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For Immediate Use
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Second Skins: Painted Barkcloth from New Guinea and Central Africa Opens Apr 1

This April the Fowler presents striking examples of painted barkcloth from two regions on opposite sides of the earth—the Ituri rainforest of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the mountains of eastern Papua New Guinea—in the exhibition *Second Skins: Painted Barkcloth from New Guinea and Central Africa*, on display Apr 1–Aug 26, 2012. In both regions, women make barkcloth by stripping the fibrous inner bark from a variety of different forest trees and then beating it with a mallet until it is transformed into a soft felt-like cloth.

Decorated barkcloth was once made primarily for clothing. Many of the patterns applied to the cloth originally came from forms of body decoration—body painting in the Ituri forest and tattoo in New Guinea. Like the painted or tattooed human skin, the barkcloth provided an interface—beautifully decorated with inherited, culturally significant designs—between the individual and the larger social world.

Barkcloth appears in an array of colors and textures, from smooth off-white, to rough browns, to lace-like pale reds. Dynamic, graphic designs and patterns are drawn, painted, stamped or printed onto its surface, usually with a finger, flexible twig, or stencil fashioned from a plant stem.

Focusing on 20th-century and contemporary iterations of possibly ancient traditions, *Second Skins* explores barkcloth's "migration" from the body to the gallery wall, highlighting the genre's artistic inventiveness and the differing ways these two traditions have interacted with the international art market.

Ömie Barkcloth from Papua New Guinea

The Ömie people, who number about 1,800 individuals today, live in an isolated part of Oro Province on the slopes of the volcano Mt. Lamington. In 2004, a group of young educated Ömie men, who favored economic development in support of their traditional culture, proposed to clan chiefs a plan to market Ömie barkcloth made by women to the outside world for the first time. The community established an enterprise now known as Ömie Artists and began working with an agent from Australia to promote the sale of Ömie barkcloth. It is marketed with the names of the individual women artists. The first major museum exhibition of Ömie barkcloth took place at the National Gallery of Victoria, in Melbourne, Australia in 2009, and its presentation at the Fowler is the first in the United States.

Ömie barkcloth features dense and highly intricate painted designs that reference motifs from the natural world, such as trees, birds, spider webs, pig tusks, and shells. Many of these colorful patterns were also tattoo designs, which date to the time body tattoos were an important part of initiation rites. The twenty-one pieces on display range from dazzling examples with all-over patterns in complex tracteries to others with elegant and more minimalist designs. Two of the primary leitmotifs are the tangles of climbing vines and the majesty of the Ömie mountains, which dominates the environment.

The Ömie population remained largely unnoticed by outsiders until World War II, when young Ömie men were recruited by the Australian Army. After the disruptions caused by the war and subsequent missionary activity in the region, the chiefs encouraged the women to paint their tattoo designs onto barkcloth in order to appease the ancestors and preserve their patterns.

Girls learn how to create barkcloth drawings from their mothers, grandmothers or aunts, usually as teenagers. They train by watching their “mothers” lay down the main elements of the design in black, and they may assist by filling in with colored pigments, which are made from local, natural substances. For example, the black dye is made by chewing ash from burned bamboo together with a particular type of leaf. Yellow comes from the pulp of a local fruit, while red is made by steaming certain fern leaves and bark together with wood ash. The range of variation among individual Ömie barkcloths reveals the innovation possible in the hands of particular woman artists.

Mbuti Barkcloth from the Democratic Republic of the Congo

In the Ituri Forest, barkcloth is made by the Mbuti peoples, who occupy the northeastern edge of a vast rainforest that stretches from Cameroon’s Atlantic Coast to the Ruwenzori Mountain range, on the borders of Uganda and Rwanda. The Mbuti are one of approximately a dozen different hunter-gatherer peoples inhabiting this forested zone. The Democratic Republic of the Congo’s recent civil wars make it difficult to know how many Mbuti there are today. Population estimates in the 1980s put their numbers at around 30,000.

Like the barkcloth made by the Ömie, Mbuti barkcloths are rarely pictorial, and more often include motifs that refer to the forest environment—for example, leopard spots or vines—and the material culture of their camp life, such as their houses and hunting nets. The Mbuti traditionally used this elaborately ornamented barkcloth as loincloths for men, women and children, as receiving blankets for newborns, and as a trade item with their local farming neighbors.

As with Ömie barkcloths, the dyes are created using local, natural materials. Black, the most common Mbuti dye color, is mixed from Gardenia fruit juice and soot scraped from the base of cooking pots, while various pulverized barks and leaves provide rarer red, yellow and green dyes.

In 1976, the National Museum of Zaire purchased approximately one hundred decorated Mbuti barkcloth drawings for its permanent collection. A series of small exhibitions of Mbuti drawings followed in the early 1980s at commercial art galleries in Europe and North America. Artists and scholars in the west celebrated the drawings for their graphic vitality and freedom, and several works found their way into the personal collections of Minimalist and Post-Minimalist painters, including Brice Marden and Terry Winters.

By the late-1980s, thousands of barkcloths made explicitly for export burst onto the international art market via France and Belgium—the Congo region’s two former colonial powers. The works for sale passed through chains of local traders and international dealers, and information about the individual makers or the place of origin rarely accompanied the drawings. The surge in interest helped buoy the first major exhibition of the graphic arts of the Ituri Forest, organized by the Musée Dapper in Paris in 1991.

Additional Information

This exhibition is curated by the Fowler Museum team of Roy Hamilton, senior curator of Asian and Pacific collections; Gemma Rodrigues, curator of African arts; and Marla C. Berns, Shirley and Ralph Shapiro Director. Major support comes from the Barbara and Joseph Goldenberg Fund and the R. L. Shep Endowment. Additional funding is provided by Bedhead Pajamas.

The Fowler Museum at UCLA is one of the country’s most respected institutions devoted to exploring the arts and cultures of Africa, Asia and the Pacific, and the Americas. The Fowler is open Wednesdays through Sundays, from noon to 5 p.m.; and on Thursdays, from noon until 8 p.m. The museum is closed Mondays and Tuesdays. The Fowler Museum, part of UCLA Arts, is located in the

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north part of the UCLA campus. Admission is free. Parking is available for a maximum of \$11 in Lot 4. For more information, the public may call 310/825-4361 or visit fowler.ucla.edu.

Related Events

Opening Day

April 1, 2012 2 pm

On opening day of *Second Skins*, Fowler curator of African arts Gemma Rodrigues offers an overview of the exhibition, followed by talks by Roy Hamilton, the Fowler's senior curator of Asian and Pacific collections, and Enid Schildkrout, curator emerita, American Museum of Natural History and Museum for African Art.

Hamilton will explore the unique story of how Omie barkcloth came onto the international art market, as well as some of the ideas behind the cloths' motifs. Next, Schildkrout will discuss the barkcloths of the Ituri region, showing how they are part of a larger corpus of regional graphic art, found on surfaces as diverse as wall murals and the human body. After the talk, Fowler curators Gemma Rodrigues and Hamilton will be in the exhibition for informal discussions about the works on view.

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