

THE ART OF  
MICRONESIA

MAITLAND ART CENTER

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# THE ART OF MICRONESIA

Micronesian Art provides a blend of related but distinctive cultural and craft traditions. The 2000 individual islands in Micronesia occupy little more than 1000 square miles of land. This land is distributed unevenly between relatively large volcanic islands, and tiny atolls. Guam is the most familiar island, and has been colonized by Europeans the longest. It was a strategic stopping place for Spanish galleons, and began to be settled during the seventeenth century. Few traditional crafts can now be found in Guam. Most culturally inspired Micronesian crafts come from smaller atolls, or high islands such as Yap, Kosrae, Ponape (Pohnpei) and Palau (Belau), where European influence was later, less extensive, or native belief systems were more tenacious.

This collection was gathered without ever visiting Micronesia, though such a visit continues to be one of my cherished goals. The collection began during the mid 70s with the intriguing acquisition of a single storyboard and monkeyman figure. The crafts shown here include items dating from the end of WWII to the present. Nearly all Micronesian crafts found today in the United States were brought here by servicemen who experienced much the same fascination that I did with these intricate and varied culturally inspired creations.

Like all great artistic traditions, Micronesian crafts evolved in response to contacts with other cultures. As early as the 16th century, Micronesia began to be visited by Spanish galleons. British, German, Russian and US traders, whalers, and explorers made voyages into the 1800s. In 1885, following a disagreement between Spain and Germany, the Vatican recognized Spanish sovereignty over Micronesia. Subsequently, in 1899, Spain sold Micronesia to Germany to recoup financial losses suffered during the Spanish-American War. Japan occupied Micronesia at the beginning of WWI, and the islands were entrusted to Japan following a 1919 League of Nations Peace Conference. During the period after WWI, Japan fortified, colonized and developed these islands, and few outsiders were allowed in. After Japan's defeat in WWII, the United States recognized the strategic importance of the islands, and adopted them as a Trust Territory. Although most of Micronesia has now officially declared independence, the United States continues to have large military bases in the area, most notably Kwajalein in the Marshall Islands.

When I found that first tantalizing storyboard in the 1970s, I knew nothing at all about Micronesia. I acquired several more storyboards through the 1980s, but my interest really took off when in 1990-91, I acquired a total of 20 Micronesian objects from an estate. The more items I found, the more fascinated I became with these intriguing people, who, with little more than wood, shells and plant fibers, could create so many objects of quality and beauty. The collection includes items obtained shortly after WWII, when Japanese influences were more evident, as well as objects collected during the 50s, 60s and 70s. Some items come from the estates of servicemen, while others have been purchased in the 90s directly from islanders, or through craft co-ops, such as the "Local Crafts Project" in Kosrae sponsored by the Peace Corps. The large base at Kwajalein continues to provide a market, not only for crafts from the Marshall Islands, but also for those imported from other areas of Micronesia including Kosrae, Ponape and as far away as Palau. These crafts are often brought to Florida by military transfers or retirees. Though some of the craft items in this collection are traditional, others have been modified stylistically over a period of years by culture contacts with different visitors, or in response to changes in legislation, such as the American ban on the import of tortoise shell products. The Palauan storyboard is perhaps one of the best examples of a saleable craft which has evolved from a cultural artistic tradition.

## **MONKEYMEN**

Another interesting carved and stylized form is the monkeyman figure. There are a number of these figures in the collection. These squatting images were traditionally produced in a variety of styles in Palau, Yap, Sonsoral, Ulithi and surrounding atolls. Somewhat similar figures can also be found as far afield as New Guinea, the Solomon Islands and even Island South East Asia. The original ritual purpose of these figures has been obscured by Western influence and the missionary tendency to consider any figural form as a potential heathen god. However, these figures are thought to have functioned as ancestor or spirit figures which may have been used in household shrines, canoe magic or as guardian figures in canoe burials. Variation in body style and eye shape identify monkeymen figures from different island areas.



32. Piggyback Squatting Figure



33. Squatting Figure

**32. PIGGYBACK SQUATTING FIGURE**

Carved Dortwood, Mother of Pearl Inlay, Tar Pupils. 13.75 x 4.75 x 4.3 inches  
1960s

Patricio is said by informants to carve this type of piggyback figure. Note that instead of squatting, the lower figure is actually kneeling on its heels. Such squatting figures were probably carved by Palauans as well as carvers of Tobi ancestry.

**33. SQUATTING FIGURE**

Carved Wood. 10.5 x 5.3 x 3.3 inches  
1930s - 40s?

Probably the oldest "monkeyman" figure of the group, this carving has several unique stylistic features including its carefully sculptured ears, distinctive neck and chin (in profile), and the interesting facial features which include unique darkened eyebrows reminiscent of a traditional Mortlock Island mask (Marshall Islands). The figure probably originally had inlaid pearl shell eyes.