

SPECIAL PIECES

A tribute to fertility, courtesy of the legendary Paul Wirz

2005 is the 50th anniversary of the death of the legendary Swiss anthropologist and field collector, Paul Wirz, who was actually born in Moscow in 1892. He studied the physical sciences in Switzerland while preparing to become a teacher, until a chance visit to North Africa in 1912 and his attendance at some anthropology lectures converted him to ethnology. Due to the war, he could not travel to British or German New Guinea, so began his studies in Dutch New Guinea, working with the Marind Anim. He returned to Switzerland in 1920 and studied anthropology at Basel University under Felix Speiser, presenting a doctoral thesis on the Marind Anim (see article, page 4, this issue).

Today, Paul Wirz is most strongly associated with the art of the Lake Sentani district, but he also collected prolifically among the Asmat and Marind Anim of West Papua, and in the Sepik, the Highlands, the Papuan Gulf, and Gogodala areas of PNG.

He first visited Lake Sentani in 1922 and fell in love with the area, but even at this early stage, he knew that the culture would be wiped out by colonialism and he became increasingly anti-European and anti-colonial. Christian Kaufmann points out that Wirz believed in a "savage life" outside civilisation and "idealised its remnants on the island of New Guinea".**

Wirz was always a free spirit. Many of his collections found a home at the Museum der Kulturen in Basel, but many more were sold to other institutions and dealers. Wirz took ill and died in Abelam territory in 1955 and is buried in Wewak.

* Douglas Newton, "Art styles of the Papuan Gulf", Museum of Primitive Art, 1961.

** For a detailed biography of Wirz and his contribution to our understanding of Oceanic art, see Christian Kaufmann, "Paul Wirz and the Appreciation of New Guinea Art", in "Art of North West New Guinea", edited by Susan Greub, 1992. This quote appears on page 144.



This superb sculpture of a pregnant woman was collected by Paul Wirz in 1930, at Maipua in the Namau coastal district, Purari Delta, Papuan Gulf. This figurative carving is of the type called Ikuu, carved in both male and female forms. The subject is full of life and appears to be about to dance out of the photograph. She seems to be rejoicing in her fertility, unashamedly naked, with a swollen belly and a wide, smiling mouth. The woman's ears are decorated with large hoop earrings and a crescent shell pectoral seems to be painted on her chest. Fire blackened wood with red and white pigments, height 156 cm. Douglas Newton publishes a photograph of this piece, together with a male version (also collected by Wirz) and points out that the large horizontal teardrop eyes and the wide mouths with saw teeth are typical of the area. Photo copyright Museum der Kulturen, Basel, reproduced by kind permission of Dr Christian Kaufmann.*