

MARC ASSAYAG

African & Oceanic Art



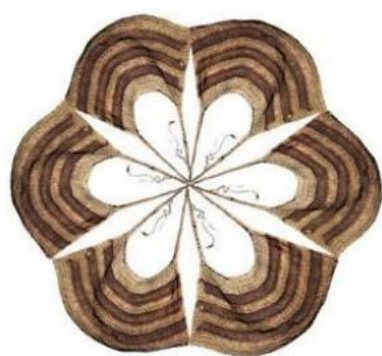
Bilum !

MARC ASSAYAG

African & Oceanic Art

Text & Photography
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Montreal, QC, Canada

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Bilum!

Bilum!

The addition of an exclamation mark at the end of my title may seem a bit audacious in this particular case. After all, an exclamation mark exclaims! It announces something with volume and, even more, implies a sense of excitement and immediacy to the subject being announced. It may, therefore, seem odd in the context of the simple Bilum bag, possibly the most ubiquitous ethnographic object in New Guinea.

After all, what could one possibly add on the subject of these utilitarian bags that, for all practical purposes, function as everything from cradles to semi-trailers in New Guinea society? Many more erudite than I have broken down the simple loop structure in detail, while others have opined at length on the importance of the bag's role in New Guinea culture, from antiquity to present.

This presentation touches on neither of these subjects. So clearly they aren't the reason for an exclamation mark. Rather, it was while photographing the collection that the mark was born.

Sometimes, as humans do, we tend to fall into strange visual ruts where only the expected is seen and where we only see what we expect. To use an old adage in the context of viewing art, we lose sight of the forest because of the trees.

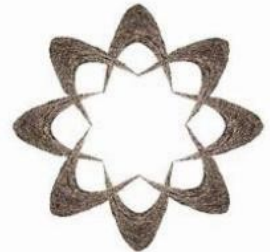
This was certainly the case when it came to Bilum bags whenever I encountered them, here and there, in the course of business. To me, at that time they were just bundles of crumpled cord which, for practical purposes, could just as easily have been crumpled bits of paper on their way to the trash basket.

When photographing the Jolika bags, however, a strange inversion occurred. The process wasn't immediate or sudden. Instead it crept up on me as, one by one, I fought with each bag to find its true, ultimate form for photography. Slowly then, it began to dawn on me that each time I unfolded one of the rag tag bunches of cord, a superb geometrical form, or design, emerged.

Geometrical? In case you're still curious, THIS was the birth of the exclamation mark we are discussing... Since geometry is not native to these bags' native environment. So what exactly is going on with these things? Putting aside their structure, composition and adornments, all of which have been studied at length over time, how is it that we are seeing such geometry in a land where such shapes fundamentally didn't exist?

Clearly, in the case of the Bilum, it isn't that we've lost sight of the forest because of the trees, but rather the opposite; that we may have lost sight of the trees because of the forest. Indeed, having reduced them to mere utilitarian objects we seem to have lost sight of many aspects that make these objects special. One of these losses, clearly, is the fact that these objects have form elements that are quite extraordinary in a tribal context.

Geometric form elements.



Bilum Sizes

Not all bilums are meant for every usage. In fact the bags come in four general categories that, once defined, add a new dimension to appreciating them.

Most common, and best known, are the large utility bags that are used to carry children. While I purposely chose to avoid the ubiquitous image of a baby in a bilum, it is worthwhile to underline the advantages of the bags in this arena. Indeed, serving as more than a simple mode of carriage, the bilum is also an excellent comfort wrap, mosquito net and rocking cradle.

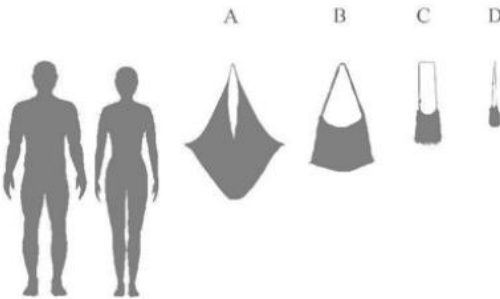
Interestingly these same bags were and still are used to carry goods such as firewood, forest harvests, and other large or heavy loads. Other than a suitcase or large duffel, there exists no equivalent in western culture for this type of utility bag.

The second category is also a general utility bag, but smaller than the category above. These medium-sized bags for daily use could be compared to a modern day shopping bag. Third is the equivalent of a purse in western society. Bags in this category are meant to carry one's personal belongings and are generally carried over the shoulder.

Sorcery or magician's bags, which are presumably no longer made, also fit into this category and could be compared to modern day toolboxes.

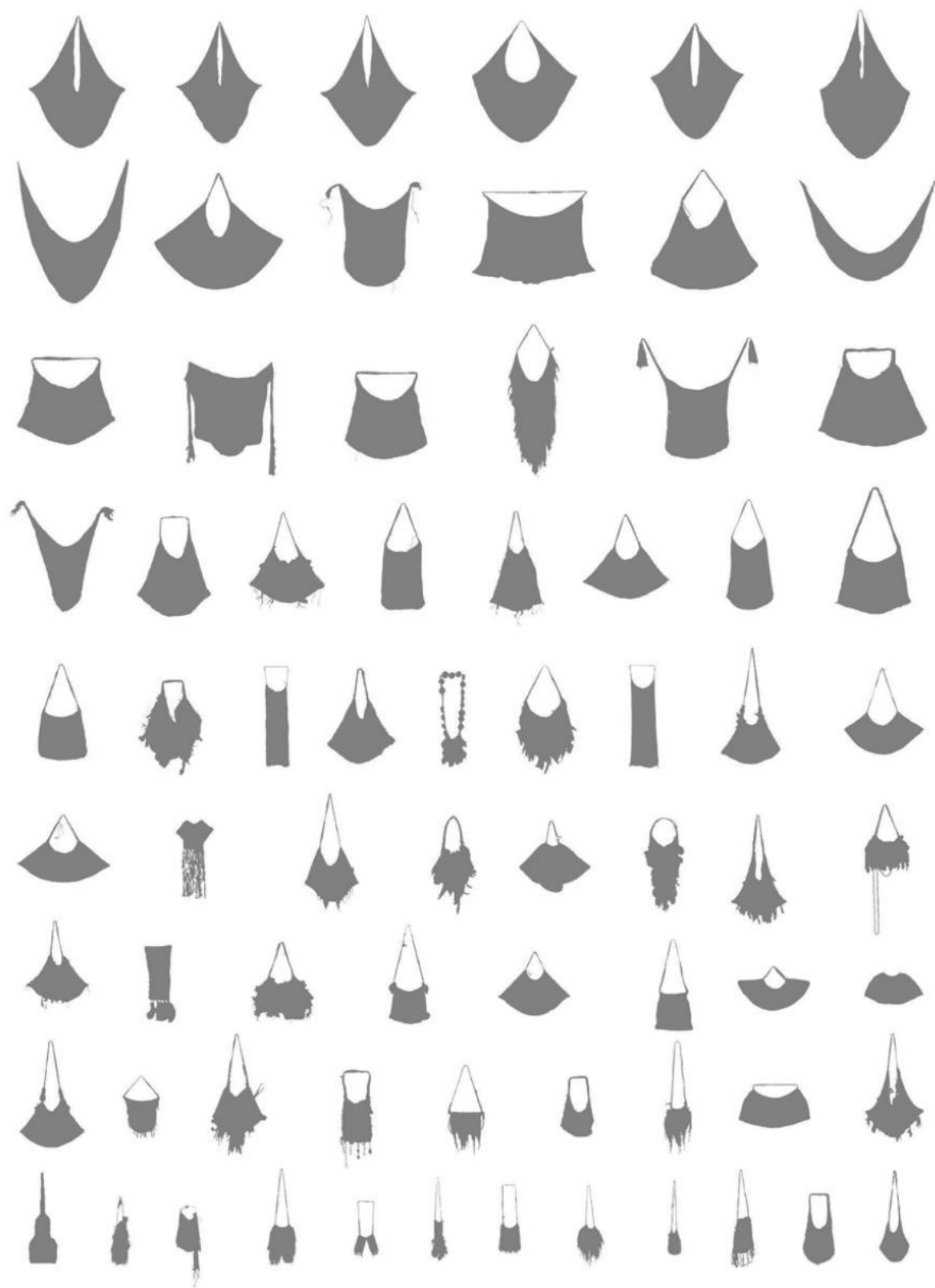
The last category is the amulet bag that is meant for personal magic. These tiny bags are usually worn around the neck and serve to carry small, apotropaic amulets to ward off evil.

