

Shields

The shields are the most powerful expression of Asmat art. They embody the ancestors to whom they are dedicated and transmit the latter's power, strength and ferocity to the owners, who are charged with a feeling of invulnerability. The designs can be either figurative or abstract, depending on the area of provenance. The combination of the ancestor's strength with the energy transmitted by the totemic symbols engraved and painted on the shield induces terror in the enemy and causes him to flee or immobilizes him in a state of panic. In such way the enemy was easily captured, roped, dragged to the canoe and beheaded.

The shields are not merely powerful war tools, they represent a protection against evil spirits and ghosts through the iconography of the ancestors. They are placed inside the house near the entrance or laid transversally on the ground, to allow the spirits to protect the house during the owner's absence. In the occasion of feasts and ritual ceremonies, the shields are grouped together, to cumulate their power and inspire courage, endurance and warring skills.

The shields are divided in four stylistic areas, each characterized by a unique type of decoration, form, design or motif peculiar to the area. In the coastal villages, the carvers use a softwood, usually mangrove, while in the interior a harder wood is utilized. The shields may reach a height ranging from 1,70 to 2,00 metres. In the past the carver used tools made of stone, bone and shell. Today metal tools are more frequent.

The shields found on the coast and in the central part of the region (area A) are rectangular, with a human figure as representation of the ancestral spirit on top. This phallic projection is called the *cemen* (phallus) of the shield.

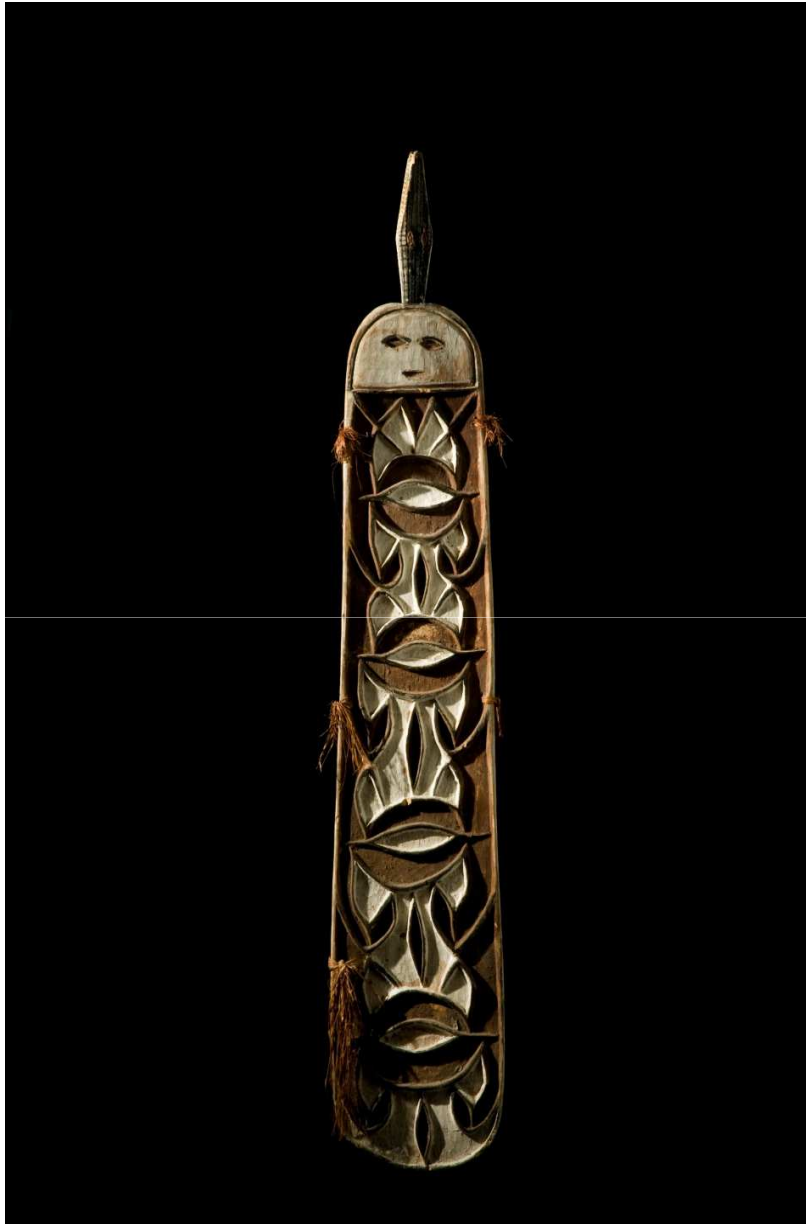
The shields originating in the villages of the northwest (area B) are larger and oval; the top part is separate and more clearly defined, usually representing a manta, a stingray, a turtle or a casuarius. Taken as a whole, the shield has a phallic form.

