



© Fondation Gandur pour l'Art. Photographer: Thierry Ollivier

*Rom mask*

Vanuatu (Ambrym), 1957

Wild banana fibre, cycas leaves, cock feathers, liana wood, sawdust, pigments

135.5 x 30 x 35 cm

FGA-ETH-OC-0078

**Provenance**

Chief Tain Mal, Fanla village, Ambrym, collected by Pierre Anthonioz

Collection Jacques Bruneau, Paris

Galerie Meyer, Paris

Acquired at galerie Meyer, Paris, 16.06.2020

**Former publication**

*Un frisson surréaliste. Le surréalisme dans les collections du musée des Beaux-Arts de Quimper*, Musée des Beaux-Arts de Quimper, 08.02.2019 -20.05.2019, Quimper, 2019.



## Tales about masks and pigs

This sharp mask, entirely made of peaks and triangles, was produced in Vanuatu, formerly known as New Hebrides. This is an extremely rare case of a piece for which the precise geographic origin is known (Fanla village, on the volcanic island of Ambrym), as well as its backer (chief Tain Mal), recipient (the French Resident Commissioner Pierre Anthonioz), and year of production (1957). A good chance to mention the *Mage*, one of the ceremonial rituals underlying social life on Ambrym...

### *A taste for points*

This composite and stylized face, which gives prominence to triangles and diamonds, belongs to a *Rom* mask. Like all Oceanian masks, and notably the Baining *kavat* mask studied in a previous note<sup>1</sup>, this *Rom* mask is extremely fragile. It consists of a framework of rods of liana wood, wrapped with coconut fabric (*tapa*) coated with scrubbed liana, the sap of which, mixed with sawdust, forms a paste which is plastered on the fabric and then painted (*fig. 1*).

As to the actual face, it shows two triangular sides of fabric separated by a central edge displaying red crenels. From the front, the mask displays a diamond shape, a pattern typical for northern Vanuatu, with areas painted with opposite colours. The two sides of the face are painted green and reddish-brown; the rods delimiting the sides and lower part of the face are adorned with a stripe of black and white triangles. The eyes, surmounted by protruding brow bones, are split to allow the wearer to look around. The long blond hair and short beard are made of fibres from the trunk of wild banana trees. This mask also features a typical high crest made of cock feathers. At the bottom of the crest are a few dry leaves: these are the sole remains of a bunch of cycas leaves which formed the ultimate element of this kind of mask, known as *Rom Kon*.

In the lower part of the inside, a transverse stick enables the wearer to hold the mask with his teeth; knotted behind his head, fibres from the hair prevent the mask from falling forward. Worn with a long and thick coat of banana leaves, the *rablar*, and used along with a long plaited rattle with hanging bells, this mask is reminiscent of a shark head, and is at once spectacular, coloured and unsettling. It is all the more impressive since the wearer of the mask would dance while shaking the rattle, making its bells ring (*fig. 2*).

---

<sup>1</sup> Artwork of the month, December 2018.



### *Rom masks*

Several types of *Rom* masks are known: the *Rom Kon* is the tallest and most sacred: it corresponds to the highest rank of the initiation; the *Rom Ten* is smaller, and adorned with black triangles; the *Tata Toyo* is red on one side, green on the other; the *Rom Atintin* has no proper face, but two spirals on each side; the *Rom Yeyero* has two faces, front and back<sup>2</sup>. These masks are worn during dances performed by initiates, on an island where social life relies on initiatory principles, like everywhere else in Melanesia.

This mask was made in 1957, as indicated by a letter dated 10 April 1957 and signed by Pierre Anthonioz, who was then the French Resident Commissioner in the New Hebrides, sent to Jacques Bruneau, a senior official at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Paris. "I shall send you a mask from Ambrym by the first boat. I have just received a few of these masks this morning, which were made by pagans in the inland of Ambrym...". The object remained in the collection of Jacques Bruneau, along with the corresponding letter.

In those days, the island was divided among pagan and Christian villages; our mask comes from the pagan village of Fanla, not far from the sea. In this village, people lived "in a state of complete nudity, to the point that their great chief Tain Mal, who was to be honoured with the medal of honour of the French Ministry of the Overseas on the fiftieth anniversary of the Condominium, declined this distinction, saying he would not know where to place it" (letter of Pierre Anthonioz to Jacques Bruneau).

Several masks in other collections are similar to the exemplar of the FGA, notably at the Musée du Quai Branly and at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston (*fig. 3*), to name but a few<sup>3</sup>. The FGA mask is also similar to an exemplar at the collection Barbier-Mueller, also made in Fanla, but the latter does not display (anymore) the red crenelated rod enhancing the front edge<sup>4</sup>.