Bilum Bag Size / Function Chart



With the exception of magician's bags, both men and women use all the categories of bags above but with one distinguishing factor: women usually carry utility bags around their foreheads, while men tie them around the shoulders.

A	B	C	D
A	Large Utility Bag	Heavy weights	
B	General Utility Bag	General daily usage	
C	Pocket / Neck Bag	Personal usage	
D	Amulet Bag	Personal magic	



Weaving Techniques

Knotless Netting

Despite their great variety of shapes and styles, bilums are produced using a single weaving technique. Classified as a knotless technique, the bilum weave is a simple variation on a twisted figure eight that results in exceptionally strong netting

This weave is also the source of the great compression and expansion qualities for which these bags are known. Using this technique, bilums are made by creating rows of loops around a spacer that is meant to keep them even.

Handles are produced separately and attached afterwards.



Braiding

While generally not used to weave the main body of a bag, braiding techniques such as cross stitching and plaiting appear to be the preferred methods for decorating bags with secondary fibers, such as orchid stem or rattan.

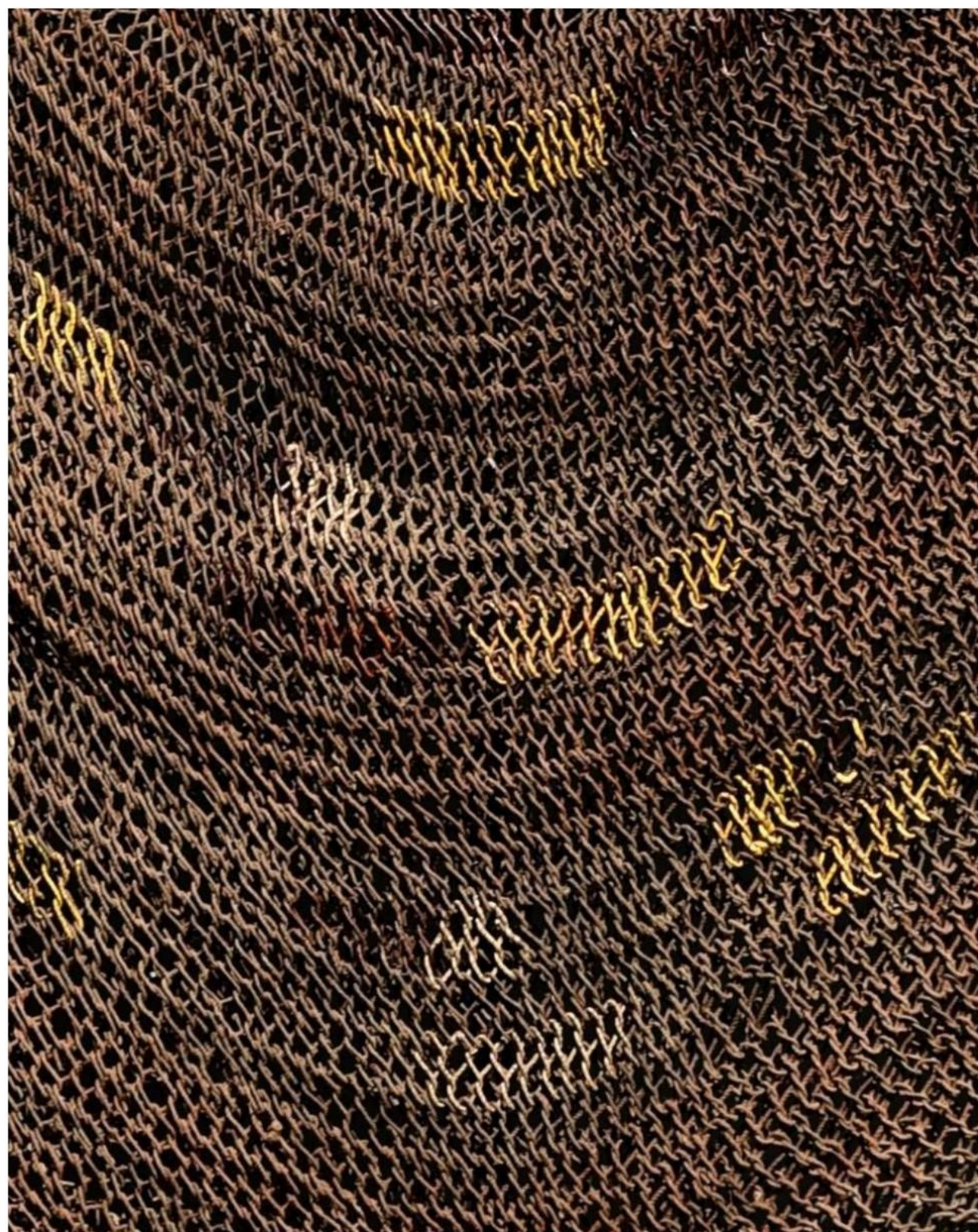


Plaiting



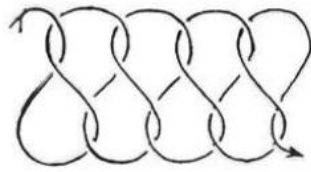
Cross Stitching

In the Highlands in particular, both of these braiding techniques are also used for tying fibers onto arrows and spears.

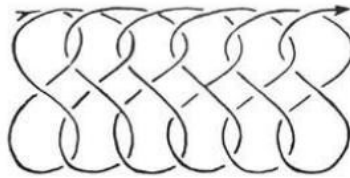


Variations on the Bilum Stitch

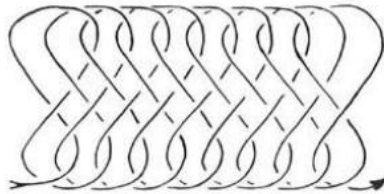
- Tightening the weave -



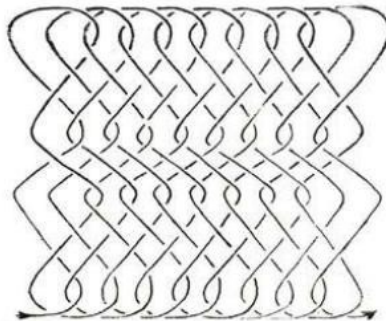
ordinary hourglass entanglement



Bead forming hourglass entanglement



Single Row - Close hourglass entanglement



Double Row - Close hourglass entanglement

Source:

Dr. Kristin Buhler Oppenheim

Textil Technological Contribution: The technique of the Ornamental bag from Kaup.

Annali Lateranensi

Vol IX

ETHNOGRAPHICA AUS NEUGUINEA

George Holtker S.V.D.

Citta del Vaticano, 1945



What's in the Bag?

Functionally, of course, a bag is a bag and as such, its usage is generally well understood. Bilum bags are no different; as utilitarian objects, they have uses that are as varied as they are evident. Interestingly, however, the exact opposite can be said about some other types of bilum, like the enigmatic amulet bag, or the bilums made for ritual/magic stones known as the Thunderbolts or Thunderstones, and described by Georg Holtker in 1944. Indeed, rather than being made to ferry objects, these types of bags were produced to carry magic.

So what exactly did those bilums contain?

While we may never have a complete answer, several bags in the collection that still appear to hold original contents have been photographically dissected to shed light on the subject.

In a charming manner, these contents also demonstrate the notion of the power object in New Guinea, with the charming aspect being that we seem to gather and empower our own icons the very same way today. After all, if walking on a beach full of sea shells, what is it that would make one pick up, and keep, a particular shell over all others? Or seen another way, what is it, exactly, that makes a penny lucky?