Citak or Kaunak shields (area C) are the most impressive in size. The top is slightly rounded and resembles an abstract human head. The base is flat.

Brazza River shields (area D) are similar to those produced in the Citak area, with a slightly different top part, which is sharply pointed, with a painted nose and spiral shaped eyes, resembling the ancestor to whom the shield is dedicated.

The central body is engraved and painted with typical headhunting symbols, which can differ according to the area. The boldest designs are found along the coast, in the south (area A), similar to shell nose ornaments which refer to wild boar tusks. Usually it is combined or interspersed with the *ainor* symbol, the meaning of which is so terrible that the enemy is paralysed: enormous dilated pupils in the form of two connected spirals. The shields of the northwest (area B) are smaller with very intricate designs and totemic symbols such as the flying fox, its legs, cuscus tails, whirlpools and wild boar bones. The Citak shields (area C) have a very dense and repeated design, which symbolizes the water leaking out of the sago drain. There is very few information regarding other Citak designs and even fewer related to the Brazza River populations (area D).

The designs reproduced on the shields confer to the owner the necessary strength to coexist with the world of the spirits, based on the relations he has with his own shield. The first most important function is to appease all the spirits who live in the forest and in the rivers.



Scudo

Scudo su cui sono incise rappresentazioni della volpe volante su sfondo bianco. La lunetta superiore mostra un volto umano stilizzato, sormontato da una testa di cocodrillo. Ai lati sono legati nastri di rafia.

*203 x 71 cm; legno di mangrovia, caolino, argilla rossa e polvere di carbone e rafia
Cod.Shield GA*

