FIG. 1: Ceremonial house, *kurambu*. Abelam; Kimbungua village, Maprik area, East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea.
Photo: Ulrich Kortmann.

FIG. 2 (top right): Long yam, *wapi*. Abelam; Kiminimbus village, Maprik area, East Sepik Province.
Photo: Marc Dozier.

FIG. 3 (middle right): Long yams on display. Abelam; Maprik area, East Sepik Province.
Photo: Fred Gerrits. From G. J. M. (Fred) Gerrits, *The Haus Tambaran of Bongiora: A View from Within of the Tambaran and Yam Cults of the Abelam in the East Sepik Province of Papua New Guinea*. Bellinzona: Giampiero Casagrande Editore, 2012.

FIG. 4 (bottom right): Adorned dancer. Abelam; Maprik area, East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea.
Photo: René Gardi, 1951. From René Gardi, *Sepik: Land der Sterbenden Geister.* Bern: Alfred Scherz Verlag, 1958.

Abelam Masks
NEW PERSPECTIVES

By Richard Scaglion

A unique exhibition of New Guinea masks will be presented at the Musée International du Carnaval et du Masque in Binche, Belgium, opening September 4, 2020. Titled *Abelam. Tournés vers les étoiles (Abelam: Facing the Sky)*, the display is predicated upon an unusual premise first expressed in *The Stars Are Eyes*,[1] an innovative treatment of the arts of the Abelam people of Papua New Guinea. In it, author Marc Assayag urges us to consider art from a variety of orientations and perspectives. His work deploys a series of remarkable images to show how Abelam artistic representations present the viewer with complementary meanings when observed from a variety of angles (especially upside down). In so doing, Assayag has exposed a literal blind spot in how Westerners experience "vision" itself, revealing how elements of Abelam design have heretofore remained imperceptible to Westerners. The exhibition builds upon this principle, overcoming the drawbacks of static museum displays by offering an entirely new visual experience. Employing light and shade effects, mirrors, and specially designed pivoting display cases, the show invites us to inspect and consider Abelam masks from multiple angles and viewpoints and to take our appreciation for Abelam art in an entirely new direction.

THE ABELAM PEOPLE

Just north of the Middle Sepik River in Papua New Guinea, the Abelam territory stretches upward from low-lying grass plains to the coastal mountains of the East Sepik Province. Today the Abelam number nearly a quarter of a million people. Their ancestors moved northward out of the marshy environment surrounding the Sepik River onto the floodplains of the Screw

FIGS. 5a and b (below): Yam mask (face-on and lateral perspectives). Abelam; Maprik area, East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea.
Fiber, pigments. H: 40 cm.
Private collection.
Photos: Marc Assayag.