Even if we don't consider them the same way, we still encounter "objects of power" today. They are objects that often cost us nothing and yet mean much to us for reasons we can't explain. This is the very essence of the power object or the lucky charm. While it sounds completely obvious, charming objects become charms, and people give these objects power by infusing them with the belief that they are powerful.

Still, given the consistency of interesting and oddly engaging objects found in the bags, even when fragmentary, it seems

strangely connective that the object selection process operated then and there, very much the same as it does here and now.

Today an amulet bag may perhaps better be understood as a spiritual charm bracelet, with the charms being shards of wood, old pieces of incised bark, or bits of broken spear or arrow shafts. Small painted fragments of wood also seem common, as are curled pieces of bark or small bunches of Tapa cloth.







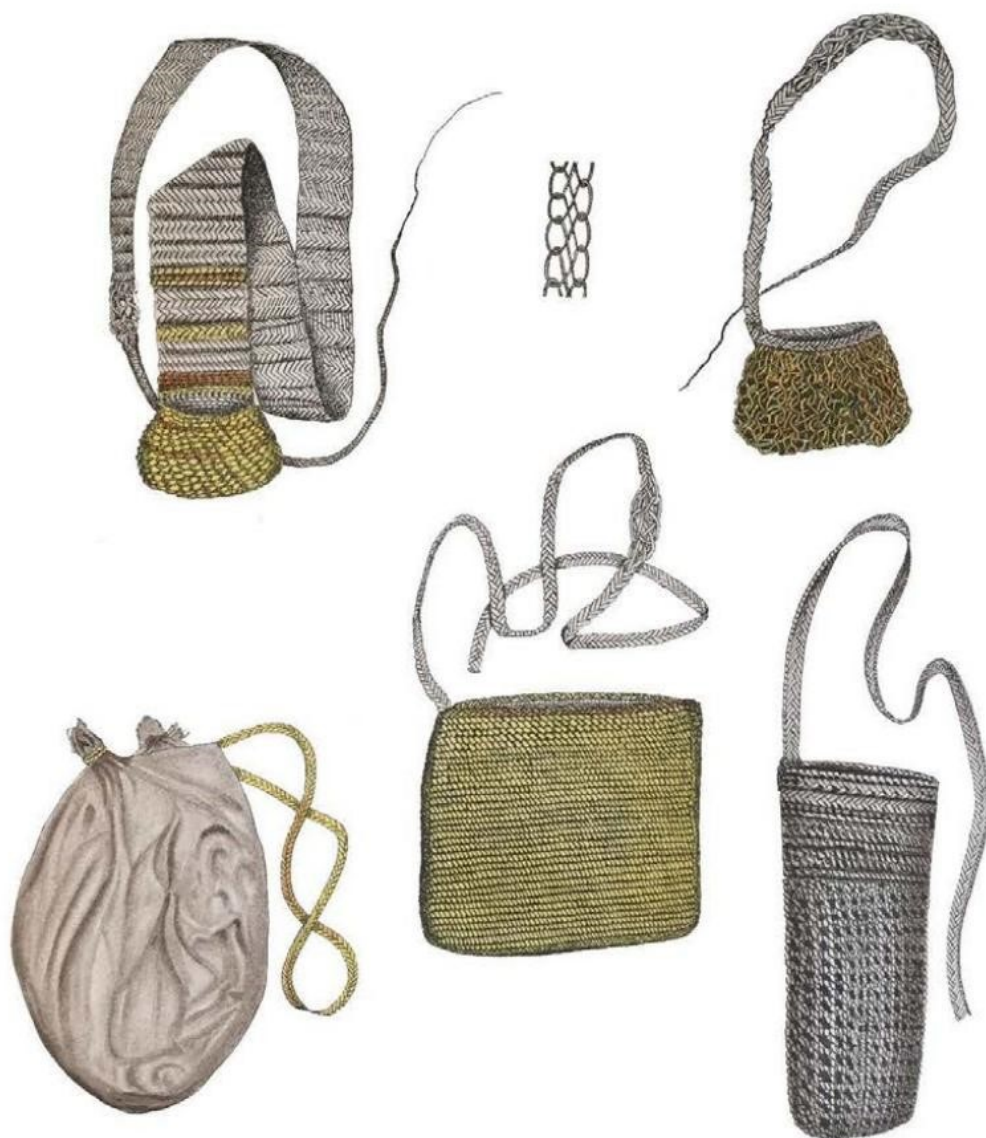
Especially consistent, in almost every bag, were two other elements: Bones and enigmatic bound bundles that resemble miniature sewing or repair kits. Bones, in particular, seem to have occupied a special place in spiritual protection of the day. The sheer number in which they are found, along with their endless variety of form and insinuated menace, seems to indicate that bones were omnipresent in bilum magic. The bound objects, almost as ubiquitous as bone, were found in almost every bag that had contents. Their importance is underlined both by this fact and the fact that the bundles were the only manmade objects found in bag contents. Evidentially then, it would seem that this bundle, despite its resemblance to a sewing kit, was where the intended magic truly resided.

Other bilums were produced to hold groups of ritual / magic stones, so called Thunderbolts, by Holtker in his 1944 report entitled: "Der Donnerkeilglaube vom steinzeitlichen Neuguinea aus gesehen". This report, which can be found online, outlines an early belief that stones of particular shape, and especially shaped stones, came from the sky like thunderbolts.

He further outlines that these stones were kept in special bilums that were hung under the eaves of the men's house when not in use.

As it turns out, these stones also give pause for reflection, and perhaps a gram of wonderment, when one considers the time and place in which they existed as Thunderstones. In fact, pre contact, finds of stones that were perfectly, or familiarly, shaped must indeed have been considered magical. Some stones were shaped as axe blades. Communally held in some instances, these stones were kept ritually and, as often seen, inserted into individual axe handles for use.





ANTHROPOLOGISCHE UND ETHNOLOGISCHE
ERGEBNISSE

DER CENTRAL NEU-GUINEA EXPEDITION 1921—1922

VON

Dr. P. WIRZ,
Basel

The Collection

West New Guinea

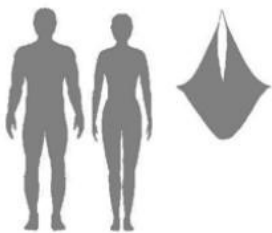
1.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

A finely woven, diamond shaped bilum with a pattern of repeating rectangles in white, red and yellow tones.

Most bilum are woven from a type of Ficus tree fiber, with color accents usually coming from orchid stem fibers.

40"





Oro

2.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

ex Clive Loveless, UK

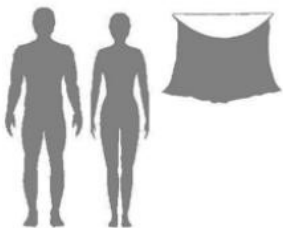
ex Finch & Co., UK

According to collection notes, this bilum was collected in situ by Prof. Peters, a doctor of tropical medicine, while stationed in New Guinea in the 1950's.

Its fine weaving, almost wool-like in quality, depicts a complex design within two large multicolored bands.

Ubiri people, Wanigera,
Collingwood Bay

38" across





West New Guinea

3.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

ex K. Conru, BE

ex Tomi Van Duren

Collected by Dr. Theo Hanegraaf in 1959

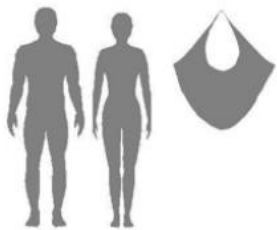
This early collected bilum is a fine example of geometry in both weaving and pattern.

With large base loops woven in radiating bands, the pattern is composed of repeating rectangles woven in red, white and yellow fibers.

34"

Published:

New Guinea Highlands
Art from the Jolika Collection
Pg 603, Illus 17.51





Southern Highlands

4.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

These large, hammock-shaped bilums are from Mendi province, where they resemble an inverted version of a local style of hair netting.