### *The secret fabrication of masks*

Once again, the fabrication of masks is an initiate man's business, which is performed in a sector of the village devoted to it and forbidden to all others. As for women, they are allowed to see the dances of *Rom* masks from afar only, but they are traditionally responsible for providing the banana tree fibre

---

<sup>2</sup> GUIART, "Sociétés, rituels", p. 69.

<sup>3</sup> Paris, Musée du Quai Branly, Inv. 71.1960.93.1; 71.1931.61.2; 72.1962.1.4.1D; Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, Inv. 1996.395.

<sup>4</sup> BUTOR, BOYER, MORIN, *L'homme et ses masques*, p. 344, no. 57.



used for the hair of masks<sup>5</sup>. In this regard, Jean Guiart notes: “needless to say, the purpose of the material requested must not be revealed to her”<sup>6</sup>. He also notes that an elderly man had made a *Rom* mask for him, but he could only receive it after he paid for it. He was thus allowed to don the *rablar* and to dance on the area meant for it, in front of the “house of men”<sup>7</sup>. The dance – *Ole* – is indeed the first step of the ritual, as it opens ceremonies which usually last for several days, during the harvest of yams, in February. The ritual *Rom* dance is still performed in Ambrym nowadays, so that rites do not fall into oblivion<sup>8</sup>.

### *The Mage and initiation*

In Vanuatu, and especially on Ambrym Island, social life is based on the *Mage*, a system of initiatic societies. Within the *Mage*, the successive acquisition of ranks enables male individuals to climb the steps of this extremely hierarchised society which, unlike other Melanesian cultures, does not have hereditary chiefdoms<sup>9</sup>.

The access to these ranks takes the recipient away from the uninitiated, but brings him closer to his peers; however, the upper the initiate climbs, the more isolated he becomes<sup>10</sup>. For instance, those who belong to a *Mage* must no longer consume food prepared or cooked by women, by they eat together, by a fire where initiates of the same level are gathered. The same rule applies to sleeping or sitting. They have their own fruit trees, which are forbidden to anyone else. The trees are notched with signs making them taboo, which stress the status of their owner within the fellowship<sup>11</sup>. In fact, the initiation is a necessity for men, because the position they will hold in the society depends on it.

If the *Mage* as a means of development of the individual within his village represents the main system of rites on which social life is based in Ambrym, it is not the only one: other initiatic rites, such as the very secret *Luan*, increase the prestige of the individual within his village; however, these rites are not vital to his social integration<sup>12</sup>.

---

<sup>5</sup> GUIART, “Sociétés, rituels”, p. 10-11.

<sup>6</sup> GUIART, “Sociétés, rituels”, p. 11.

<sup>7</sup> GUIART, “Sociétés, rituels”, p. 69.

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N2X1-M5ol6k> and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RWOCfwjAnsA>

<sup>9</sup> GUIART, “L’après-guerre”, p. 238.

<sup>10</sup> GUIART, “Sociétés, rituels”, p. 26-27.

<sup>11</sup> GUIART, “Sociétés, rituels”, p. 29.

<sup>12</sup> GUIART, “Sociétés, rituels”, p. 30-31.



### *Purchase of rites and masks*

Because what matters here is that these masks, along with the associated admission rites, must be bought. One could consider the purchase of the right of performing rituals and of wearing masks, as well as the associated bargain, as a “purchase of intellectual property”<sup>13</sup>, a form of copyright ahead of its time (*kopiraet* in Bislama), which even today ensures the stability of rites, and notably the sculpture of ritual statues and the production of drums<sup>14</sup>.

According to collective memory, the rites of Ambrym were first bought from the neighbouring island of Malakula, in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century; in the same way, Ambrym purchased games and ritual dances from its other neighbour Pentecost Island<sup>15</sup>. From Ambrym, Pentecost Island probably acquired satiric songs used during the dance related to the celebrations of circumcision<sup>16</sup>. This trade stopped with the 1913 volcanic eruption on Ambrym, which displaced a large part of the population of the western part of the island and accelerated the abandonment of this trade of rites<sup>17</sup>.

On the local scale, on Ambrym Island, the candidate for a rank must pay the different elements of his initiation in pigs: once initiated, he can resell the same material to another candidate, under the same terms<sup>18</sup>. The costume and the mask remain his property until their natural decay, though some other masks are destroyed after the celebration<sup>19</sup>, like the *Ngulong* mask featuring a pointed hat (*fig. 4*).

