MAN and the NATURAL WORLD:
ART OF OCEANIA: FOCUS
(Australia, Torres Strait, and New Guinea)
ONLINE ASSIGNMENT:

TITLE or DESIGNATION: The Ambum Stone from the Ambum Valley, Enga Province, Papua New Guinea

CULTURE or ART HISTORICAL PERIOD: Prehistoric

DATE: c. 1500 B.C.E.

MEDIUM: greywacke
ONLINE ASSIGNMENT:

TITLE or DESIGNATION: Buk (mask) from the Torres Strait

CULTURE or ART HISTORICAL PERIOD: Torres Strait Islanders

DATE: Mid- to late-19th century C.E.

MEDIUM: turtle shell, wood, fiber, feathers, and shell
ONLINE ASSIGNMENT: https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-africa-oceania-americas/oceania/melanesia/a/malangan

TITLE or DESIGNATION: Malagan display and mask from New Ireland Province in Papua New Guinea

CULTURE or ART HISTORICAL PERIOD: Oceanic art of New Ireland

DATE: c. 20th century C.E.

MEDIUM: wood, pigment, fiber, and shell
TITLE or DESIGNATION: Asmat bisj poles

CULTURE or ART HISTORICAL PERIOD: Asmat of Irian Jaya

DATE: mid-20th century C.E.

MEDIUM: mangrove tree trunks
ONLINE ASSIGNMENT:  

TITLE or DESIGNATION: *Earth’s Creation*

ARTIST: Emily Kame Kngwarreye

CULTURE or ART HISTORICAL PERIOD: Aboriginal Australian Contemporary

DATE: 1994 C.E.

MEDIUM: synthetic polymer paint on canvas
MAN and the NATURAL WORLD:
ART OF OCEANIA: SELECTED TEXT
(Australia, Torres Strait, and New Guinea)
The Ambum Stone. Ambum Valley, Enga Province, Papua New Guinea. C. 1500 B.C.E., greywacke

This exquisite and exceedingly rare sculpture, discovered in a cave in the early 1960s, was made more than 3500 years ago and is one of the earliest known Pacific works of art. Ancient stone mortars and pestles from Papua New Guinea are often fashioned into the forms of birds, humans and animals. However, the *Ambum stone* is on a higher sculptural level than other prehistoric pestles and has a greater level of figurative detail. When the process involved in producing the *Ambum stone* is taken into consideration it is all the more magnificent—working with the tough greywacke stone would have involved many weeks of laborious chipping and hammering at the surface with stone tools.
Despite the various animalistic features such as the nose tip, which resembles that of a fruit bat, the *Ambum stone* may depict a juvenile long-beaked echidna (spiny anteater), an animal thought to have been revered for its useful fat deposits prior to the introduction of pigs.

The significance and function of the *Ambum stone* remains obscure, as little is known about the people who produced this beautiful work. Such objects are often considered sacred and credited with supernatural powers by present-day people in the region, where they are used as spirit stones in sorcery and other rituals.
Bird Figure from the Mount Hagen region, Western Highlands, Papua New Guinea, date unknown, stone

Stone bird figures are enigmatic remnants of a vanished culture or cultures that once flourished on the island of New Guinea, predominantly in the mountainous highlands of the interior. This unknown culture or cultures created a diversity of stone objects, including figures of birds and other animals. The dating of these objects remains uncertain, although organic material associated with one example has recently been carbon-dated to around 1500 B.C., indicating that some examples are of considerable antiquity.

