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EMBODIED SPIRITS

GOPE BOARDS FROM THE PAPUAN GULF

Edited by Virginia-Lee Webb

Essays by Thomas Schultze-Westrum and Robert L. Welsch

A fascinating collection of the wooden ritual objects called 'spirit boards' made in the Papuan Gulf of New Guinea. They represent spirits that protect clans from sickness, evil spirits, and death. The first book devoted exclusively to the subject sets the individual works in their local context with historical and field photographs. The sculptural forms called 'spirit boards' are known by different names in the numerous ethnic regions of the Papuan Gulf, and are called *gope* in several languages. Traditionally, boards were made with wood from discarded canoes, usually decorated with carved and painted designs on one side. The boards were carved by important men of an extended family or clan. In the late nineteenth to early twentieth century, men lived apart from women and uninitiated boys. Their houses had designated areas or shrines created for the display of items that indicated personal status and clan identity. Multiple boards were placed in these shrines and served as reminders to their owners about their responsibility to the clan and the community.

Embodied Spirits is the first book devoted exclusively to the subject and presents the numerous styles of spirit boards. Full-page colour photographs illustrate the boards of each region, selected from noted international and private collections. The description includes detailed collection history, provenance, publication, and exhibition information for each work. Additionally, contextual historical photographs show the actual spirit boards in situ or similar examples from corresponding time periods.

Virginia-Lee Webb is former Research Curator and Senior Research Scholar at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, in the Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and Americas, where she organized twenty exhibitions for the museum. She also worked at the Museum of Primitive Art, which merged with The Metropolitan Museum. She is currently a consulting curator for several museum projects.