESI	ID akses	Akses Date	Jenis Akses
	2011-57	03/31/2011	Akses: Hadiah

Tanggal:	Rentang tanggal	Tanggal paling awal	Tanggal terbaru	Jenis
	1993-1997	1993	1997	Tanggal pengumpulan

Data dari:	Tanggal, Selasai
	03/29/2011

DESKRIPSI

NAMA	Perisai
BUDAYA	Asmat; Yaor
DIGUNAKAN	Asmat; Yaor
WARNA	Putih; Oranye; Hitam (warna)
BAHAN	Kayu; Cat, Arang; Oker; Kaput
TEKNIK	Diukir; Dilukis
SUBJEK	Geometris
ID LOCN	

INFORMASI Perisai ini diukir dari kayu yang memiliki bagian atas yang runcing dan alas yang lebar. Bagian depan perisai ini memiliki ukiran relief untuk simbol dan dilukis warna oranye dan putih. Pegangan di bagian belakang diukir, dan dipasang pada perisai tersebut menggunakan paku. Ukuran perisainya adalah 76.20 cm panjang dan 22.86 cm lebar. Berapa cat putih sudah terkelupas di atas.

Perisai ini dibeli di Yaor. Informasi tentang koleksinya di dalam arsip 2012-99 (nama "010 Asmat Journeys & Other Ledger etc [Perjalanan Asmat dan jurnal lain]).

Tentang donor: Koleksi seni kontemporer dan objek-objek etnografis dibuat oleh donor selama perjalanan ke Asmat dan tempat lain di New Guinea tanggal 1993-1997. Mereka mengunjungi desa-desa, bertemu dengan seniman, dan mendokumentasikan perjalanan dengan foto-foto dan tulisan-tulisan.

Foto SL-DMT

Ukuran	Ukuran	Inggris	Metric		
Panjang	30.00	in	76.20	cm	Panjang
Lebar	9.00	in	22.86	cm	Lebar

This sample is intended to be a starting point for collaborative efforts. Feedback from community members on what is working well and what needs improvement for accessibility is important, as every institution and every person who will interact with educational materials such as this will have different needs and desires. Although work such as translating records may be difficult, it is vital for accessibility (Eardley 2025). Translations allow people of various abilities to understand and engage with materials in collections. Although translations can be challenging, due to the cost of translators and the amount of work needed, it is something that can be overcome. If institutions are not yet able to have a human translator doing the work, they can start by using online translation services. Although not fully accurate and often lacking in linguistic nuance, it can be a helpful starting point. By translating object records for Asmat communities, institutions are creating more usable, thus educational, information. This then allows for better collaboration and awareness as to what is in collections and what information museums have. From this, communities then have the power and autonomy to provide information that they believe is more culturally reflective. These ideas and concepts will be shared with the Burke Museum as a starting point to build meaningful relationships between Asmat communities and the Burke Museum.

I would like to conclude this section by discussing the Asmat story of Fumeripits. The way I had learned the story was not from Indigenous Asmat people, but instead through books written by Western anthropologists. However, what I had learned was a far too simplified version of the story. In my interview, Wahyu asked if I knew the story, to which I admitted I do know part of it, but I was not confident in the version I had heard. I recounted the telling that I knew, which is the following:

“Fumeripits was a man who drowned in a river after his boat tipped over. He was then pulled from the sea and revived by the great sea eagle, War. After his revival, Fumeripits then went into the forest. As he sat by his fire, he felt lonely, and decided to carve a man and a woman figure from wood. He then wanted to play music, so he readied his tifa (drum). While beating the tifa, the figures started to come to life, and soon became humans, thus the first Asmat people were born from the trees.”

When I reached the end, Andres told me, with the rest of the team nodding along, that the Western retelling seems to get fixated on certain aspects of the story that are different from what Asmat communities focus on. Other scholars, such as Tom Powell-Davies, have discussed this as well. Perhaps because of who was collecting this oral history, the missionaries, there seemed to be an overemphasis on acts of immortality, according to Catholic beliefs (Powell-Davies 2021). Additionally, Asmat people being people of the trees is something outsiders had assigned to Asmat, not what they believed. In the oldest recorded version of the story, Fumeripits did not create all Asmat people, as he himself was Asmat. This fundamental misunderstanding has changed the way the story is told in the West.