Allowing for maximum adjustability, the bags are woven in successive bands of wide open loops that allow their contents to remain visible.

Contrary to men's bags that could have their contents hidden from view, the contents of women's bags had to remain visible, hence the larger, more open weaving.

80" tip to tip





East Sepik

5.

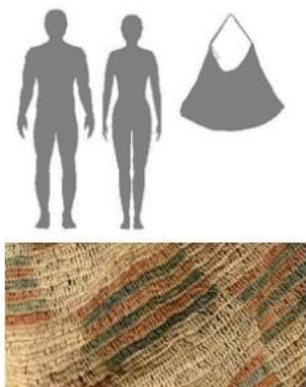
ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

This beautiful Abelam bilum has an almost wool-like quality resulting from exceptionally fine weaving.

Its design is composed of a dizzying pattern of multicolored rectangles that are, themselves, composed of alternating color bands.

Given that each color required an individual strand to be woven in, it becomes clear that such bags were only ever produced at the hands of master weavers.

36"





West New Guinea

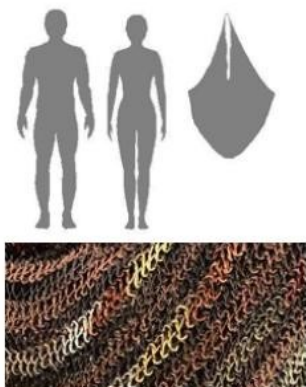
6.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

It is difficult to imagine the source of inspiration for this bilums remarkable shape. Moreover, even once conceived, it remains difficult to imagine how the form would have been woven, and then embellished to include the pattern within.

The pattern, which consists of alternating, colored rectangles within radiating bands, is admittedly striking but its geometric nature remains a mystery

38"





West Sepik Province

7.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

ex K. Knol., NL

ex Dutch Colonial Collection, NL

From the Paniai (Wissel) lakes region of West New Guinea this unusual bottle-shaped bag is made of bush fiber, orchid fiber and a more recent button.

Both Paul Wirz in the 1920s (see plate, page 12), and again Kooijman in the late 50s reported this type of bag as being used to store shell money.

16" w/out sash

Published:

New Guinea Highlands
Art from the Jolika Collection
Pg. 76, Illus. 3.15





West New Guinea

8.

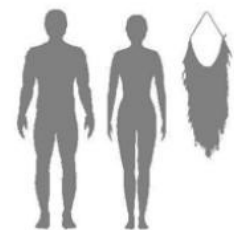
ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

ex Jeff Vanderstraete, BE

Bilum bags represented their owners. Down to minute aspects such as how they were made, adorned or cared for, every part of a bilum reflected the person wearing it.

This Dani bag, therefore, was not just a bag adorned with pig tails. Rather, the bag declared the owner's prowess at hunting the animals and demonstrated his power at having been, and in continuing to be, able to harness each of the pig's spirits.

This added dimension indicates just how deeply these bags reflected the individuals who wore them. To own adornments, the bag's owner had to have the capacity to harness their spirits. Small wonder, therefore, that bags heavily adorned with bones and skulls, for example, were said to belong to sorcerers or magicians.



46"

Published:

New Guinea Highlands
Art from the Jolika Collection
Pg 569, Illus 17.25





Oro

9.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

Given that Oro is a coastal province, bags from this area may be found adorned with local shells. Still, given that shell are currency, not every bag is so adorned.

This particular example, beautifully woven in even rows of alternating colors, is richly adorned with a variety of cowrie shells, shell disk bangles and large conus shells upon the strap. Clearly, with such a demonstration of wealth the bilum must have belonged to an important individual.

16" wide





Oro

10.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

This fantastic jelly fish like bilum is from Collingwood bay. Designed without a shoulder or neck strap, and heavily adorned with Job's Tear and banana seed drapes, it would seem evident that this is a bilum made for ceremonial use.

With bilum, a distinction can be made between ritual and ceremonial use. Indeed, while I am unaware of the bags being used in ritual per se, there is ample evidence that they were used ceremonially, to hold sacred stones, for example.

21"





Chimbu

11.

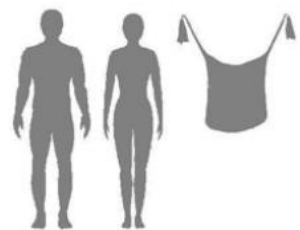
ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

This fine old bilum has open straps that allow it to be tied around the shoulders rather than worn around the head tumpline style.

This feature, and the fact that it has tight weaving rendering it's contents invisible, points to it being a man's bag.

Acting in subtle counterbalance to it's organic form, the woven pattern is dizzying and seems almost electronic. Dominated by four large squares, each panel features tight, raised rows in alternating checkerboard and linear patterns.

22" panel





Madang

12.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

There are two such bags from Madang in the collection. Fashioned in a different weave than other bilum, these are more braided than woven per se.

This technique allowed for even more graphic ability given it's tighter knots. As well, as it typical to the Madang style, leftover cordage is simply left to hang.

14"





West New Guinea

13.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

ex K. Knol, NL

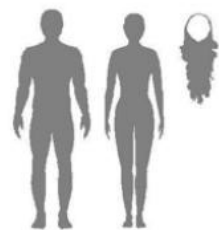
These are, in fact, two bilums that were coupled long ago to create a single, fantastic magician's bag.

Heavily adorned with powerful magic elements this bag, as aforementioned, directly mirrored it's owner's power in a manner that no modern day object can to equal.

23"

Published:

New Guinea Highlands
Art from the Jolika Collection
Pg 541, Illus 17.1





Chimbu

14.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

Nevertheless, the design is hyper geometric and, as such, surprising structured for the natural context in which it was produced.

Furthermore if one's bilum represented its owner, down to the adornments that hung from it, would it not follow that the woven pattern, too, should be a reflection of the weaver?

30"





East Sepik

15.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

This large old Abelam bilum is finely woven with thick fibers. Over time these fibers have softened to attain an almost cloth like quality that, incredibly, still seems to retain all of it's original strength.

The bag's maker did not content themselves with just adding concentric bands to the panel design. Rather, they dramatically complicated their process by adding edge lines, in red, to each of the grey colored bands.

38" across





Papuan Gulf

16.

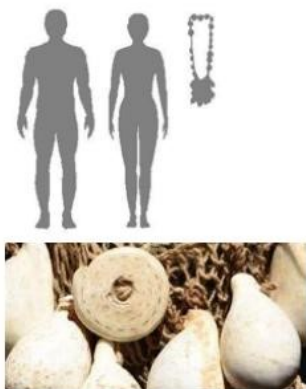
ex T. Barlin, Australia

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

This fine bilum is from Goaribari Island in the Papuan Gulf. A fact which may explain the many large cowrie shells adorning it's front panel, and shell disks along the strap.

With it's contents hidden from view, and displaying obvious wealth, it would seem reasonable to believe that this delicate a bag would have only be made for ceremonial purposes.

22"





East Sepik

17.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

This fine old Abelam bilum is another simple, elegant example of form meeting function. Once again the linear bands, woven in alternating black and red tones, looks like a simple feature to the western eye, that is use to the commercial loom.

Clearly this takes on another dimension when executed by hand. In addition to being of color, the bands are also knotted in a slightly tighter pattern than the brown field. The result is a finely raised ridge along each of the red lines compared to it's neighboring black line.

22" across





Mendi

18.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

In addition to its classic square form this Mendi bag is a fine example of contrasting craftsmanship.

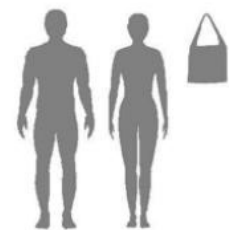
Using traditional ficus tree fiber, the bag's strap and edges are coarsely woven in equally traditional knotless weaving.

Interlaced into this perimeter is a striking panel of thick rattan, that, instead of being woven, is braided in the same manner as are the region's spear and arrow bindings.

