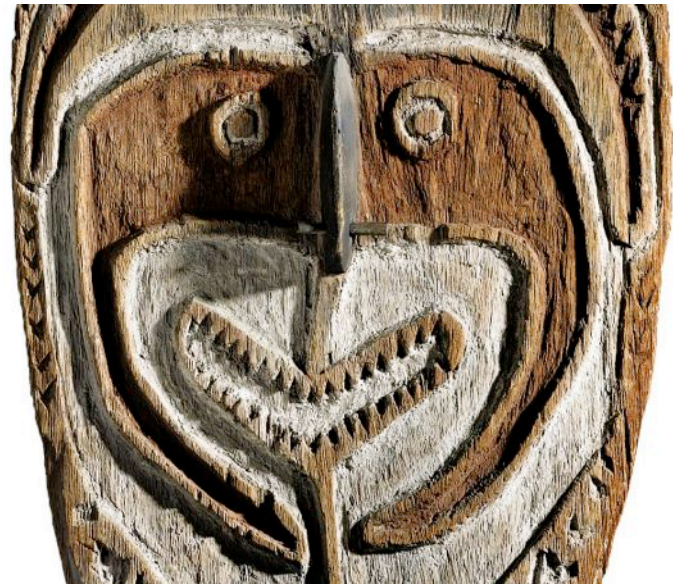




Wooden votive board
 Papuan Gulf, Purari Delta Region (Maipua
 Village?), Papua New Guinea
*kwoi*¹
 Nell Walden-Heimann collection, pre-1932
 Published in: Omnibus, Flechtheim Gallery
 journal, 1932, p.90



Kwoi votive board Papuan Gulf, Papua New Guinea

Brief description

Paddle-shaped board made of light brown wood with various areas coloured white, red and black. Handle approx. 44cm in length, oval part with face approx. 77cm, and total length therefore approx. 120cm.

Local name

*Kwoi*¹ (the name used in the Purari Delta). Also known as *gope*.

Provenance

Andreas Schlothauer, from 2002
 Joris Visser Gallery
 Nell Walden-Heimann, published in 1932 (possibly Arthur Speyer II, Berlin – Berlin Ethnological Museum – J.F.G. Umlauff, Hamburg, pre-1905)
 Papuan Gulf, Purari Delta, Maipua Village?
 Published in: Omnibus, Flechtheim Gallery journal, 1932, p. 90

A. Description

Object

The *kwoi*'s form resembles a paddle with a handle (approx. 8cm wide and 44cm long) and an oval part (approx. 77cm long and 30cm wide at its thickest). At its longest it measures almost 1m20. The board is carved in light brown wood, as can be seen from the handle and the back. The front is dyed red, white and black. An abstract face resembling a mask is depicted in bas-relief. The thin nose is the only thing that protrudes significantly. The nostrils are pierced through by a small piece of black wood. Only the forehead and the relief lines which frame the various parts of the face still have the original wood colour. The decorative elements are dyed red, black and white with natural pigment.² The protrusion of the nose and the surface of the forehead together form a sort of black mushroom. Red is used for the thin crack above the forehead as well as for the upper part of the face and the cheeks. The black nose symmetrically divides this red decoration. Below the nose a thin V-shaped line leads to the

upper lip. This continues from the lower lip to a small circle (which probably depicts a naval) at the end of the stylised face. The eyes and naval are depicted in similar fashion: a point surrounded by a concentric circle and, between them, a sculpted part whose background is dyed white in the case of the eyes, black in the case of the naval. White, which is the colour of the largest area on this board, is used for the lower part of the face and the eyebrows, as well as in the upper and lower sections of the board where there are V-shaped engraved decorative elements. The inner part of the mouth and also the line above the red crack of the forehead are sculpted like the teeth of a saw. If one uses a magnifying glass or enlarged photos one can see that the carving is crude and imprecise. Very few angles have been cut precisely. The back of the board has also been hewn without much care. These clues clearly point to the use of simple imprecise tools.³ Well-sharpened iron tools would have left finer, smoother, more exact incisions. The black on the forehead is somewhat faded, whereas it is still very dark on the nose. So it may have been touched up at a later date.⁴



2. Detail of the area around the nose and its decoration

Remains of labels and numbers

Various numbers and remains of labels can still be seen on the back of the board. The number “N.W. 169”, written in white, is visible at the bottom of the handle (Repr. 3a). Similar handwriting can also be found on a small votive statue in the Berthoud (Burgdorf) Ethnological Museum originating from the lower Sepik region, which was in the Nell Walden collection and currently has the number “N.W. 238”. The numbering system is certainly that of Nell Walden.

