

Ancestor Poles

The ancestor poles are probably the most astonishing and well-known Asmat works of art. The poles can reach a height of 8 metres and have different ritual and exorcising functions. They are carved to celebrate important deceased members of the village, especially the warriors, and their purpose is to keep alive their memory and assist their souls in the transition to the otherworld. They may be placed in front of the houses and jeus, as a protection, or used in male initiation ceremonies.

They were usually carved in softwood, such as mangrove wood. The tree is turned upside down, stripped of its leaves and the trunk is carved into an intricate series of figures (human images of the deceased) placed one on top of the other, like a banner. The ancestor pole had the function to appease the spirits before a headhunting raid.

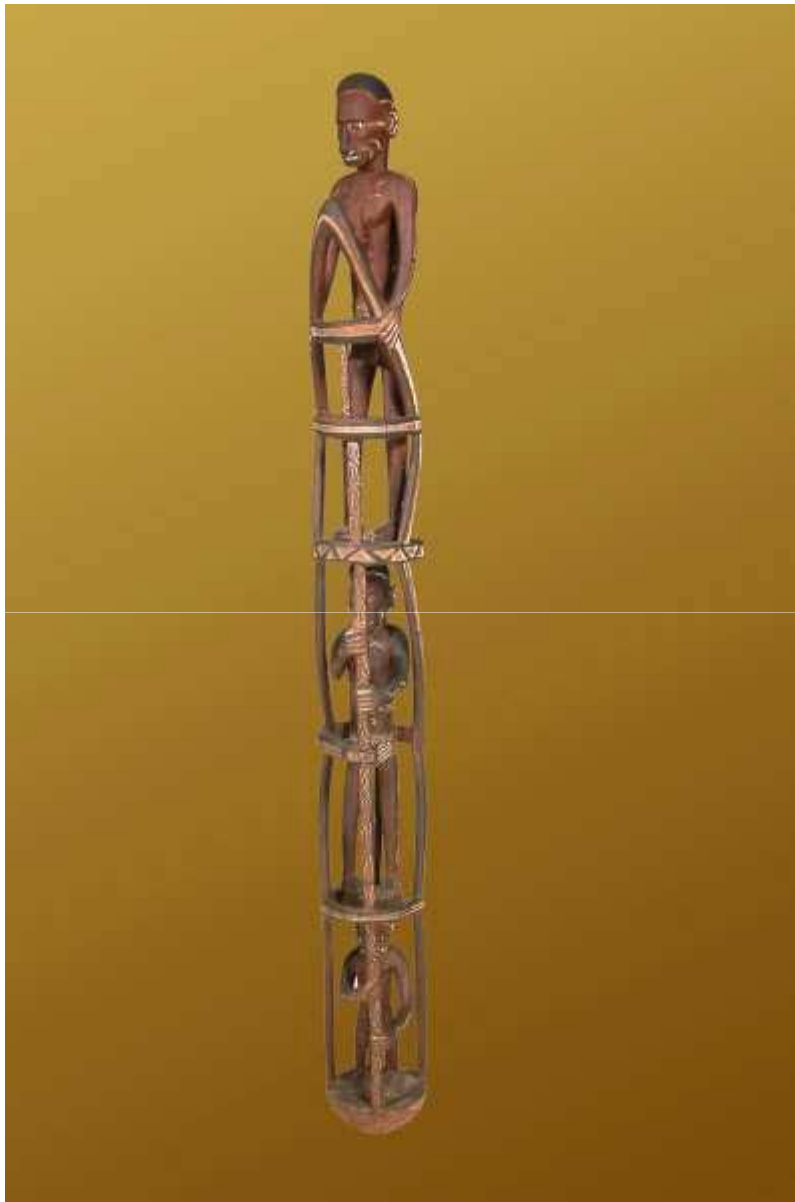
The Asmat artist uses red, white and black colors, which have a magic value besides decorative purposes.

White is obtained along the coast from the powder of burnt clamshell, while kaolin clay is used in the inner part of the region. It is considered a protective colour, which gives strength and keeps danger at bay. It is applied to the canoes and statues of human figures, as a second skin.