12" Panel

Published:

New Guinea Highlands
Art of the Jolika Collection
Pg 467, Illus 15.33





West Sepik Province

19.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

ex M. Hamson, California

This triangular bag would have belonged to a powerful magician. Covered in dozens of bones, sticks and other elements earned over time, the intimidating bag literally bristled with menace.

That said, the base weaving on the bag is also worthy of note, with tight, thick loops creating rows that almost resemble a bush corduroy.

As can be observed in the detail panel below, the weave almost resembles something knitted rather than woven.

24"





Chimbu

20.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

This is another fine old open handled bag from Chimbu. Once again balancing an organic, free flowing form, the bag's weaving pattern is rigorous and obviously produced at the hands of a master.

When seen up close, the loops on this bag are held between raised 'rail' like lines at their tops and bottom. In addition to this feature the bag's has a checkered design in varying brown tones.

24"





Oro

21.

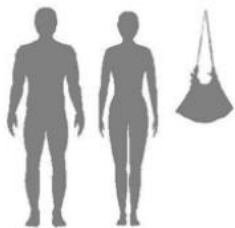
ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

This fine Collingwood Bay bilum is woven with a double red bands delineating an area of checkerboard pattern.

Undoubtedly a ceremonial bilum, the bag is covered with a thick panel of cowrie shells. This same panel, and the bag's strap, are further adorned with shell disk bangles as well as large sized cowrie and conus shells.

Clearly the white shells provide a dramatic contrast to the bag's reddish field. Equally clear is the value represented by the bag, given that shells are local currency.

15" wide





Eastern Highlands

22.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

This bilum is woven with three columns of alternating rectangles separated by two columns made up of checkerboard pattern.

Incredibly, the reverse panel (shown in detail below) is a negative copy of the front panel, but with rail patterns forming the central columns instead of checkerboard squares.

20"





East Sepik

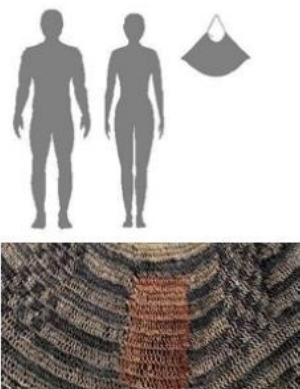
23.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

This Abelam bilum's simple, familiar shape belies the intricacy of it's weave.

Merging vertical red rectangles with concentric blue lines that are punctuated by squares of checker board patterning, the bilum is clearly produced at the hands master weaver.

16"





East Sepik

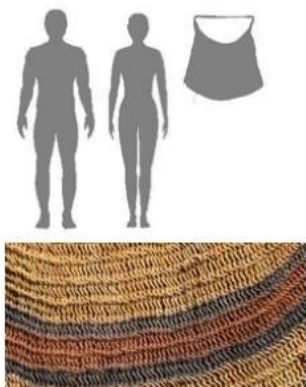
24.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

This Abelam bilum, a is supremely elegant in it's minimalism. With a single tri-colored band arcing across it's yellow field , the bag is subliminally enhanced by both the regularity and texture of it's weave.

Thereafter, functionally, it is interesting to note hat the long strap, used to hang the bag around the shoulder, is completely adjustable to any size body, via the tying of a single slip knot anywhere along it's length.

20" wide





West New Guinea

25.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

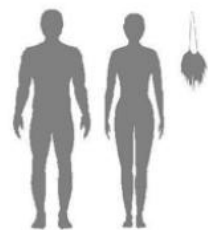
This fine, small, personal size bag is adorned with a symbol of transformation between states of maturity in the form of butterfly pupae.

Combining this fact with its small, more personal size, and the fact that the pupae also obfuscate the bag's contents, it would seem that the bag could have belonged to a young man during his initiation process.

10" panel

Published:

New Guinea Highlands
Art of the Jolika Collection
Pg 567, Illus 17.23





West New Guinea

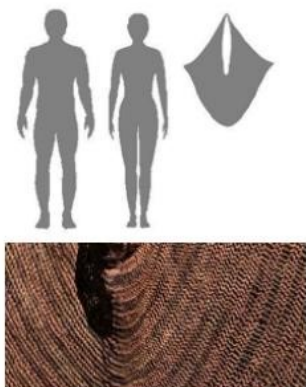
26.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

Draping almost like a royal crest this uniquely shaped bilum has a subtle banded design incorporated in it's weave.

Executed with great regularity the weave also features slightly raised ridge lines which, combined with the alternating bands, give the bag a fine cloth-like texture.

38"





Chimbu

27.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

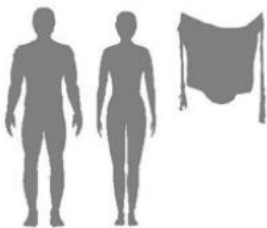
ex M. Hamson, California

Collected pre 1960 by missionary Robert F. Hueter.

A superb bilum with ample, generous volumes and fine weaving in panels of varying geometric motifs.

Upon consideration, geometric aspects seem as common in bilum as they are foreign to the environment in which these were produced.

Furthermore, the fact that the bags were meant as literal representations of their owners should mean that, fundamentally, the patterns exist on the bags only because they first existed in the minds of the makers. While seeming self evident, this statement, becomes quite relevant when considering the time period, and natural environment, being discussed.



21" panel

Published:

New Guinea Highlands
Art of the Jolika Collection
Pg 331, Illus 12.32



Eastern Highlands

28.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

ex Terence E. & Patricia Hays

Collected by the Hays in Habi'ina Village, 1971-72

Bilums were still very much being made traditionally when this, and the next catalog entry, were collected by the Hays. With that in mind the finesse and craftsmanship demonstrated in the pair of bags, that were collected contemporaneously, is dizzying.

33"

Published:

New Guinea Highlands
Art of the Jolika Collection
Pg 264, Illus 11.33





Eastern Highlands

29.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

ex Terence E. & Patricia Hays

As with the previous catalog entry this bilum was also collected by the Hays in Habi'ina Village in 1971-72

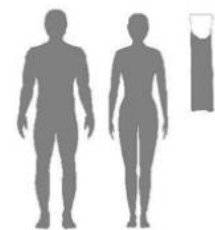
Demonstrating superb craftsmanship the pattern alone is impressive without considering the fact that each color required a separate, handmade strand, and that every strand had to be identical in order for the design to be successful.

Such skill is dizzying in a world where automation has rendered patterns like this commonplace.

35"

Published:

New Guinea Highlands
Art of the Jolika Collection
Pg 265, Illus 11.34





West New Guinea

30.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

ex K. Knol, NL

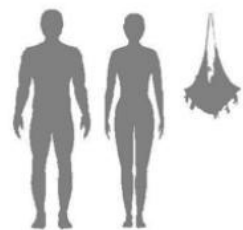
This magician's bag is unusually woven, with wide open loops that allowed for the it's contents to remain visible.

Clearly deliberate, this device may well have played into the owner's sense of drama, something already alluded to by the dramatic adornments decorating the bag. As with all sorcery's bags, however, the hanging adornments were not just there for show. Instead they graphically, and menacingly, depicted the magician's ability to harness power.

11" wide

Published:

New Guinea Highlands
Art from the Jolika Collection
Pg 562, Illus 17.19





East Sepik

31.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

There are, relatively speaking, very few bilums that are adorned in such a way that they can only serve a ceremonial purpose.

Such is certainly the case with this impressive large man's bag, and it's predominant panel of dog teeth and ceremonial shell work.

With dog teeth being important currency in much of New Guinea, this panel clearly represented great wealth.

22" wide





West New Guinea

32.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

This dazzling Highland bilum has a concentric arc design woven into the main field with dazzling orchid stem fiber.

It's short handle denotes it as a shoulder bag while it's size points to it's place in the medium utility class, where it may have been carried by either men or women.

20"

Published:

New Guinea Highlands
Art from the Jolika Collection
Pg. 66, Illus. 3.5





West Sepik Province

33.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

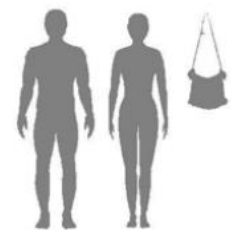
This is a rare Bilum from the Yilli area of the
Torricelli Mountains.