Every element necessary to the grade-taking process must be bought, from the leaf used as a shade to the painted statue made of fern tree which will close the ritual, including the reed which will be planted in front of the candidate's tree<sup>20</sup>. Originally, the price was estimated in poultry, and then in pigs; today, it is based on money. In 1950, the purchase of an average rank cost 300 Australian pounds, corresponding to 10 pigs with curved tusks. One must therefore be rich to access the upper ranks.

### *The long-tusked pigs of Vanuatu*

As we can see, the bartering system is based on a pig (*Sus papuensis*), the Papuan hog (*fig. 5*). The lower tusks of this pig species are naturally curved, and can even form full circles (*fig. 6*) or even a double spiral, provided that their upper tusks are removed when they are young. This animal is so

---

<sup>13</sup> PATTERSON, “Mastering the Arts”, p. 255; BUTOR, BOYER, MORIN, *L'homme et ses masques*, p. 344.

<sup>14</sup> GEISMAR, “Copyright in context”; p. 441 *sq.*; DEBLOCK, “Objects”, *pass.*

<sup>15</sup> PATTERSON, “Mastering the Arts”, p. 254-255.

<sup>16</sup> GUIART, “Sociétés, rituels”, p. 18.

<sup>17</sup> PATTERSON, “Mastering the Arts”, p. 255.

<sup>18</sup> GUIART, “Sociétés, rituels”, p. 17.

<sup>19</sup> PATTERSON, “Mastering the Arts”, p. 255.

<sup>20</sup> GUIART, “Sociétés, rituels”, p. 16-17 and p. 42.



closely associated with Vanuatu that its spiral-shaped tusk appears on the national flag of the archipelago (*fig. 7*) as well as on its coat of arms, which shows a warrior holding a spear standing in front of two crossed cycas fronds, with a spiral-shaped pig tusk in the background.

One should stress that when it comes to pigs used for bartering, only male individuals are taken into account<sup>21</sup>. If their tusks form a first full circle, around the age of ten, the pig is worth 30 Australian pounds, and receives a name. And if by some miracle three circles develop, the pig is then venerated like a living ancestor. High-ranking pigs are fed by hand, with taros and bananas prepared especially for them, or even pre-chewed by women<sup>22</sup>.

And so, along with the changes of rank, pigs change ownership, a transition marked by the pig's leash, which is entrusted to the addressee, the initiating person<sup>23</sup>. Every time, this change is announced by conch horns<sup>24</sup>, which is a way of boasting about one's porcine wealth. Jean Guiart describes one of these promotion ceremonies held in the village of Fanla, with nine candidates and the initiated sellers, performed under the aegis of Tain Mal, the wealthiest and highest-ranking man in the village<sup>25</sup>.

The acquisition of a new grade also implies the sacrifice and consumption of one or several of these precious pigs. A pig-killing club preserved in the collection of the FGA, adorned with an ancestor head, shows the close links between pigs, ancestors, and the preliminary sacrifice preceding the acquisition of a mask and the corresponding initiation (*fig. 8*); by the way, the killing club was also paid in pigs.

#### *Tain Mal, a punctilious keeper of ritual orthodoxy*

As mentioned above, the mask which we are lucky enough to preserve in the FGA collection was offered to Pierre Anthonioz in 1957: according to Jean Guiart, who spent time with him in the New Hebrides and witnessed his action, Anthonioz was a very atypical Resident Commissioner. Indeed, he was able to win the liking of local populations by his acute attentiveness and his true interest for their traditions<sup>26</sup>.

As for Tain Mal, mentioned in the letter, he was a high-ranking dignitary with whom Jean Guiart talked. As a pagan and strict observer of ancestral rites, with a practice of rituals considered as "straight" by his contemporaries<sup>27</sup>, Tain Mal is at the top of a society of initiates, the *Mage*. This

---

<sup>21</sup> GUIART, "Sociétés, rituels", p. 19.

<sup>22</sup> KAEPLER, KAUFMANN, NEWTON, *L'Art océanien*, p. 374.

<sup>23</sup> GUIART, "Sociétés, rituels", p. 42.

<sup>24</sup> GUIART, "Sociétés, rituels", p. 21 and p. 41.

<sup>25</sup> GUIART, "Sociétés, rituels", p. 40 *sq.*

<sup>26</sup> Guiart, "Pierre Anthonioz", *pass.*

<sup>27</sup> GUIART, "Sociétés, rituels", p. 30; sur Tain Mal, voir aussi DEBLOCK, "Objects", p. 94 *sq.*



position makes him the chief of his village. In his name, the word *Mal* corresponds to the uppermost rank of initiation. Tain Mal is also known for being the backer of a drum – today in the Metropolitan Museum – which he commissioned from Tin Mweleun<sup>28</sup>, another Fanla initiate who also produced two slit drums made of breadfruit wood, today kept at the Musée du Quai Branly<sup>29</sup>.