On the upper part of the handle there is what's left of a somewhat darkened label, on which “...eremonialschild v. Pura...” has been written with a typewriter (Repr. 3b). Therefore the complete label text should say: “(Ze)remonialschild v.(om) Pura(ri)”, i.e. “Purari ceremonial board” in English. Possibly the label was attached by a German dealer between 1900 and 1930, as this sort of paper and typewriter seem to suggest. On the remains of a white

label in the middle of the oval part it is possible to discern the letter “...W...” (Repr. 3c). This label is also identifiable as one of Nell Walden's. To the left of it, a few centimetres higher, is a red “1” (Repr. 3d), and a few centimetres above this there is a newer white label with the number “26” (Repr. 3e). About 10 centimetres to the right of this, nearer to the edge, is a small black “8” (Repr. 3f). At present nothing further is known about these numbers and the newer label.



Remains of labels and numbers on the *kwoi*

B. Provenance

Gulf of Papua and the Purari Delta

The Gulf of Papua is a region approx. 400 km wide on the south coast of Papua New Guinea. The Purari river's estuaries form a delta of approx. 1,300 km², of which most comprises marshland and flooding area. Williams claims there were 8,688 inhabitants⁵ in 1917, possessing a common language, differing according to which of four main villages one came from.⁶ From 1883 to 1906 it was a British colony (British New Guinea) and then it was part of the Territory of Papua, under Australian administration.

The Swiss ethnologist Paul Wirz described the main stylistic elements in 1934 as follows (words in bold are the author's own emphasis): “4. Purari region. This forms a self-contained area in terms of style, as can be seen from the way the *kwoi* is carved. (...) **The faces** are primarily decorative. The ornamentation which is always present at the edges is totally independent of these. Here too the face appears to be very stylised, but it is more developed in breadth than in length. The other parts of the body are either just symbols or completely missing. (...) **The external shape** of the board is similar to those of the Wapo or Era regions (...). WILLIAMS provides an overview of the typical *kwoi* shapes. The pointed oval or rhomboid forms occur most often, while others end in a point below (...)” (Wirz 1934: 90). Newton describes similar stylistic elements.⁷ The paddle shape, dominant face depiction and typical edge decoration (Newton refers to a “chevron strip in four sections”) are also characteristic of the *kwoi* from the Walden collection. This stylistic analysis therefore concurs with what remains of the old label on the back of object: “Purari (ce)remonial board”. But as well as the above mentioned characteristics, *kwoi* may also combine other elements in a way more difficult to find on other boards. The V-shaped mouth, connected to the nose and naval by ornaments; the mushroom-shaped nose and forehead; the inner part of the mouth and the upper part of the forehead carved like the teeth of a saw; the

ornamentation which depicts the area around the eyes and cheeks in an abstract manner. The photo of the interior of a man's house in Maipua village, taken by Albert Buell Lewis in May 1912, shows several boards with certain of these characteristics (Lewis 1931: Plate 5; Newton 1961: 22). Another photo, also taken by Lewis in May 1912, in Orokolo village, shows the second board from the left, which has similar characteristics but looks more like an exaggerated caricature (Welsch 2010: 58, Fig. 91). It should be possible to produce a more precise geographical classification by comparing objects whose regional origin is established. Two very similar *kwoi* can be seen in German museums in Leipzig and in Cologne (see footnote 4).



4. a+b similar *kwoi* in two German museums

The Nell Walden Collection

The Swede Nell Walden, née Roslund (1887-1975), was one of the first collectors of German expressionism and the then European avantgarde. From 1914 onwards she acquired numerous early works by Klee, Kandinsky, Chagall, Marc, Macke, Kokoschka, Archipenko, etc. What few people know is that Nell Walden also possessed a significant collection of non-European art works: African, Oceanian and Asian masks, statues, wicker art works and weapons, as well as indigenous American textiles and ceramics, a total of some 500-600 objects. Approx. 15% of her collection, namely 79 masks and statues from Africa, Indonesia and Oceania, were bought by Baron von der Heydt in 1945 and can be seen today in the Rietberg Museum, Zurich. Further pieces are to be found in two Swiss museums – the Historical Museum, Bern (12 numbers) and the Burgdorf Ethnological Museum (numbers 10-20) - and there are also 138 numbers in the Landskrona Museum, in her native Sweden. Nell Walden acquired her first object not later than 1913, a Douala stool from Cameroon, and continued collecting until at least the mid-1960s.