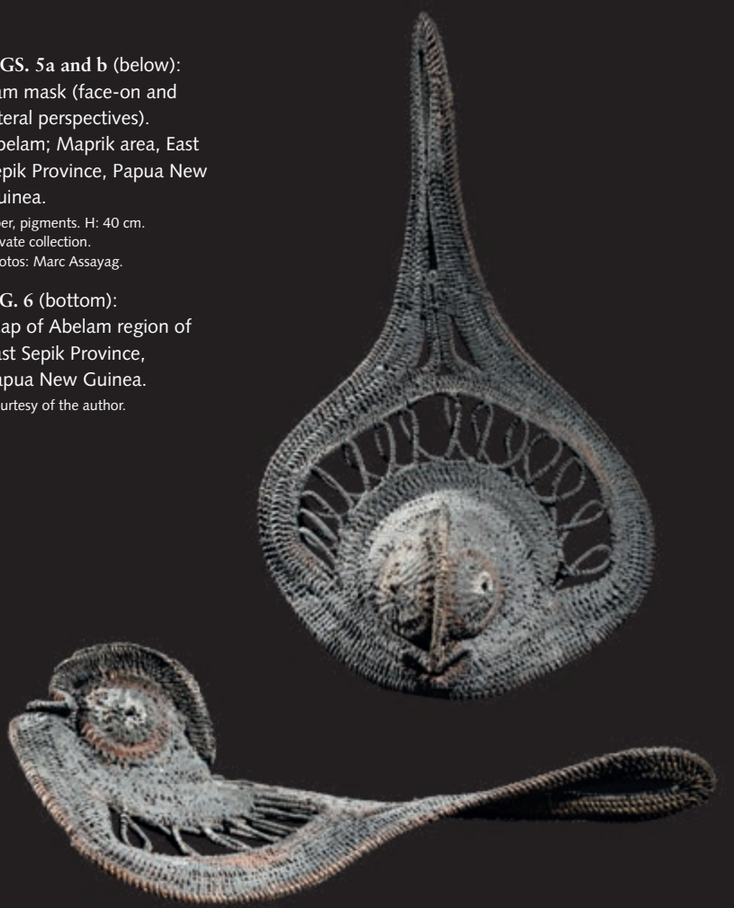
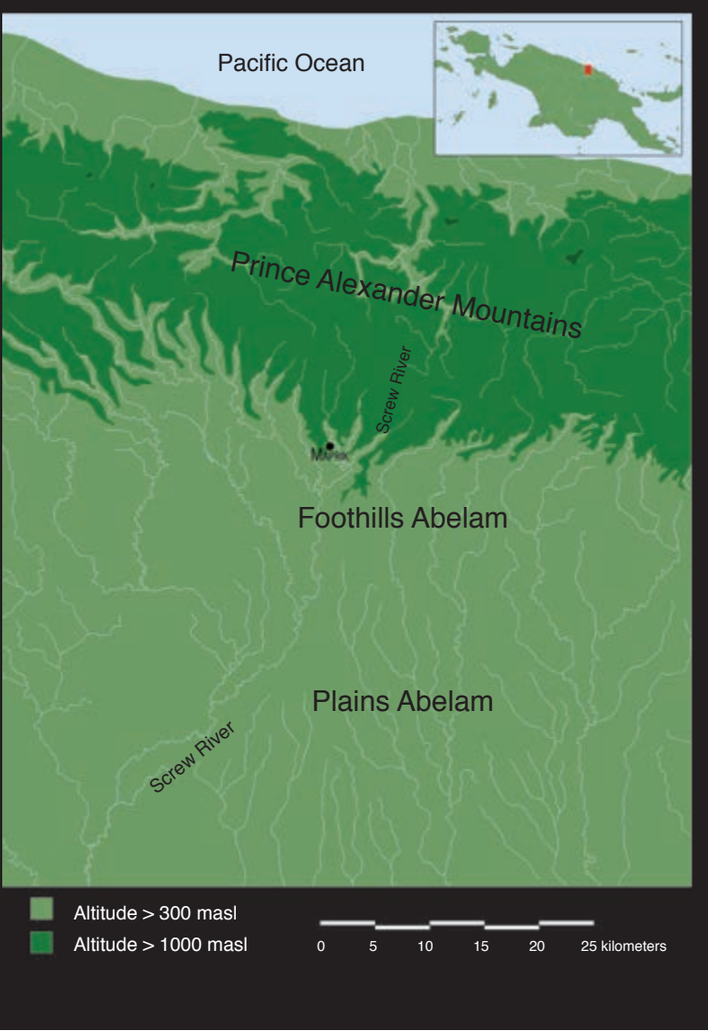


FIG. 6 (bottom): Map of Abelam region of East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea.
Courtesy of the author.