While their original significance is unknown, unusual stones, whether ancient artifacts or natural objects such as fossils, play, or played, important roles in the religious life of many contemporary Highland peoples. Unearthed by chance, they are believed to be supernaturally powerful objects and are employed in a variety of ceremonial contexts, including fertility rites, curing sickness, warfare, and malevolent magic. On occasion, large groups of stones were formerly brought together for a ceremonial cycle, known as amb kor or kor nganap, devoted to a female spirit who renewed the fertility of the earth and brought vitality and prosperity to the community.
The Torres Strait Islanders are a sturdy, dark-skinned, cheerful people of Melanesian origin. It is not yet known how long they have inhabited their islands, but it seems likely that the eastern islanders arrived later than the remainder, because their language is a variation on the western Papuan dialects, whereas the remainder of the islanders—the northern, western, and central people—speak a language undoubtedly derived from Australian Aboriginal dialects, though with an overlay of Papuan phonology and phraseology. The islanders had a universal kingship system and a series of totemic myths. These differed from group to group, but did tie together throughout the Strait. The well-known turtle-shell and wood masks and headdresses were mainly used in ceremonies celebrating these culture heroes and their creative acts.
Buk (mask) of the Torres Strait. Mid- to late 19th century CE; turtle shell, wood, fiber, feathers, and shell

The main myth in the central islands was that of the Four Brothers, named Sigai, Kulka, Malu, and Sau. They came from the west and carried out various creative acts for the islanders. But during a quarrel Malu speared Sau and the brothers divided up. Malu went to Mer (Murray Island), Sau to Massid (York Island), Kulka to Aurid, and Sigai to Yam (Turtle-backed Island).

The cult of Malu (who had a secret name, Bomaï) was studied in some detail by Haddon on the island of Mer, so that we know a great deal more about it than the other hero cults. It was carried out in a series of complex secret rituals, culminating in the showing of large turtle-shell masks in a dance accompanied by the sacred drum, Wasikor (which still exists). These basic myths have been outlined because the well-known turtle-shell masks and headdresses from Torres Strait were mostly used in secret ceremonies celebrating the creative acts of culture heroes, and in particular initiation and funeral rites.
The masks are made from turtle-shell plates, carefully shaped and curved, then lashed together and usually decorated with incised patterns infilled with white ocher. Often they incorporate both animals and human figures.

Sometimes they are adorned with cassowary feathers and nut rattles. Large masks in wood were made in some of the islands. They are powerful, semi-naturalistic elongated images, dressed with human hair.

They paraded at night during celebrations of the harvest of certain fruit. Although these masks may seem grotesque to some people, it must be remembered that they were used in highly secret ceremonies, usually performed at night by the light of camp fires.

The dances were accompanied by the steady beat of the drums and the chanting of events from the myths. They were designed to impress and even terrify the participants, and they doubtless performed this function very efficiently.
Its hybrid form - a crocodile head surmounted by a human face - was ingeniously designed to surprise and captivate audiences. When the dancer was fully upright, the mask was on top of the head and only the crocodile was visible, but it is likely that significances changed from place to place: these art forms were traded and used by communities other than those that produced them, in ceremonies including harvest and funerary feasts, and initiation and war rites.
Plates from the carapace of the hawksbill turtle were steamed to render them supple, then molded, incised, stained and stitched together.

The assemblage was a kind of anthology in artefact form of the bewildering range of Islanders’ trading links; krar incorporated cowries and goa nuts, cassowary feathers (and, in other examples, bark belts) from New Guinea, and ochre traded from Cape York.

European materials obtained through trade- the iron used for the outstretched hands and strands of calico- are also conspicuous.
Turtle-shell effigies were first recorded on the Torres Strait Islands by the Spanish explorer Don Diego de Prado y Tovar in 1606, a testimony to the antiquity of the tradition. Attributed to Mabuiag Island, this work displays the composite human and animal imagery typical of western Torres Strait masks.

Turtle-shell masks in the western Torres Strait reportedly were used during funerary ceremonies and increase rites (rituals designed to ensure bountiful harvests and an abundance of fish and game). The ceremonies often involved performances in which senior men, wearing the masks together with rustling costumes of grass, reenacted events from the lives of culture-heroes, drawn from local oral tradition. Worn over the head like a helmet, this work depicts a human face, possibly portraying one such culture-hero. It is surmounted by a frigate bird, perhaps representing his personal totemic species.