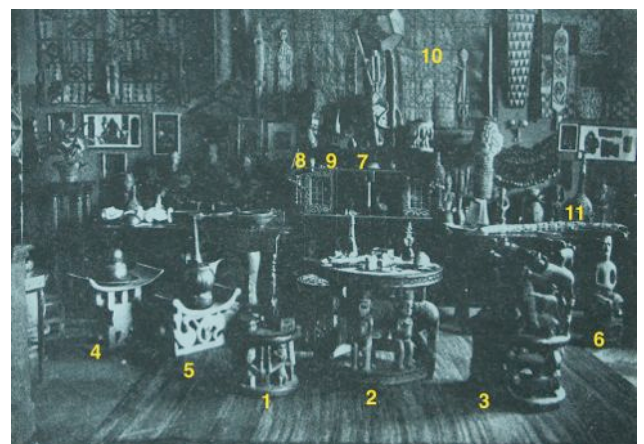
In 1912 she married her first husband Herwarth Walden (1878-1941). He was a gallery owner, publicist, composer,

writer and musician. In 1910 he founded the journal *Der STURM* and, in 1912, a gallery with the same name in Berlin. From 1912 to approx. 1924 he played a central role, not only in the German art scene but also in the whole of Europe, and he helped the then avantgarde to become established in the art market.

It was Nell Walden who collected and purchased most of the works, but it was Herwarth's contacts and connections which enabled their joint private collection of exquisite art works to grow from 1914 to approx. 1926. In 1926 Nell Walden was divorced from Herwarth and married her second husband, the gynaecologist Hans Heimann. He continued to acquire ethnographic artefacts in the following years, together with Nell. Arthur Speyer II is known to have bought objects from them during this period. In 1932 Nell bought a house in Ascona and moved to Switzerland. She took the collections with her and divided them up among various museums in Basel, Geneva and Bern. Hans Heimann, who didn't want to leave Berlin, was arrested by the Nazis in November 1937, before being deported and murdered in 1938.



5. Omnibus Journal 1932 "In Nell Walden-Heimann's home, Berlin"



6. *Der Querschnitt* Journal 1928 "Nell Walden-Heimann collection, Berlin"

There had already been an exhibition in 1927 in the Flechtheim Gallery entitled “Nell Walden and her Collections”. Photos in *Omnibus* (1932) and *Der Querschnitt* (1928), both journals attached to the Flechtheim Gallery, provide a glimpse of her flat in Berlin. A postcard from approx. 1935 depicts a room in her house in Ascona, Switzerland. In the early 1930s various objects from her collection were shown in different exhibitions, e.g. in 1932 two African statues referred to as “African sculptures” in the “Berliner Secession” and, in the same year, a small leopard from Benin in “Arts du Benin” in the Trocadero Museum, Paris. From October 1944 to March 1945 more than 100 pieces of non-European art were also shown in the Kunstmuseum, Bern in the exhibition entitled “Der Sturm. Nell Walden’s Collection 1912-1920”. Since only about 240 numbers have been conserved in Swiss and Swedish museums, it is possible that many of them are now in unknown private collections. In 1956 the Roman Norbert Ketterer Auction House, Stuttgart offered about 117 numbers for sale: “23rd auction of non-European art from China, Persia, Peru, indigenous peoples”. However, not all of these were sold and some of them can be seen today in the Landskrona Museum.



7. Chez Nell Walden, vers 1935 à Ascona, Suisse

On the provenance of the *kwoi* from Nell Walden’s collection

The votive board was pictured in 1932 in the *Omnibus* journal (*Omnibus* 1932: 90). It is therefore possible to identify it with certainty. The number “N.W.169” on the back of the piece is an important clue. In the Geneva inventory list⁸ entitled “Inventaire de la collection ethnographique: NELL WALDEN-HEIMANN / Ascona” is the entry: “169 panneau des ancêtres d’une maison de cérémonies, fleuve reine Augusta, Nouvelle Guinée”. This locational description is not entirely correct because the *kwoi* does not originate from the “Empress Augusta River”, i.e. the Sepik, but rather from the Papuan Gulf region. If one compares the lists it is clear that the

regional descriptions are generally imprecise and sometimes completely wrong. The list was obviously not drawn up until the move to Switzerland, when a list of the objects was required for customs purposes.