Locally these bags are known as "Tom", instead of
'Noken' or 'Wut' in most other regions of New
Guinea. In another departure from tradition the
opaque bags are made, and worn, by women during
special ceremonies meant to address their ancestors.

Here again the woven design depicts something of
an 'electronic ripple', with successive rows of
geometric lines radiating outward. Further
embellishing, and complicating, the pattern, are two
lines that have been woven in with red fibers.

The strap, as well, features two large, valuable
cowrie shells that serve nicely to counterbalance the
row of smaller shells lining the bottom.

12"





Highlands

34.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

This is one of only a few amulet bags in the collection.

Adorned with just a pair of boar's tusks, this little bag may, at first sight, seem plain to the modern viewer. It would, however, be wrong to believe that these were simple to the individual who wore the bag.

In fact, the presence of the tusk was clearly meant to declare that, in spirit, the entire boar was actually present to provide the bag's owner with their protection.

6"





Eastern Highlands

35.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

ex Chris Boylan, Australia

This small amulet bag incorporates a rattle of seed pods dangling from it's base. As is always the case with bilum, these and the white lines on the panel serve more than just a superficial, aesthetic function.

In fact, while both elements are placed so as to contribute to the bag's aesthetics, the real reason for their existence is to provide the wearer with extra protection against evil spirits.

In this case, as well, the seed rattle introduces us to the use of sound as an additional means of spiritual protection.



11" 1/2

Published:

New Guinea Highlands
Art from the Jolika Collection
Pg. 72, Illus. 3.12



East Sepik

36.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

This large, generous bilum is intricately woven, with tight stitching creating a superb, intricate design.

This same tightness of weave gives the bag an almost wool-dish texture that is incredibly soft and pliable. Once again it is inconceivable to imagine the focus required to keep such a pattern even, especially while producing it using multiple, colored strands.

As well, once again, the geometry of the design is as inescapable in presence as it is mysterious in origin.

38"





West New Guinea

37.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

ex Frank Reiter, Collection Germany

Collected by Father Hans Frankenmolen, Ordo
Fratrum Minorum, in Tibangi, 1985.

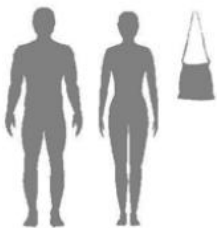
Intricately stitched with orchid stem fibers this bag's
design is composed of three rows of standing
rectangles, separated by three horizontal multi-
colored bands.

Clearly such a bag would have been made for an
important individual, or occasion, as it would require
dozens, if not hundreds, of man hours to produce.

12"

Published:

New Guinea Highlands
Art of the Jolika Collection
Pg 572, Illus 17.28





East Sepik

38.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

ex Clive Loveless, UK

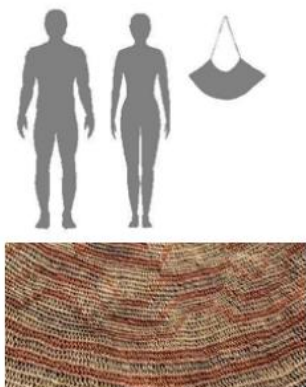
Collected by Prof. Peters, doctor of tropical
medicine while stationed in New Guinea in the
1950's.

Ubiri people, Wanigera,
Collingwood Bay

This bilum's plain brown field is intricately
interwoven with red fibers to create a fantastic,
almost circuit board-like pattern.

In fact, when considering it's early collection date,
this bilum is a perfect example to underline the
geometric theme being presented.

20"





Oro

39.

ex David Baker, Usa

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

This is an interesting Sorcerer's bilum in that the magic adorning it is vegetal instead of animal.

This is perhaps a regional difference as, contrary to the other magicians bag's presented, this example is Omie, from Oro province, rather than from the Highlands.

Clearly, in either case, in addition to whatever contents it might have held, part of the bag's magic was also held in the strands of seeds and shells that both adorn and protected it.

14" panel





West New Guinea

40.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

ex Frank Reiter, Germany

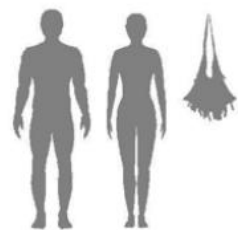
In addition to the protective powers of the multiple elements adorning this magician's bag, it should be noted that the rattling produced by these, upon his movement, was an important part of the magic.

While most magician's bags are tightly woven so as to render their panels opaque, this is the second bag from West New Guinea where the loops are purposely large and obviously woven so as to serve the opposite purpose.

11"

Published:

New Guinea Highlands
Art of the Jolika Collection
Pg 571, Illus 17.26





Madang

41.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

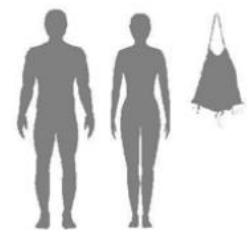
This bilum is a fine example of bags produced in the Bogia region of Madang Province.

In his 1944 study of prehistoric ax heads George Holtker pointed to this style of bag as being used to store sacred axe heads, rather than being worn.

Of particular interest in this style are the hair like threads that protrude from the tightly woven field, in addition to the columns of Job's tear seeds. This feature is only found in Madang bilums.

Both of these more visible aspects in no way diminish the finesse of the bag's base weaving, which is clearly, masterfully executed.

18"





East Sepik

42.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

This Abelam bilum is of classic shape and size. It's design, however, is outstanding, with a central, two-tone chain link held between two triple bands, also composed of alternating colors.

The open, see through, loops in the weave determine this as a woman's bag. On this note, It should be underlined that this directive is not due entirely to patriarchal reasons. Instead, in many parts of New Guinea, women were thought to intrinsically have magic within, them while men had to access it via ritual.

This fundamental belief had a profound effect on many aspects of the art, and ceremonies, we know today, and the bilum is no exception.

20"





Eastern Highlands

43.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

ex Frank Reiter, Germany

Collected by Jim Tanner, New Tribes Mission,
Goroka 1983

This small bag is simply woven in repeating,
radiating bands. As a young man's ceremonial bag,
it would have contained several magic objects.

Among these was a pyro-engraved bamboo flute
that, as is evident, is still extant.

Published:

New Guinea Highlands
Art from the Jolika Collection
Pg 268, Illus 11.36 a-b

23"





West Sepik Province

44.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

This bilum is woven with large, generous loops that have been adorned with multiple magic elements.

As with other examples in the collection, the adornments on this bilum are mainly vegetal in nature. Unusually, however, pieces of dried bark, perhaps from a sacred tree or object, hang alongside the other elements.

This is an unusual adornment in that it is material that would easily deteriorate in a forest environment. Alternatively, this may be the very purpose for its inclusion.

18" panel





Madang

45.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

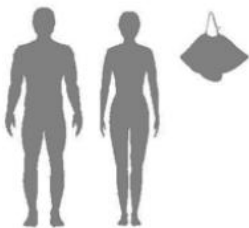
This is a fine and rare type of bilum from Bogia region, Madang province.

As referenced by George Holtker in 1944, this type of bilum was, in fact used to store sacred, faceted axe heads that were considered to be thunderbolts manifested.

His report, entitled, "Der Donnerkeilglaube vom steinzeitlichen Neuguinea aus gesehen" (Google translation: The Thunderbolt Belief seen from Stone Age New Guinea) is freely available online.

Design wise, it is evident that this bag, with its heavy convergence of local riches and equally evident symmetry, was produced for a higher purpose than ordinary use.

16" wide





Madang

46.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

This fine ceremonial bilum is adorned with currency in the form of it's many hanging dog teeth.

From accounts I have read, in the 1960s, 200 such teeth could be traded for a canoe. As such the bag, already fine in itself, is simply adorned with riches.

Nothing about bilum, however, is unidirectional.

More than simply demonstrating wealth, it is important to understand adornments are there to protect; Through sound when they rattle, and visually, by bewildering onlookers when the bag is in motion.

