

# Museum receives carving with rich story

2008 was a remarkable year for art donations to the American Museum of Asmat Art at the University of St. Thomas (AMAA@UST). By mid-October, nine donors contributed nearly 300 objects to the collection. The works range in size, style, material and provenance. Donors from the Twin Cities area delivered some of the pieces. Others arrived in sturdy crates from Papua, Indonesia. The most recent donation, an Asmat openwork carving with a clearly defined face and abstracted body forms, was hand-delivered to St. Thomas by Jack and Riky Drenovsky of Durand, Mich.

On Oct. 10 Jack and Riky entered one of the AMAA@UST storage houses with a neat box that perfectly fit their 20 x 3 x 3-inch sculpture. The carving is carefully hollowed out up to the top where a single head forms the top of the composition. According to information provided by Father Pitka, who brought the work to the United States from Papua, the piece represents a family tree. From the head, arms and legs of different generations link together thereby creating a repetitive pattern that captures a sense of generational continuity and connection.

The Drenovsky's story of how Jack became the owner of the work in 1960 provides insight into Asmat culture, history of the Catholic Crosier order, American life in the year 1960 and the import of passing on specific information about art objects. The Drenovsky sculpture itself contributes to understanding the development of Asmat carving during the latter half of the 20th century when there was a movement away from abstract carvings to more naturalistic ones.

Jack obtained the piece in 1960 when he was a student at Our Lady of the Lake Seminary in Wawasee, Ind. He entered the seminary as a junior in high school and during the 1960-61 school year contributed to a fundraising effort for Crosier Fathers and Brothers serving in New Guinea. The focus of the fundraiser was a raffle – one that came with premiums for the students whose friends and families sold the most tickets. Jack, along with the other seminarians, had little opportunity to go out into the community and sell tickets. Jack contributed to the fundraising effort by suggesting there be a specific fundraising goal and by enlisting the help of his father and brother. It was decided the raffle should raise money for a pontoon plane for Father Pitka and the Crosier fathers and brothers who were over in Asmat. Jack's father, Joseph Drenovsky, a stationary engineer who maintained and operated two high-pressure boilers in the roundhouse for the Grand Trunk Railroad in Durand, took raffle tickets to work as well as to church. Jack's brother Paul, an employee of GM's Chevrolet V-8 Engine Plant in Flint, Mich., did the same. Jack noted that back in the 1960s raising funds for this kind of charitable activity was accepted in the workplace.

Jack's father and brother did well in raffle ticket sales and earned Jack the right to select a premium. One of the objects was a camera. There were other everyday types of gifts that have faded from Jack's memory. Finally, there were a few pieces of Asmat sculpture. Much to the amusement of his classmates, Jack passed over the Kodak Brownie and selected a carving.

While Jack's selection of a fine art object may have been entertaining in 1960, his choice for a premium certainly stood the test of time.



Jack Drenovsky with the work that he donated to the AMAA@UST. Photo courtesy of Julie Risser.

Although delicate, the work has been cared for by the Drenovskys over the years; there are no cracks, chips or dents in it. During his visit to campus, Jack noted that he has always wanted to donate the piece to a collection. As a graduate of Our Lady of the Lake Seminary, Jack receives the Crosier newsletter, *The Crossview*. There he read about the Diocese of Agats and the Crosier Fathers and Brother donating the American Museum of Asmat Art collection to St. Thomas. The article inspired him to contact the AMAA@UST.

Now that the sculpture is part of the AMAA@UST, a graduate assistant in the Art History Department will carefully remove dust from it and UST photographer Mark Jensen along with Art History Department Visual Resource Curator Lori Shimer will create a photographic record of the work. Students interested in researching the carving will be able to access information about it easily and also make an appointment to see the work. For many Asmat objects, just pinning down a date when the work was carved or even just collected can be difficult, if not impossible, because that information may have been forgotten or never determined. We appreciate the care and the time Jack and Riky gave so that we have a quality work in our collection – one that comes with a rich body of information. ■