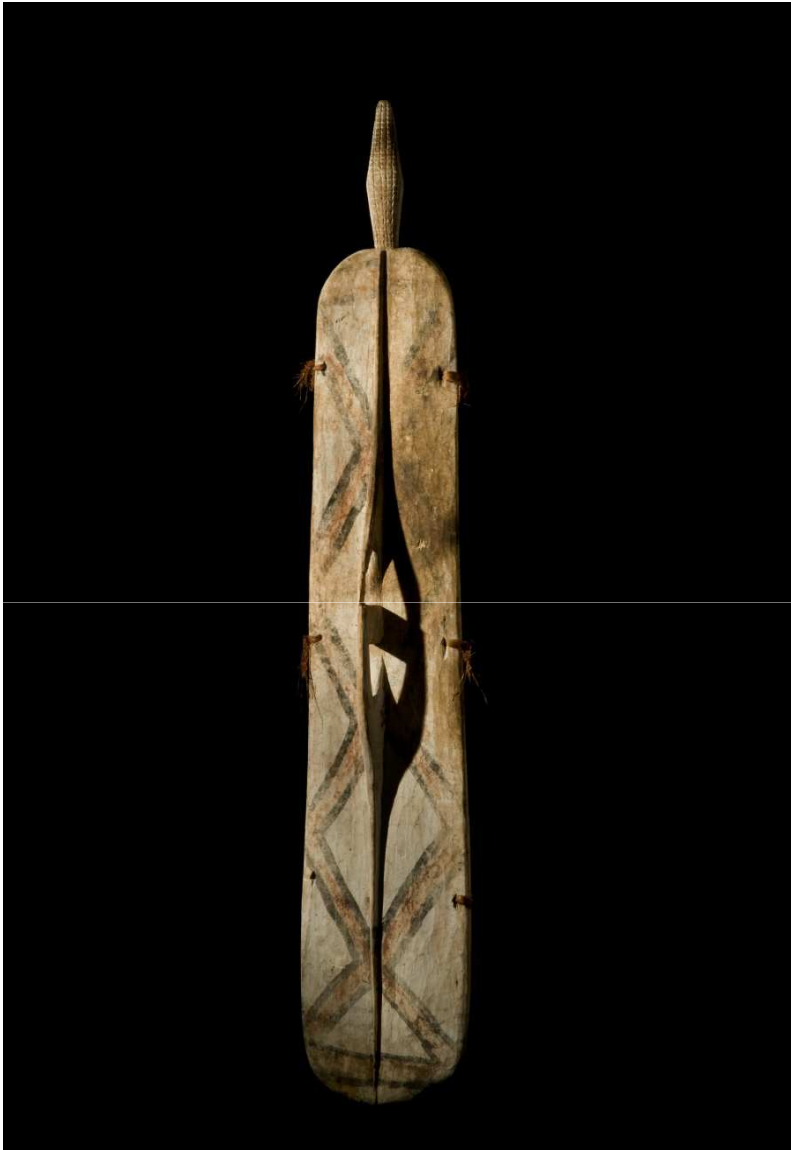
Probabile provenienza area di Kenekap

Shield

The shield has a vertical repetition of the flying fox, against a white-coated background. The crown has incised facial features and an extended shaft with the head of a crocodile. Sago leaf tassels are attached to the six holes on the outer edge.

*203 x 71 cm; softwood, kaolin, red clay, soot and sago leaf
Cod.Shield GA*

Probable area of origin Kenekap



Scudo

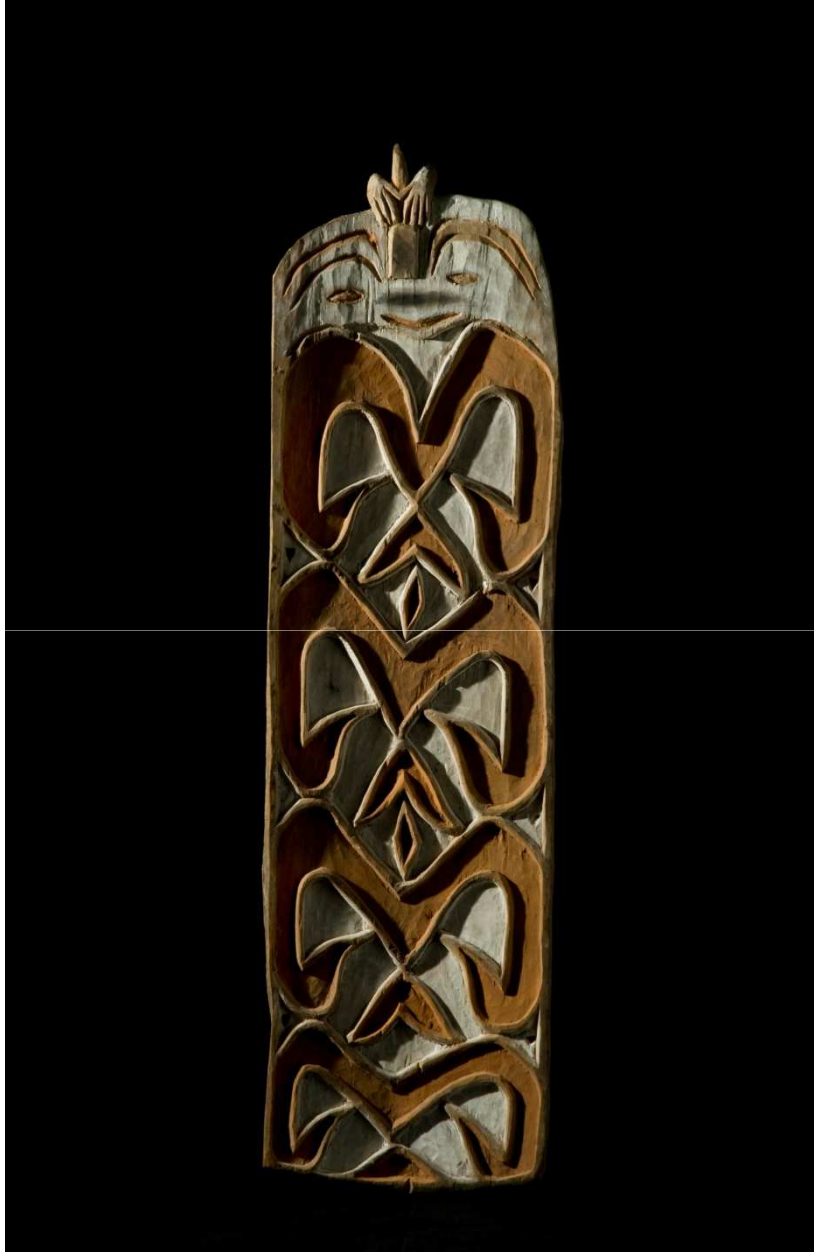
Medesimo scudo visto dalla parte posteriore, con decorazioni a rombo, che recano evidenti tracce dell'utilizzo effettuato.