10" panel





Madang

47.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

This fine personal size bag is from the Ramu River area of Madang Province.

A fine and tightly woven personal size bag that has been covered with considerable trade currency in the form of cowrie shells and dog teeth.

These small, shoulder worn bags would stay with an individual for life. At death, it is said that men's bags are placed on top of the tomb, while women are buried with their bags.

8"





Eastern Highlands

48.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

ex K. Knol, NL

A delightful small amulet bag collected by K. Knol in Telefomin. While clearly woven individually these bags have been joined to create a unique double bag.

Such double, sometimes even triple, bags are common in Telefomin where they serve a more ceremonial than every day purpose.

7"

Published:

New Guinea Highlands
Art from the Jolika Collection
Pg 519, Illus 16.16 (d)





Eastern Highlands

49.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

ex Ron Perry, AZ, (collected in situ)

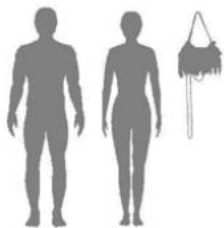
Bags that are heavily adorned with organic elements are usually believed to be magic bags. However, in this case, the presence of Job's tears seeds indicate that this was probably a widow's/widower's bag.

According to published information, the bag would be burned to signify a permanent end to the relationship once the mourning period was over.

Published:

New Guinea Highlands
Art from the Jolika Collection
Pg 266-67, Illus 11.35

18"





West New Guinea

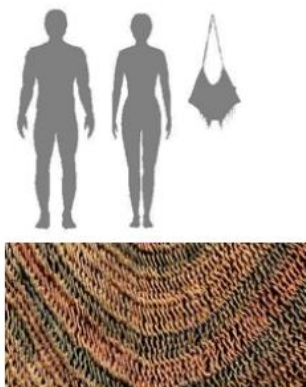
50.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

The intricate banded weaving on this magician's bag is hidden from view by the numerous butterfly pupae hanging on the panel.

Also present to lend it's magic to the bag is a shock of cuscus fur. The rear panel (detail below) is plain and has radiating bands of varying weave in different tones.

14" panel





East Sepik

51.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

This man's bag is tightly woven so as to hide the contents within. In this unique case, the contents are still extant, including the man's personal cassowary bone dagger.

The other contents, including tufts of human hair, are bound within a rolled bark that has never, to my knowledge, been opened for inspection.

The numerous shell bead bangles adorning the bags edges, of course, contribute to both the bag's appearance and power.

16" panel





East Sepik

52.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

While it is hard to discern, this man's bag has a row of menacing teeth protruding from a center line like a spiny vertebrae.

Such an addition is certainly meant as a warning to stay away from whatever possessions might have been kept in the bag.

With these and beaded shell bangles draped across it, and hanging from it's edges, the bag stood well protected and, as such, was well preparer to protect it's owner.

7" panel





Highlands

53.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

This Highlands man's bag is tightly woven and hung with strings of Job's Tear seeds.

Exceptionally the contents, including curling barks that have been engraved and colored for magic, are still present.

9" panel





West New Guinea

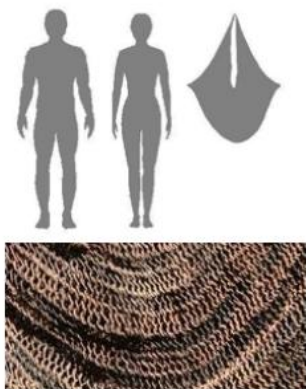
54.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

These large bilums would generally be worn by women, with the top of the strap across the forehead like a tumpline.

Similar in design to others of this style in the collection the weaving pattern consists of a radiating band design in alternating black and reddish tones.

40"





East Sepik

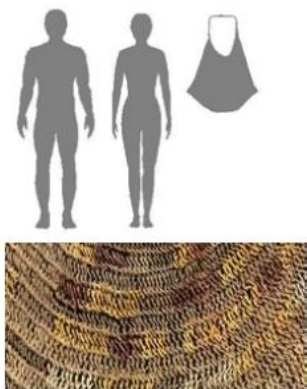
55.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

This is a well used and well loved woman's bilum
from Abelam.

With wide rows of open loops the bag's design is
enhanced by repeating rectangles of brown and
yellow orchid stem fiber.

18"





Southern Highlands

56.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

This is the second U form bilum in the collection.

Woven with simple, wide open loops this is a classic Highland's utilitarian bilum. It's form, as basic as it is, allows almost any shape to be carried while the open arms serve to easily adjust the bag to the bearer's body.

Interestingly, if reversed, this bag looks very much like the netted veils worn by the region's women.

80" tip to tip





West New Guinea

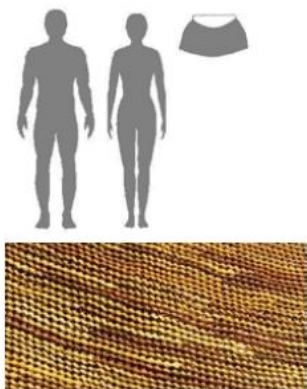
57.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

This fine old bilum's weaving pattern is completely hidden by the brilliant over weaving of golden orchid stem fiber.

Beautifully conceived and executed, the man's bag is clearly meant for an important individual.

18" wide





West Sepik Province

58.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

This magician's bag empowers the spirits of several animals, including the half skull of a small crocodile that still bears it's teeth.

Such adornments would have carried great power for the bag's owner. Indeed, in the context in which they existed, these objects, while magical in their own rite, actually spoke to the power of the man who had the capacity of harnessing, and demonstrating their magic on his bag.

18" wide





East Sepik

59.

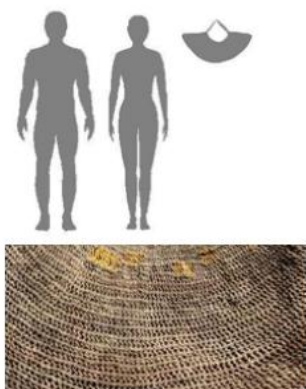
ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

This inverted yoke shaped bag is from the Wosera region of East Sepik Province.

Tightly woven with a simple repeating loop the bag's mouth is highlighted by an elegant arc of squares woven in yellow orchid stem fiber.

While aesthetically sublime in form, one wonders as to the efficiency of such a design, with a short handle and small mouth seeming to run contrary to it's generous body.

20"





East Sepik

60.

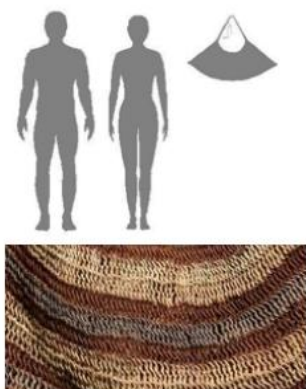
ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

This fine medium sized Abelam bilum has three concentric arcing tri color bands on a field of wide brown loops.

Shaped like an orange wedge the the bag is now soft and pliable from years, if not decades, of field use.

Given that bilum such as these can take months to produce, it is not surprising that they are then valued for the decades that follow their creation.

20"





Chimbu

61.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

This Highland man's bag has an engaging, organic form that gives it the appearance of melting.

The panel is highlighted by two simple red bands woven into a the flat brown field. This same design is also exits to hold shoulder shields in the area.

10" panel





West New Guinea

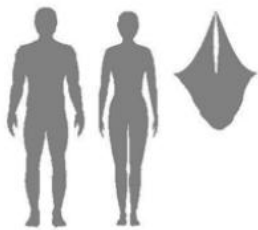
62.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

This large, utilitarian format bilum is woven with wide open loops. Embellished with alternating squares of red, white and yellow fibers the woman's bag is well used and ample in form.

Even the base weaving is banded in black and red lines that add a subtle texture to the overall appearance.

38"





West Sepik

63.

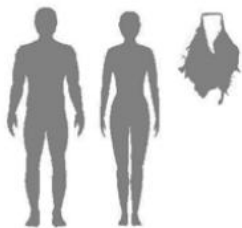
ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

This powerful magician's bag has large, almost menacing bone adornments.