The team then suggested I read the story on the Asmat Archives website, despite the story being documented by missionaries and other colonials. This documentation, however, is one of the oldest available. While I understood the premise of the first half of the story, I did not know the second half. The story on their website is in Asmat Sketchbook 4 and was one of the earliest stories collected by missionaries in the region, with Father Zeegward recording the story in 1949 (Trenkenschuh 1984). The following is the second half of the story:

When [Famiripits] was in Kokanao he built a very large jew. He looked into the future and saw that Kokonao Lama (editor: i.e. The old site of the village) would soon be washed away. He made the decision to transfer the

site to the new present location. In front of the doors of the large jew [Asmat men's longhouse], he placed axes so that when the carvings came to life and would begin to search for the drummer, they would see and

take the axes. Famiripitsj saw that all the people took the axes and then moved on to another area, so that he could keep one axe for himself.

Famiripitsj moved to the Fai River where two of his sons were already living- Matipitsj and Pinis. Both of these sons had guns. When Famiripitsj arrived, both of the boys were in the jungle gathering sago. Their children, however, offer Famiripitsj some sago, but he told them that he didn't need it. He said that all he wanted were the two guns.

Famiripitsj took the two guns which were standing on a rack on either side of the house. He took the guns and went to the Awap river where he shot a bird, which fell to the ground. He shot a second time and another bird dropped. Finally, however, he arrived in Kokonao and called all of the Papuans together for a big feast. That night, though, the people stole his axes and in the morning he discovered the theft, and called the people together.

When everyone had gathered, he shot into the crows and everyone dropped dead. From each river, he saved the life of only one man and one woman. There was crying everywhere. Famiripitsj said, "I am now the company, I am now the tuan."

When his two sons, Matipitsj and Pinis, returned from the jungle, they heard the children crying and asked what was going on. The children replied that Famiripitsj had taken the guns. They immediately went to Kokonao to see if they couldn't get at least one of the guns, but Famiripitsj refused and said again, "I am the company, I am the tuan. The guns are mine. Go back to the Fai and bring the children here. You can live on the Atapo river and become Entji and take care of my supplies in the store there." They returned and started living at Atapo and so they became Entji.

While many people living in Western countries seem to focus on how Fumeripits created people, the second half of the story, the most critical part, is not discussed. This section of the story describes betrayal, violence, and starting anew in a way that differs from the story told in the West. This version shows that Asmat people are not passive; they have autonomy, control, and are strong. They can rebuild after betrayals, and they will survive. This phenomenon, of stories being framed in certain ways depending on the culture they are taught within, is a prime example of how people in the West often do not fully understand different cultures they have only read about; thus, stories and beliefs can get misconstrued.

Additionally, the information the West has on Asmat living culture is not true according to community members. Western institutions still inadvertently, or sometimes advertently, push narratives of Asmat people being “cannibals” or “primitive”. Because many institutions do not connect with Asmat community members, this creates gaps in information and perpetuates harmful stereotypes that then affect public perceptions. Connection to community is vital for museums, as it can provide educational opportunities for both institutions and community members. Community connection is also vital for the community itself, particularly if they are currently encountering state-sanctioned violence or genocide. Although it may be difficult to work with groups surviving this level of violence, as there can be limited opportunity to speak freely with community or people may fear retaliation if they are caught speaking out, it can also serve as an opportunity for the to share their stories and information globally. Museums can act as a safe gateway for communities facing violence to present themselves in ways they choose to be, and also a more anonymous way than directly content online or being outwardly politically active. According to Ryker Crawford (2021):

“we, as curators, collections managers and museum professionals, have a plethora of stories that we can help share, if we understand that we still hold onto decades-old theories and methodologies of ‘doing museology’ that we may subconsciously be still following.” (pg. 139)

Asmat communities want to learn from global collections and see where their tangible cultural heritage has ended up. Because of collection practices, Asmat art has migrated to numerous countries all over the world, many of which are Western countries. Museums can only benefit by connecting with Asmat communities, and communities can continue to learn about their cultural heritage in global collections. Organizations such as Asmat Archives want to teach the next generation about Asmat culture amidst a decline in cultural practice, which makes

connection more vital for all parties involved. Even if institutions are unable to facilitate this connection presently, there are steps they can take so that once they have the resources to do so, they are prepared and the process can be smoother.