203 x 71 cm; legno di mangrovia, caolino, argilla rossa e polvere di carbone
Cod.Shield GA

Shield

The same shield seen on the rear side. It has rhomboidal designs outlined in red clay and black, faded and stained from use.

203 x 71 cm; softwood, kaolin, red clay and soot
Cod.Shield GA



Scudo

Di probabile provenienza dall'area Safan, questo scudo presenta su un fondo bianco grandi stilizzazioni dell'uccello totemico. La lunetta superiore mostra un volto umano. La particolarità di quest'oggetto è la piccola figura umana sulla cima che è stata mozzata, della quale rimangono le mani. L'usanza di troncare il corpo indica che il proprietario è morto senza che lo scudo potesse essere trasmesso a un discendente.

*180 x 71 cm; legno di mangrovia, caolino, argilla rossa e polvere di carbone
Cod.Shield GA*

Shield

This is probably a shield of the Safan area. Entirely coated in white it represents four large symbols of the totemic animal, the flying fox. The crown has incised facial features. The distinguishing character of this shield is the elevated human figure, which was cut off sometimes in the past, leaving only the hands. The custom to cut off the head indicates that the owner died before having the possibility to pass his shield to a direct descendant.

*180 x 71 cm; softwood, kaolin, red clay and soot
Cod.Shield GA*



Scudo

Scudo area Emari Ducur, dal tradizionale profilo arrotondato; al centro immagini dell'animale totemico, il pipistrello, le cui unghie sono connesse con lo spirito dei morti. Il corpo centrale è contornato da un motivo decorativo a esse. La parte superiore presenta un volto umano.

*203 x 71 cm; legno di mangrovia, caolino, argilla rossa e polvere di carbone
Cod.0114-60*

Shield

Emari Ducur shields are characterized by an ovoid shape. This reproduces on a white coated background the symbols of the flying fox, a totemic animal. The claws are related with the otherworld. Numerous smaller motifs are engraved around the border. The crown has incised facial features.

*203 x 71 cm; softwood, kaolin, red clay and soot
Cod.0114-60*



Scudo

Lo scudo presenta due grandi disegni a rombo, recanti motivi circolari all'interno e alle congiunzioni. Il fondo bianco è altresì punteggiato da piccoli rombi dello stesso color argilla. La base e la parte superiore che separa la lunetta sono dipinte con il carbone, mentre la lunetta stessa presenta una faccia umana ricavata in altorilievo.

*164 x 35 cm; legno di mangrovia, caolino, argilla rossa e polvere di carbone
Cod.0115-61*

Shield

This shield features two big rhomboid designs, with curved motifs connecting the two forms. The white coated background is dotted with small replicas of the rhombus, also coloured in orange clay. Two black horizontal bands separate the basis and the crown, where a human head is carved in high relief.

