

Time and Tide Exhibition Promotes Museum Partnerships

By Julie Risser

Art exhibitions produced collaboratively by neighboring institutions can highlight local collections and provide opportunities for sharing professional knowledge/practices. When these partnerships are between a major museum, in this case the Minneapolis Institute of Arts (MIA), and an educational institution that has a graduate program in art history, the University of St. Thomas, valuable hands-on training and direct learning opportunities result.

The MIA and the American Museum of Asmat Art at the University of St. Thomas (AMAA@UST) partnered to create the exhibition *Time and Tide: The Changing Art of the Asmat of New Guinea*. Molly Huber, assistant curator from the department of African, Oceanic, and Native American Art selected the pieces, developed the exhibition theme, and edited the catalog. During 2007, AMAA@UST graduate assistants trained in basic preservation techniques prepared works for display by completing object condition reports, as well as removing dust and insect debris. Then exhibition designer Roxy Ballard determined object groupings, object positioning, as well as color schemes. The efforts of all parties come through in the finished exhibition located in the U.S. Bank Gallery of the MIA. Originally slated to close in June, the exhibition may be extended into the month of August.

Both Huber and Ballard came to campus to discuss their approaches to exhibition development and design with students enrolled in the "Collecting and Exhibiting Asmat Art" graduate seminar offered by AMAA@UST director Julie Risser. Huber described how the exhibition developed over two years, what some of her primary goals were in selecting the works, and the process of getting the exhibition and catalog produced. Huber wanted to break with past exhibitions of Asmat art by moving away from more anthropological approaches and focusing on the aesthetic strengths of two categories of Asmat art: sculpture and fiber works.



Huber's desire to develop an exhibition that celebrated the objects' visual appeal aligned well with Ballard's techniques/approaches to art installation, and the long narrow space in the main room of the U.S. Bank Gallery. Ballard recognized early in the exhibition planning the demands and potential of the objects. The largest piece, a 20 foot wuramon or spirit canoe, required specific space parameters. By using a diagram of the gallery, along with the reproductions of the art, she verified that the canoe could be maneuvered into the gallery space. Ballard and Huber recognized this piece functioned well as an anchor for the main room. The two also agreed that the visual appeal of the works came through well when they were grouped by regional style characteristics. The exhibition layout



Left: Entrance to the exhibit. Top: Roxy Ballard, exhibition designer for the MIA, holds up scale models of three shields from the American Museum of Asmat Art at the University of St. Thomas. Photos by Julie Risser.

incorporates appealing clusters of objects that are placed around the wuramon in such a way that visitors are encouraged to wend their way through the gallery in a circular fashion.

For the dominant color in the gallery, Ballard proposed a gray enriched with a hint of blue. This color compliments the art beautifully and gives the gallery space an open and calm feeling. Together with the large canoe, and the flowing layout it encourages people to make associations with water. As graduate student Cece Baum remarked the color reminded her of mist rising on the water. Such associations are fitting for an Asmat art exhibition; the works were created in the watery environment of Papua, Indonesia.

For their final seminar project students will need to employ some of the lessons they learned from Huber and Ballard – each student is designing an Asmat exhibition. Rather than select works and develop a theme for the U.S. Bank Gallery they are choosing pieces that suit the Asmat gallery that will be part of the new Anderson Student Center. ■

Julie Risser is director of the American Museum of Asmat Art at the University of St. Thomas and a clinical faculty member.