Pigs, rites and masks are thus at the core of a complex system of exchanges peculiar to the islands of Vanuatu. And with this *Rom Kon* mask, the secrets of the initiation rites are well kept.

Dr Isabelle Tassignon  
Curator of the Ethnology collection  
Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, October 2021

Translation : Dr Pierre Meyrat

---

<sup>28</sup> New York, Metropolitan Museum, Inv. 1975.93: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/309995>

<sup>29</sup> Paris, Musée du Quai Branly, inv. 72.1964.2.32: <https://www.photo.rmnm.fr/archive/94-050758-2C6NU00E9YQE.html>



## Bibliography

BUTOR, Michel, BOYER, Alain-Michel, MORIN, Floriane, *L'homme et ses masques. Chefs-d'œuvre des musées Barbier-Mueller*, Geneva and Barcelona, Hazan, 2005.

DEBLOCK, Hugo, "Objects as Archives of a Disrupted Past", *Museum Worlds: Advances in Research*, 8, 2020, p. 88-101.

GEISMAR, Haidy, "Copyright in context: Carvings, carvers, and commodities in Vanuatu", *American Ethnologist*, 32, 2005, p. 437-459.

GUIART, Jean, "L'après-guerre à Ambrym (Nouvelles-Hébrides)", *Journal de la Société des Océanistes*, 6, 1950, p. 238-241.

GUIART, Jean, "Sociétés, rituels et mythes du Nord Ambrym (Nouvelles-Hébrides)", *Journal de la Société des Océanistes*, 7, 1951, p. 5-103.

GUIART, Jean, "Pierre Anthonioz (1916-1996)", *Journal de la Société des Océanistes*, 103, 1996, p. 311-314.

KAEPLER, Adrienne L., KAUFMANN, Christian, NEWTON, Douglas, *L'Art océanien*, Paris, Citadelles & Mazenod, 1993.

PATTERSON, Mary, "Mastering the Arts: An Examination of the Context of the Production of Art in Vanuatu", in BONNEMAISON, Joël, HUFFMAN, Kirk, KAUFMANN, Christian, TRYON, Darrell (eds), *Arts of Vanuatu*, Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 1996, p. 254-262.

*Vanuatu Océanie. Arts des îles de cendre et de corail* [Catalogue d'exposition, Port-Vila, Musée, 28.06.1996-10.08.1996, Nouméa, Musée territorial de Nouvelle-Calédonie, 03.09.1996-30.10.1996, Bâle, Museum für Völkerkunde, 15.03.1997-10.08.1997, Paris, Musée national des Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie, 30.09.1997-02.02.1998].





**Illustrations:**



Fig. 1 - © Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Geneva. Photographer: Thierry Ollivier



Fig. 2 - © Creative commons. Photographer: David Stanley



Fig. 3- © Boston, Museum of Fine Arts



Fig. 4 - Ngulong mask, Inv. FGA-ETH-OC-0037 © Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Geneva. Photographer: Thierry Ollivier



Fig. 5 - © Creative commons



Fig. 6 - Muséum du Havre, Inv. 2013.8.3 and 2013.8.4 © Muséum du Havre. Photographer: Guillaume Boutigny



Fig. 7 - © Creative commons

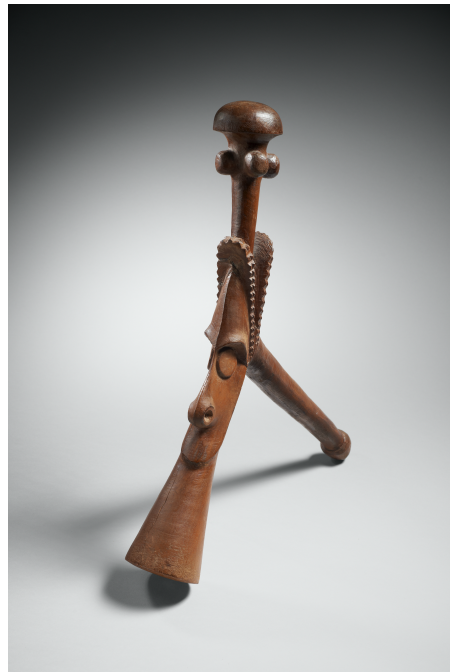


Fig. 8 - Pig-killing club, Inv. FGA-ETH-OC-0034 © Fondation Gandur pour l'Art, Geneva. Photographer: Thierry Ollivier