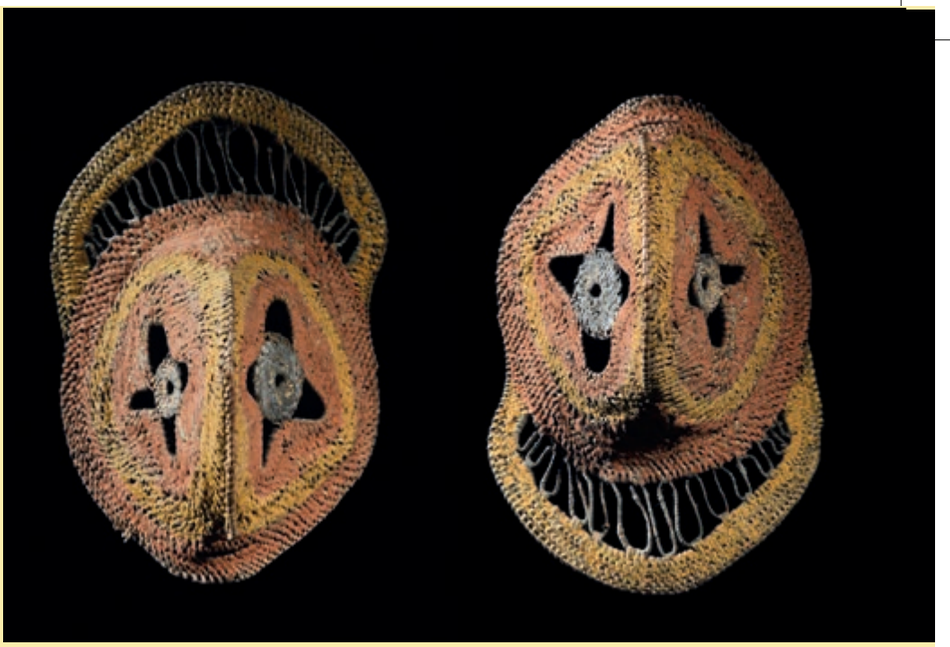


River and finally into the foothills of the Prince Alexander Mountains. Local ecology, agricultural intensification, and other factors eventually created differences between the plains-dwelling Wosera people and their foothills-dwelling cousins. But for both groups, local soils, rainfall, and drainage conditions favored the growth of root crops such as taro and, especially, yams, and these tubers came to dominate both the diet and the ideology of the Abelam people.

Contact between the Abelam and Europeans began in the 1920s and '30s, but it was not until the 1960s that colonialism brought about significant changes in Abelam culture. Government influence increased throughout the 1970s, and Christian churches began to attract converts. The 1970s–'80s also saw an increase in business and commerce, with the Maprik District becoming one of the country's largest rice-producing centers, while commercial coffee production also was burgeoning. Conversion to Christianity increased dramatically during the 1980s, and traditional culture as represented in this exhibition went into decline.

ABELAM ART

Traditional Abelam art and religion have always been closely linked, but as Christianity made inroads in the 1980s, Abelam artistic traditions began to deteriorate. Customary religious and spiritual beliefs involved various mystical objects, plants, animals, spirit beings, and, most importantly, ancestral spirits. Many of these supernatural beings were thought to be capable of influencing human affairs, and people sought their aid by offering up ritual displays, engaging in mystical practices, and avoiding actions that would anger them. The most powerful and most respected of all these supernatural beings were the ancestral spirits, or *ngwālndu*. Abelam males were introduced to these spirit beings through a series of successive initiation ceremonies in which the *ngwālndu* were represented by carved wooden statues, paintings, and sounds. As the various initiation stages progressed, initiates were shown or given various musical instruments, including



FIGS. 7a–e (above):
Yam mask (five perspectives).
Abelam; Maprik area, East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea.
Fiber, pigments. H: 20 cm.
Private collection.
Photos: Marc Assayag.

FIGS. 8a–e (below): Mask, *baba* (five perspectives). Abelam; Maprik area, East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea.
Fiber, pigments. H: 40 cm.
Private collection.
Photos: Marc Assayag.

bullroarers, soundboards, flutes, ocarinas, resonators, and trumpets, the sounds of which were designed to embody spirit voices. Also representing the spirits were costumed dancers with feathered headdresses who performed during the ceremonies. In the last stages of initiation, special rooms in the spirit houses, or *kurambu,* were arranged with scenes containing painted wooden carvings and other figures symbolizing *ngwālndu*, which were then visually revealed to the initiates.

During these initiations, no explanations of the "meanings" of what the inductees were seeing were ever offered to the young men, whose understandings emerged slowly over a lifetime of contemplation as they participated further in ceremonial life. "Secrets" were never revealed directly, and, indeed, there really were no shared secrets as such. I began my own anthropological fieldwork with the Abelam as a young man in the early 1970s. As traditional practices began to wane in the late 1980s, elderly Abelam men, fearing that their ritual expertise would die with them, were almost desperate to pass along customary knowledge to anyone who would listen. Younger people were no longer concerned with the old ways, but as an anthropologist, and middle-aged myself by then, I was one of the few persons apparently still interested in acquiring it. My mentors were now most willing to share their knowledge, but, even so, I never got what would pass for "explanations" in the Western

sense from my now-eager mentors. As anthropologist Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin clarifies:

> As I have pointed out on several previous occasions, imagery is never explained in the form of verbal exegesis; the Abelam do not require a consistent explanation for beings that are represented by means of visual media, either as three-dimensional sculptures or two-dimensional paintings. Instead, the system of cross-referencing signs is an open one, providing leeway for multiple and diverse interpretations.[2]

With this understanding of the relationships among art, ancestors, and male initiation in traditional Abelam social life, I turn next to creative expressions centered on another ritual complex.