Red or burnt yellow clay can be found along the rivers in the upstream regions. It is the colour of beauty and power and it is used to highlight the designs on the canoes, for a swifter navigation, as well as body paint applied around the eyes, to resemble the small feathers of an angry Black Cockatoo and fill the enemy with terror. It is also used to define body scarifications on human figures.

Black is basically coal and soot is used to design human body hair.

In the past the poles, as well as the sculptures and shields, were roughly outlined using stone tools, while the details were carved with cassowary or shell instruments. Only after the 16th century did the coastal tribes started using tools made from nails and metal scraps found in shipwrecks, hence using also ironwood for their carvings.



Palo degli antenati

Questo palo reca in cima una figura maschile che ne sovrasta altre due, collocate in una sorta di gabbia circolare. Il pezzo è ricavato da un unico tronco e le decorazioni esterne sono incise e delineate con polvere di caolino.

255 x 40 cm; legno rosso, argilla, caolino e polvere di carbone
Cod.0082-195

Ancestor Sculpture

A sturdy ancestor sculpture. A human figure at the top stands on the upper rung of a circular cage, enclosing two other figures underneath. The decorations of the cage are engraved and highlighted with red and white colour, as the facial features and hands of the three figures. The whole sculpture was carved from one single piece of wood.

255 x 40 cm; redwood, clay, kaolin and soot
Cod.0082-195



Palo degli antenati

Scultura con due figure maschili sovrapposte che reggono una struttura traforata, la quale ricorda inconsuetudinalmente un *cemen* in posizione verticale. La base è conformata in modo da poter essere conficcata nel terreno paludoso.

180 x 25 cm; legno rosso, argilla, caolino e polvere di carbone
Cod.0089-196

Ancestor Sculpture

The sculpture comprises two human figures holding a vertical structure resembling a *cemen*. The base of the sculpture is formed in order to be easily inserted in the muddy soil.

180 x 25 cm; redwood, kaolin, red clay and traces of soot
Cod.0089-196



Palo degli antenati

Il palo si presenta composto da due livelli, uno retrostante costituito dalle quattro figure maschili, l'una sovrapposta all'altra e di dimensione crescente, l'altro in primo piano formato da una serie di animali totemici, legati l'uno all'altro. L'opera mostra un significato simbolico ricco e complesso e non del tutto decifrabile.

250 x 16; legno ferro, patina naturale, caolino e argilla rossa
Cod.0098-198

Ancestor Sculpture

The sculpture is formed by two levels, one behind representing four male figures, one above the other in ascending order, the other in front composed by a series of totemic animals, linked one with the other. This work of art has a complex and rich symbolic meaning of difficult interpretation.

250 x 16; ironwood, natural patina, kaolin and red clay
Cod.0098-198



Palo degli antenati

Palo degli antenati caratterizzato da un inusuale dinamismo, composto da cinque figure umane, di cui una rivolta all'indietro, con la base conformata in modo da poter essere conficcata nel terreno. Le scarificazioni sono messe in evidenza da un composto di polvere di caolino e resina.

*265 x 40 cm; legno rosso, pesante e duro, argilla, caolino e polvere di carbone
Cod.0112-201*

Ancestor Sculpture

This sculpture is characterized by an unusual dynamism and represents five human figures, of which one is looking sideways. The base of the sculpture is formed in order to be easily inserted in the muddy soil. The body scarifications are filled with white kaolin.

*265 x 40 cm; redwood, kaolin, red clay and soot
Cod.0112-201*



Palo degli antenati

Struttura molto complessa e raffinata, costituita da dieci figure umane sovrapposte che si alternano una di fronte all'altra. L'eleganza della colorazione viene sottolineata dalle strisce orizzontali di caolino che percorrono i corpi.

294 x 28 cm: legno nero, duro, patina naturale, caolino e argilla rossa
Cod.0116-203

Ancestor Sculpture

This very complex and refined sculpture comprises ten human figures facing one another in ascending order. The elegance of the coloring is highlighted by the horizontal bands of white kaolin across the bodies.

294 x 28 cm: hardwood, natural patina, kaolin and red clay
Cod.0116-203