*164 x 35 cm; softwood, kaolin, clay and soot
Cod.0115-61*



Scudo

Lo scudo presenta cinque paia di motivi *bipane* simmetrici colorati in argilla gialla, separati da piccoli ovali del medesimo colore. Il fondo è bianco, racchiuso da una cornice nera che separa anche ogni singolo motivo. La lunetta in legno grezzo porta in cima un viso scolpito.

195 x 45 cm; legno di mangrovia, caolino, argilla e polvere di carbone

Cod.0118-62

Area Safan

Shield

This shield has a vertical repetition of six pairs of symmetrical, horizontally opposing *bipane* symbols, separated by small oval shapes of the same colour. The shield is coated white, with a black frame separating each set of designs. A carved human head extends from the crown, which is bare of colour.

195 x 45 cm; softwood, kaolin, clay and soot

Cod.0118-62

Safan area



Scudo

Questo scudo a fondo bianco ha come decorazione la stilizzazione della foglia del pakis, che se bollita rilascia una sostanza rossa (il colore con cui è rappresentata) che simboleggia la vittoria in guerra. Sulla parte piatta superiore, separata da una riga nera, è stata ricavata una testa umana.

*225 x 63 cm; legno di mangrovia, caolino, argilla rossa e polvere di carbone, rafia
Cod.0122-63*

Shield

This white coated shield is decorated with the stylization of the pakis leaf, a plant used for its red dye, which is the colour of victory in war. The flat crown has an extended shaft with a carved head at the top. Of the eight original tassels, only one remains at the bottom.

*225 x 63 cm; softwood, kaolin, red clay, soot and sago leaf
Cod.0122-63*



Scudo

Scudo decorato con sette rappresentazioni del pipistrello in ocre scuro, separate da ovali dello stesso colore, su fondo bianco. Presenta nodi di rafia su fori laterali. La lunetta antropomorfa è sormontata da una figura umana bifronte.

183 x 81 cm; legno di mangrovia, caolino, argilla e polvere di carbone, rafia
Cod.0394-136

Probabile provenienza area di Kenekap

Shield

This shield is decorated with seven representations of the flying fox, in a dark ocher, separated by small ovals of the same colour. The entire shield is coated white and has traces of remaining tassels of sago leaf on the outer edge. The oval crown is incised with an anthropomorphous face and protruding above is a double faced figure.

183 x 81 cm; softwood, kaolin, clay, soot and sago leaf
Cod.0394-136

Probable village of origin Kenekap



Scudo

Scudo dell'area Kenekap, rappresentante due figure umane color ocra su fondo bianco, nella posizione *wenet*. Ornato con ciuffi di rafia sui lati, la parte superiore è sormontata da una testa umana.

207 x 49 cm; legno di mangrovia, caolino, argilla rossa e polvere di carbone, rafia
Cod.0398-137

Shield

A Kenekap shield, representing two human figures in ochre, in the *wenet* position, against a white background. It is decorated with tassels tied at the border. On the flat crown, a shaft bears a carved human head.

207 x 49 cm; softwood, kaolin, red clay, soot and sago tree fiber
Cod.0398-137



Scudo

Lo scudo presenta cinque grandi rombi formati dalla simmetria della stilizzazione dei rami del banyan, color ocra vivo. Il fondo è bianco, la base e la parte superiore che separa la lunetta sono dipinte con il carbone, mentre la lunetta stessa presenta una faccia umana ricavata in altorilievo.

*185,5 x 46 cm; legno di mangrovia, caolino, argilla rossa, polvere di carbone, rafia
Cod.0468-103*

Shield

This shield features five big rhomboid designs, placed symmetrically and resembling the branches of a banyan tree, coloured in bright ocher. The background is coated white with curved motifs connecting the designs and two black bands at the base and on the top. The crown is entirely coated with red clay and has a human head carved in high relief.

*185,5 x 46 cm; softwood, kaolin, red clay, soot, sago leaf
Cod.0468-103*