YAMS

The Abelam people may well be the world's most accomplished yam growers. They focus especially on the growth, display, and exchange of exceptionally large specimens of the yam *(Dioscorea spp.)*. In English, these have sometimes been called "long yams." While the initiation ceremonies described above have not been performed for many years, in contrast, yam growing is still practiced. Two main species of yams are commonly grown: *wāpi* and *ka (jāmbe)*. *Ka* yams are raised for food, but a few varieties of *wāpi* are grown to gigantic size in special gardens tended by Abelam men. These yams, which have great symbolic and ritual significance, are exchanged in competitions with trade partners from rival groups, and men who consistently grow exceptional specimens receive great praise and gain considerable prestige. Specimens of the premier *wāpi* variety, the *māmbutap,* can attain lengths of three meters (ten feet) or more. These extraordinary yams are put on public display after the harvest.

Yam festivals, which are still held, are celebratory communal occasions, and rival yam growers from nearby villages attend to inspect and assess the yams. On the morning of the event, the long yams, festooned with shell, feather, and basketry ornaments, are at first concealed behind barriers. When the spectators have gathered, the decorated yams are carried together onto the ceremonial ground.

FIGS. 9a–c (left):
Mask, *baba* (three perspectives).
Abelam; Maprik area, East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea.
Fiber, pigments. H: 45 cm.
Private collection.
Photos: Marc Assayag.

FIG. 10 (below):
Illusion—Surreal Portrait.
© FH-Studio.com.

FIG. 11 (above):
Turned columns, a variation on the Rubin's Vase Ambiguous Figure.
Detail of installation at the Exploratorium, San Francisco.

Each long yam is attached to a pole and transported by two men, one at each end. As the yams are paraded, guests show their approval of their rivals' efforts by putting special leaves or lime on particularly good specimens. The *wāpi* are then lined up along wooden frames in front of the ceremonial houses where they are carefully examined and measured by the ritual exchange partners. Following the inspection, individuals sing ritual and provocative songs, particularly on the themes of yam exchanges and warfare.

While the guests are reviewing the yams, women from the host village prepare an elaborate feast. Food is distributed during the singing of the ritual songs, which eventually gives way to general feasting. Late in the day, there is a distribution of food to the exchange partners and other visitors (often more than they can carry away), after which many depart. Others stay for the singing and dancing in celebration of the harvest, which continues until dawn. A week or so later, the (now undecorated) *wāpi* are carried to the exchange partners' hamlets and left there with relatively little fanfare, ending the year's ritual yam cycle.

FIGS. 12a–c (below): Mask, *baba* (three perspectives). Abelam; Maprik area, East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea. Fiber, pigments. H: 45 cm. Private collection. Photos: Marc Assayag.

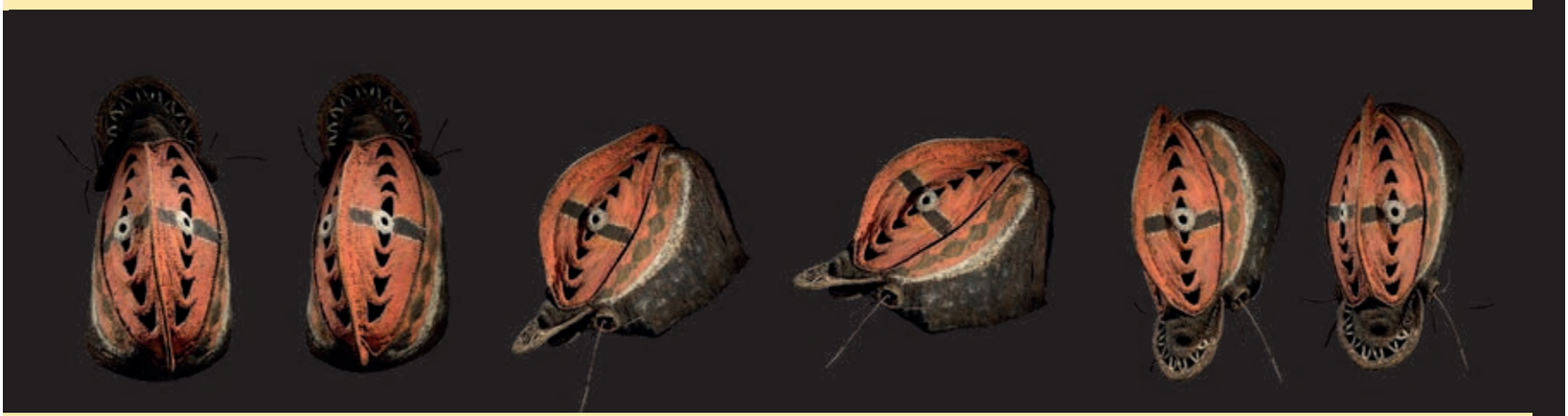
During the yam festivals, the long yams are decorated and ornamented so as to resemble human figures. Specifically, their adornments are designed to simulate male dancers in full ceremonial dress. Meanwhile, the ceremonial costumes of these men impersonate *ngwālndu* ancestral spirits. The yam masks that are displayed in the installation of *Facing the Sky* were intended to be attached to the "heads" of the longs yams and constitute their "faces." Constructed of basketry and often painted and embellished with feathers and other decorations, these masks are made especially for the yams and are never worn by people. Especially fine yam specimens receive particular care. They wear special, more elaborate masks and are treated much like revered ancestral spirits themselves. The long yams thus symbolically link together people and their ancestors, and the connection between a man, his *wāpi,* and his *ngwālndu* was formerly a very close one.

