

## Living Art Papua New Guinea

by Susan Cochrane with Introduction by Michael A Mel. Melbourne Books, 336 pages.  
Review by Margaret Cassidy

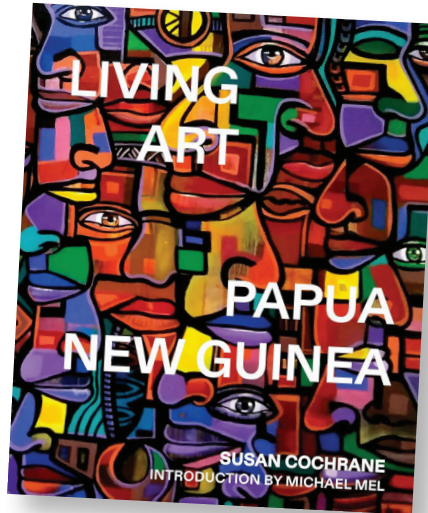
The title of this book summarises so simply but accurately the contents of this important book that was launched at the Oceanic Art Society's XIII Forum "Papua New Guinea Art: Past, Present, Future" in Canberra celebrating Papua New Guinea's (PNG) arts.

PNG's diverse art practices are 'living art', reflecting that what today is considered traditional 'art' by outsiders is intrinsic to traditional rituals and was imbued with spirits but has also flourished into individual creative expression and many diverse practices. It is also reminiscent of the story told in Barry Craig's earlier book *Living Spirits of Fixed Abodes* (reviewed by David Said in this *Journal* in February 2011) where he referred to a statement by former PNG Prime Minister Sir Michael Somare to the effect that "the primary purpose of creating much of the art of PNG is to provide a home to an inhabiting spirit for the duration of a ceremony or for as long as the object endures".

As PNG continues to look to stimulate economic activity, art and culture are seen as both self-sustaining for Papua New Guineans but also an opportunity to showcase this vibrant artistic practice to the world and encourage tourism. Performance remains at the centre of much of this modern yet traditional cultural artistic practice.

This book is important as it provides both an opportunity for the uninitiated to learn about the diverse visual culture of Australia's nearest neighbour while it is also destined to make a key contribution to the ongoing history of the evolving arts and culture of PNG.

Cochrane's book commences with a quote from the current Prime Minister of PNG, James Marape, "as we celebrate the 50th anniversary of our nation's independence, it is imperative that we showcase the rich cultural heritage and artistic talents of PNG to the world. Our art is a vibrant representation of our history, diversity and identity and it deserves recognition on the global stage. Let us seize this opportunity to elevate Papua New Guinea's standing in the global arts community while instilling pride in our citizens".



Published by Melbourne Books in a large, coffee table format and filled with rich colourful photographs of both artistic works and artists at work, this book is a great resource for the coming generation of both artists and scholars. It tells the story of the linguistic, cultural and artistic diversity of PNG as well as the weaving of *kastom* and contemporary art forms. Michael Mel has provided an excellent introduction, writing about the tensions felt by many between the lifestyles and values of home communities and the exciting new world of the nation of PNG amidst global

influences. All of these can be seen in the artists of PNG who are navigating local cultural language and knowledge, Western education and Christian influences, the media and political and cultural changes. Mel acknowledges the complexity of modern communities with the mythologised image of village life glossing over the challenges of rising ghettos, fringe dwellers and the politically and economically marginalised.

Three themes are woven through this book - *kastom* and contemporary culture; the interconnection between the village, urban and global localities; and, the importance of Indigenous visual language. According to Cochrane, the Indigenous term *kastom* has transformative possibilities with the possibility of selective growth while providing resistance to unilateral change. Keeping *kastom* alive in PNG has been a priority since independence.

Richly illustrated with detailed captions this book includes 336 pages of lavish images that capture the vibrant artistic practices of PNG today, with the traditional captured in images such as the decorations being placed on the highly decorated prow of a masawa (*kula* canoe) and the initiation scarring on the back of a young man in the East Sepik in 2007, to the fabrication of contemporary shield designs by the Haus Yuriyal, a large collective of artists in the Jiwaka and Simbu provinces

Part Two  
KASTOM AND  
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CULTURE





# book review

of Papua New Guinea whose work was seen most recently in Australia at the 11th Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art at QAGOMA across the summer of 2024-2025, the application of traditional and modern body adornment (bilas) which was last the focus of an exhibition at the Australian Museum in , and the fibre arts featuring Florence Jaukae Kamel who has empowered groups of *bilum* makers.