It is not yet known when and from whom Nell Walden acquired the piece. Given that she had been in close contact with Arthur Speyer II since the 1920s, it may be that the piece had belonged to a Berlin dealer. A photo from about 1920 shows that the Speyer family owned several *kwoi* from the Purari Delta (Schindlbeck 2012: 100).⁹ It is conceivable that Speyer acquired this *kwoi* along with other objects from Papua New Guinea from the Berlin Ethnological Museum. This museum possessed a good number of pieces which it had obtained from the Hamburger ethnographic dealer J. F. G. Umlauff. A dossier of acquisitions shows that Umlauff had bought these objects before 1905 from an English-speaking source (Welsch 2006: 85). It is not known when and to whom Nell Walden sold this board. At any rate no sale is documented in the 1956 catalogue of the Roman Norman Ketterer Auction House.

C. Usage

Votive boards, generally referred to as *kwoi* or *gope* these days, were kept in men’s houses and each one was always the property of an individual man. According to Paul Wirz: “Each man possesses several of these boards. Youths inherit them from their fathers and, later, make them themselves. Then there is another category of boards, which are much larger and more carefully finished. Each men’s house has just one of these” (Wirz 1934: 10). As Newton states, unfortunately we know very little about how they were produced or about their creators.¹⁰ Most writers assume they were used in the ancestor cult. The boards were often displayed next to reliquaries. Smaller boards were also used in dances.

Texte : Dr. Andreas Schlothauer

Traduction : Dr. Tom Hawes

Notes

- ¹ An overview of the various indigenous names for these votive boards from the Gulf of Papua is provided by Douglas Newton (Newton 1961: 36).
- ² Newton refers to white lime, red ochre and black charcoal: "Paint is laid on with a frayed pandanus branch; it usually consists of lime for white, red ochre, and charcoal for black" (Newton 1961: 29).
- ³ Newton mentions stone carving tools and shell scrapers: "Carving tools are limited (...) to stone adzes and axes for rough work, and shell scrapers for finishing" (Newton 1961: 29).
- ⁴ A comparison of the area around the nose with two very similar *kwoi* in museums shows that the shape and the small sticks in the nostrils are the same. One of them, in red white and black, can be seen in the Grassi Ethnological Museum in Leipzig (Damm 1964: Tafel. 59). The other is in the Clausmeyer collection in the Rautenstrauch-Joest Museum in Cologne (Inv. Nr. 198). But the latter is in black and white only (Stöhr 1987: 346).
- ⁵ "The three largest-village groups are Ukiravi, Iari and Kaimari. According to the census of 1917, out of a total of 8,688 for all villages, the respective populations of these three are 1,568, 1,736 and 1,450" (Williams 1924: 4).
- ⁶ **Kaimari** was spoken along the coast in the villages Kaimari, Vaimuru and Maipua; **Koriki** in Ukiravi, Kairu and six other villages; **Iari** in the eastern Delta in Iari and three other villages; **Baroi** in the northwest interior, in four villages (Williams 1924: 5).
- ⁷ "The fact that a belt of originally western immigrants settled themselves along the coast line from Vaimuru to Maipua led to the formation of a very definite group of styles. It is most noticeable in the *kwoi*, particularly those coming from **Maipua**. These are indeed what might be thought of as the classic type for the area, and in fact some of this kind are made in Iari. Characteristically it tends to be a broad oval with a long flat tab at the foot. The border is a chevron strip in four sections; there is a large face in the middle, the brow being particularly stressed, and the eyes set in the midst of elaborate designs" (Newton 1961: 80).
- ⁸ Footnotes to a letter of 19th December 1932 in file 350.A. 1.1.1.4/25, Ethnological Museum, Geneva.
- ⁹ The *kwoi* in the middle of this photo can now be found in the Burgdorf Ethnological Museum. There was no number and it was reinventoried in the 1990s. It now has the number 12082. Thanks to the photo this object is clearly identifiable.
- ¹⁰ "Regrettably little is recorded about the making of the ritual objects, or their prescribed makers" (Newton 1961: 29).

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