VIEWING ABELAM ART

Based on this brief ethnographic sketch, how do we then "view" Abelam art? First, recall that the artwork was designed to be largely spiritual

rather than mundane. It was through art that Abelam people were linked with their ancestors. Also worth noting is that Abelam people are accustomed to viewing art objects from a variety of perspectives and directions. For example, when the long yams are being "inspected" by visitors from other villages, they are tied to poles and propped up at an angle relative to the ground. People view them, and the masks attached to them, from above, below, and sideways.

FIGS. 13a–h (below): Mask, *baba* (eight perspectives). Abelam; Maprik area, East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea.
Fiber, pigments. H: 50 cm.
Private collection.
Photos: Marc Assayag.



Even more significantly, people were not meant to be the only audience for these artifacts, which were also designed to curry favor with the ancestors. The *ngwālndu* ancestors also were spectators at the yam festivals, but from an entirely different vantage point. Traditional Abelam belief held that the spirits of the recently deceased stay close to earth for some time and affect human affairs, but, eventually, they become *ngwālndu,* taking up residence in "the sky," from which perspective they observe ritual behavior on the ground. As such, they watch things "upside down" (from a terrestrial perspective), thus according this particular alignment special relevance. The title of Assayag's book, *The Stars Are Eyes,* makes reference to the special celestial perspective of the ancestors, drawing upon ethnographer Anthony Forge's statement, "That the stars are also eyes is a basic assumption at one level of Abelam cosmology."[3] Certainly, then, we should carefully regard Abelam art positioned "upside down" from its normal, terrestrial alignment (i.e., the way it would be hung in a typical art gallery) in order to fully appreciate how its principal supernatural audience—the *ngwālndu*—would see it.

FIGS. 14a and b (right): Yam mask (inverse perspectives). Abelam; Maprik area, East Sepik Province, Papua New Guinea.
Fiber, pigments. H: 40 cm.
Private collection.
Photo: Marc Assayag.

ABELAM: Facing the Sky
Opening
September 4, 2020.
Musée International du Carnaval et du Masque,
Binche, Belgium
www.museedumasque.be

VARYING PERSPECTIVES

What is revealed when these masks are viewed from a variety of perspectives and placements? Clearly, there is no simple or "correct" answer to this question. Even for initiated men, traditional Abelam art carried complicated messages that did not reveal themselves easily, and uninitiated people were never meant to "understand" what they saw. Western viewers have perceived bird-like images in yam masks that are aligned right side up from a terrestrial perspective. I myself clearly see "headdresses" that, when inverted, become "beards." Viewed upside down, Assayag sees skull imagery. All of these interpretations are valid—and that's the point. Looking at these artworks with this in mind provides an exceptional opportunity to expand our vision and explore multiple possibilities.

By inspecting and considering Abelam artwork from numerous orientations and perspectives, *Abelam: Facing the Sky* is an exciting show that invites us to uncover design elements in Abelam art that have never before been noticed by Westerners. Even more important, it permits us to transcend our own culture-bound ways of "seeing," allowing us to regard these masks through entirely different eyes.

NOTES

1. Marc Assayag. *The Stars Are Eyes: A New Perspective on the Art of the Abelam.* Montreal: Marc Assayag, 2019.
2. Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin. *Ceremonial Houses of the Abelam—Papua New Guinea*. Goolwa: Crawford House Publishing, 2015, p. 173.
3. Anthony Forge (A. Clark and N. Thomas, eds.). *Style and Meaning: Essays on the Anthropology of Art*, Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2017, p. 104.