Not forgotten is the architecture and the work of both pioneering and current urban contemporary artists. This one volume provides a long lasting history of so many artists and artistic practices that make up the endeavours of the fifty years of an independent PNG. Importantly, women are given their rightful place as artists and scholars of note alongside the male artists. In this book so many of the contemporary projects of PNG artists abroad from Paris to New York to Sydney that have formed the basis of articles and reviews in this Journal can be found. This veritable 'Who's Who' of PNG art on the global stage including the Kwoma artists in Paris (the latest instalment by Elsa Spigolon published in this Journal in Autumn 2025 edition), the Mariwai Project (introduced to Journal readers by Shiva Lynn Burgos in the Winter 2017 edition), the Sepik River Project commissioned by the Campbelltown Arts Centre in Sydney (which included pieces sourced from OAS members via a call-out in the June 2010 edition of the Journal), Paradise Palette (the most recent Melbourne exhibition reviewed in this Journal's Autumn 2025 issue) and other initiatives are all captured.



5.25 Juvé Wena, House of a Thousand Tribes

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the exhibition, she reflected on their reception by German art critics and museum professionals, commenting that art museums in Europe considered paintings by Indigenous artists as 'naïve' or 'folk' art and of little consequence.

Contemporary paintings without obvious traits of Pacific traditions are not accepted by the public as authentic Pacific art works - but as soon as they incorporate an ethnographic element they are not regarded as being contemporary or modern. In the first case the artwork is not seen as genuine and therefore as not good enough to be included in any art show, in the second case the work is classified as ethnographic or folk art and is therefore excluded from modern art exhibitions.<sup>18</sup>

Pamela Rosi, who consistently found ways to present and promote Papua New Guinean artists in the USA, commented on the agency of contemporary artists as 'cultural ambassadors'. In the 1980s and 1990s, several artists including Larry Santana (whose paintings depict topics related to tensions between modernity, tradition and social alienation) received some support from the Papua New Guinean government and other agencies to represent their art and culture in the USA. Rosi commented that, while American audiences received artists like Larry Santana enthusiastically, critics initially raised doubts about the authenticity of contemporary art as a valid expression of Papua New Guinean culture. In turn, this led to her questioning of the role of 'Western gatekeepers' to categorise, stereotype and devalue contemporary Papua New Guinean art in the global market.<sup>19</sup>

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PNG's contributions to initiatives to generate global interest in arts events in Australia such as the eleven iterations so far of the Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art at QAGOMA and the emerging focus on Indigenous artists at recent editions of the Sydney Biennale are also highlighted, as well as the close relationship between the National Gallery of Australia (NGA) and the PNG National Museum and Art Gallery.

That this book was launched in Canberra at a forum celebrating Papua New Guinea's arts is so appropriate. The book concludes with a section describing the history of focussing on collecting PNG art within the NGA in the lead up to Independence, the refocusing of the Australian government's efforts into building the PNG National Museum and Art Gallery, the more recent 2014 Memorandum of Understanding signed between the NGA and the PNGMAG

resulting in the "The Myth + Magic: Art of the Sepik River" exhibition (the centrepiece of the OAS's 2015 Forum held at the NGA and reviewed in the September 2015 edition of the *Journal*) as well as opportunities for staff from both institutions to travel and learn and the current NGA collecting development strategies which can be seen in the current "Bilong PNG" exhibition (previewed by co-curator, Dan Toua in the Autumn 2025 edition of this *Journal* with four key items introduced by NGA Pacific curator, Crispin Howarth in Spring 2025 edition) at the NGA.

This book handsomely captures fifty years of living art.

is decorated with accents of red clay, bone, and white clay, memo, wormlike, goblet, and black charcoal, as porpoise, are also used to add decorative features and patterns to the overall design of the facial mask. However, white is sometimes used as the background for the designs, and clear tree oil, umbogoro, is also occasionally used when a colour pigment isn't desired.<sup>18</sup>

Fibre arts are skillfully used to make costumes, such as baramo or sapo fibre for the multi-layered (grass skirts, aprons woven from bush string or bark) or patterned baramo. Skirted grass skirts, woven aprons, lengths of tapa and special belts are the traditional of women. These are items of prestige and high value. Men collect and give the plumes of bilukus birds, which are arranged in creases leaving the face or attached to branching headresses.

Papua New Guinea is home to a diverse range of aesthetic when it comes to body decoration and adornment. Generations of artists have invented countless ways to fashion and combine these basic elements, which became absorbed into traditional systems of knowledge and ideas of beauty.

As with other art forms, bilas is not static, but rather continually evolving. As Mei says:

In the last 200 years or so, following contact with Europeans, there have been changes in the way people see themselves and their community. The introduction of new technology, education, government, law, values and beliefs has been largely responsible for the vast and dramatic changes to the way in which people live and see the world... Indeed, the new ideas have perhaps, dominated. Needless to say, bilas and the way it was understood and practised has changed dramatically as a result of the contact.

18. Mei, *Body Adornment in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea*, p. 108. © 2010 University of Queensland Press.

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