Conclusion

Since the start of colonial contact, Asmat people and their art have become subject to the desires of their colonial occupiers. This history has permeated museum collections and thus has impacted the way Western institutions display and teach about Asmat people, art, and culture. Across the United States of America, Western institutions have significantly less artwork made by women compared to artwork made by men, which directly reflects who and what collectors placed importance in. This gap in museum collections can skew the general public's belief about a culture, as if Asmat is consistently advertised as a culture that centers around carving, people will believe that. Museums carry soft power and the ability to influence the general public, as they are often viewed as trusted educational institutions (Lord and Blankenberg 2016). Museums have an ethical responsibility to acknowledge that their collections are not neutral and are built upon decades and centuries of colonialism and Western-centric biases, and thus they must connect with Indigenous communities in which their collections originate from. Though this is a daunting task, as many museums have artworks from hundreds and thousands of communities, this is a process that should be started. Institutions can start by selecting culture groups that have been underrepresented or whom the institutions can build community relationships with.

Historically, Asmat people have been framed as "primitive", "savage", and "stone-age" by many global powers, including the Netherlands, the United States, and Indonesia (Rutherford 2018). This concept was created to oppress Indigenous groups and thus assigned to Papuan people to justify colonial and military occupation. This racial construct exists in museums and their collections today. The representation of Asmat art and culture in exhibits has not always been truthful, and instead played on Western stereotypes, with certain exhibits displaying either no, wrong, or exoticizing information. There are institutions that have worked on changing this

narrative, including the Cambridge Museum of Archeology and Anthropology, with the exhibition *Church and the ancestors: Sacred pir mats from Asmat, Papua, Indonesia* (December 2020 to September 2021) and the American Museum of Asmat Art, with the exhibit *Woven Together: Asmat Women and Art* (2021 to 2022), with both of the exhibitions centering around contemporary issues and women centered artwork. However, according to the Asmat Archives, there is still much work to be done, and much collaboration to be desired (Asmat Archives Discussion 2026).

Asmat, and in general Papuan, people are currently undergoing state-sanctioned violence because of the Indonesian government (Human Rights Monitor 2025, Chao 2022, Kirksey 2012). The government's cupidity for their land and natural resources has resulted in the suppression and death of many Papuan people. Thus, it is vital for institutions to connect with these communities and build lasting relationships so that their stories are heard and reflected through the data used in the collections of their art that now live in international institutions. Collections are not solely curated by museums; they are instead shaped by donors and sellers who give the artwork to museums. Museums do not always have information attached to the art, and often do not have the full story of how the object came to be. For Asmat, understanding the political history of the region, the historical representations, and the key parties involved in defining what value is placed on which objects are crucial to begin dismantling the colonial legacies that plague collections.

Even though my research is focused on Asmat art collections from the Asmat region of South Papua, the concepts can be applied to many Indigenous communities and museum collections globally. Art is political and deeply intertwined with one's history, which is why learning about the politics and history of a place is important to learning about the art produced

there. Asmat art exists within the colonial entanglement that Eben Kirksey defines, and there are more agents than just the government and extraction agencies. The art itself, museums, donors/collectors, and third-party art sellers are all also involved in this multi-layered entanglement. Additionally, the structures that artists live within, such as that created by state-sanctioned violence and the patriarchy, result in only some voices being heard, predominately male, and others becoming marginalized, predominately female. The layering of time, harmful media portrayals, and male-centered researched has only worsened the issue. By understanding these structures, museums can start to acknowledge the silences and gaps in their collections, thus initiate collaboration efforts that result in a more inclusive collections practices and educational materials that centers the voices of real peoples, not just the echoes from their entanglements. Collaboration and relationship building may be difficult for those in the entanglement, but that does not mean it is impossible or something that museums should not face.

While collaboration is necessary, there are often many ethical concerns that can arise from it. The way that institutions and communities should view this relationship is as one akin to kinky- empiricism, as defined by Danilyn Rutherford. In her book, *Living in the Stone Age* (2018), she says:

“Dialogue is always fraught with ethical conundrums. To converse is to engage in an exchange of gestures. To exchange is to receive, and to receive is to confront the impossible demand to give others their due...Anthropologists find themselves compelled to do right by a cultural other that fades into a specter as soon as they think hard about what they do. This second dimension of kinky empiricism—its Slinky effect, as we might call it—eats away at certainty as well as good conscience. When anthropologists look closely at their own research practices, it becomes clear that partial truths are the best they can do.” (pg. 154)

Using this framework, institutions can better navigate the colonial entanglement and legacies imposed on Asmat people. There is no one fix-all to the structural issues artists and museums encounter in their works. The more work is done in one direction, the more the slinky moves back and forth. In this work, museums will never fully understand or accurately reflect the voices of communities; they are only able to reflect partial truths or parts of a story. Even so, these places must work to highlight stories and bring them to the forefront of their collections work to better understand collections, represent people, and decolonize the minds of their local communities, even if it is only partially.

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