Practically speaking, in a context where most bags were unadorned, to see an individual wearing such a bag approaching must have been impressive and intimidating.

As has been the subject of this discussion; the mere fact of owning, and harnessing such power was already magical in itself, at the time when bilums stood as physical representations of their owners.

20" panel height





Western Highlands

64.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

Ex Ron Perry, AZ

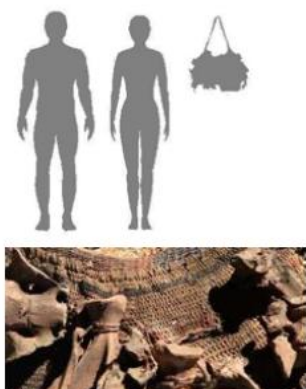
While the previous catalog entry presented it's power in a brute and obvious manner, this example presents the same type of power less menacingly.

This fact underlines the subtle power of these understated objects where, even today, different adornments on their panels elicit different reactions at a visceral level.

16

Published:

New Guinea Highlands
Art from the Jolika Collection
Pg.70, Illus 3.10





Madang

65.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

As with entry #12 in this catalog this small bag is braided rather than woven.

This technique gives these bags a cloth like quality unlike any other bilums encountered. Furthermore, the fact that the technique allows for knots also means that more complex designs can be achieved.

The design on this bag demonstrates this very fact, with it's row of small windows woven in complete with horizontal bars to keep all contents in.

12"





Chimbu

66.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

ex T. Barlin, Australia

This magician's bag has a peculiar rigid strap. This is a unique feature that has not, to date, been repeated in any bag i've seen, be it in literature or person.

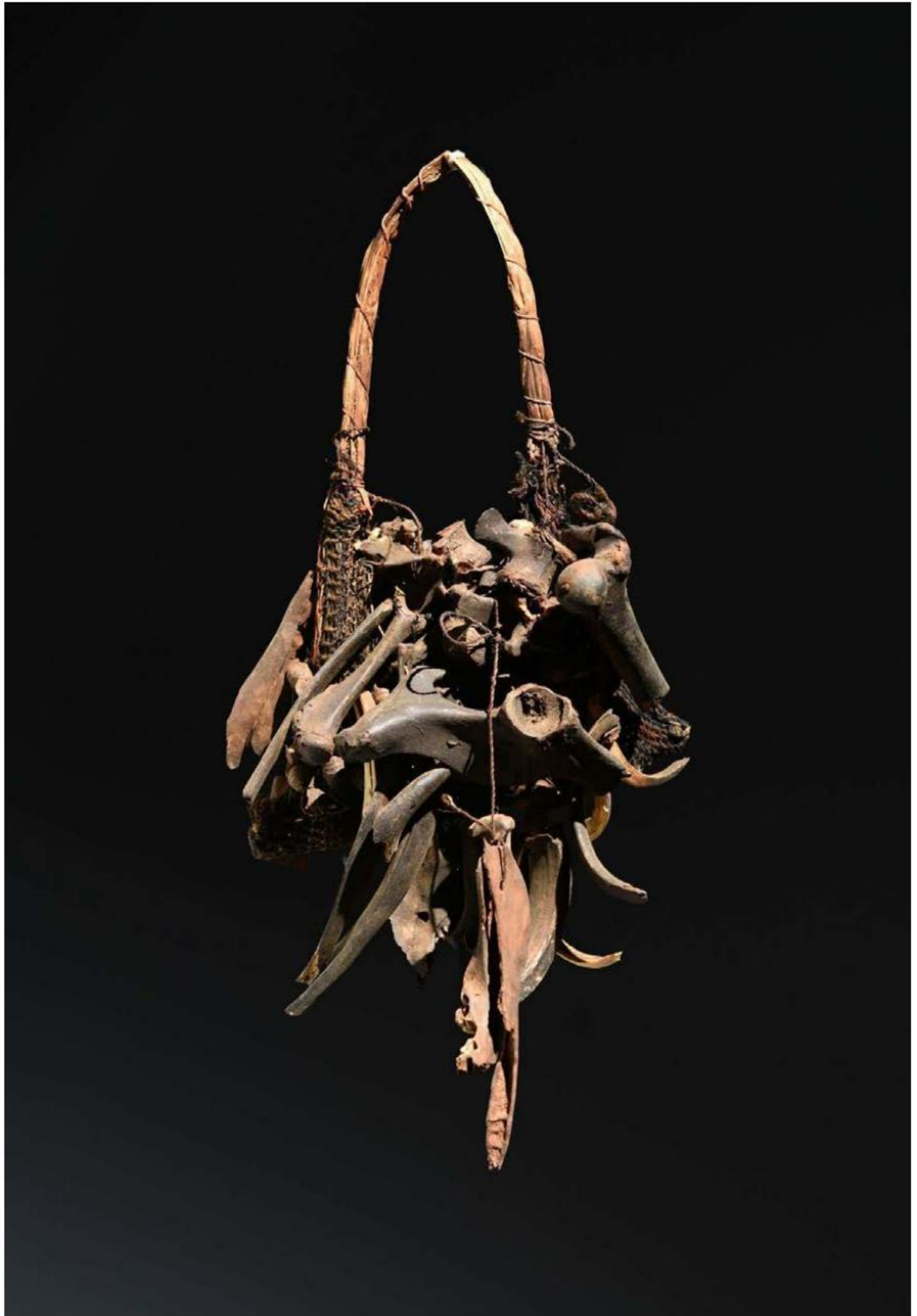
Heavily laden with pig bones, tusks and other magical elements this bag, again, must have created quite an impression in it's context.

18"

Published:

New Guinea Highlands
Art from the Jolika Collection
Pg 329, Illus 12.31 (b)





West Sepik Province

67.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

ex Scott Rodolitz, Usa

This fine and, one might say, simple personal size bag still contains it's charge of stones.

Polished or shaped stones of any type were highly valued in all parts of New Guinea. As is often seen, these stones are removable from their instruments and, thereafter, stored in important clan bilums under the eaves of the men' s house.

I believe this bag, with it's stones still extant, to be one such storage bilum.

19"

Published:

New Guinea Highlands
Art of the Jolika Collection
Pg 373, Illus 13.19 (a)





West Sepik Province

68.

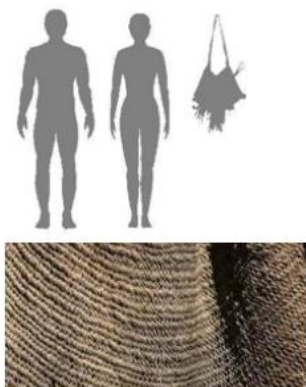
ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

ex M. Hamson, California

This old bilum from West Sepik Province would have impressed, if not intimidated, many onlookers with its numerous and menacing adornments.

Beautifully executed, with tight rows of raised loops, the bag is lined with a row of cowrie shells along the bottom. Given that the bilum is from the Toricelli mountains it seems evident that the shells, probably obtained in trade, would have been considered valuable.

14" wide





West Sepik Province

69.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

ex Scott Rodolitz, Usa

This is another bilum that was collected holding a group of stones.

With unusually thick, strong loops on a small size bag it is very possible that this is the reason for which this bag was made.

Indeed, as documented by Georg Holtker in his 1944 report entitled: "Der Donnerkeilglaube vom steinzeitlichen Neuguinea aus gesehen" (Google translation: The Thunderbolt Belief seen from Stone Age New Guinea), bilums were once made for the very purpose of storing sacred stones. Such bilums, he explained, would be stored under the eaves of the men's house.

19"

Published:

New Guinea Highlands
Art of the Jolika Collection
Pg 373, Illus 13.19 (b)





West New Guinea

70.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

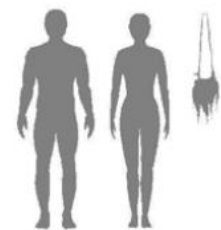
This small, personal size bilum is adorned with butterfly pupae and a single old cowrie shell.

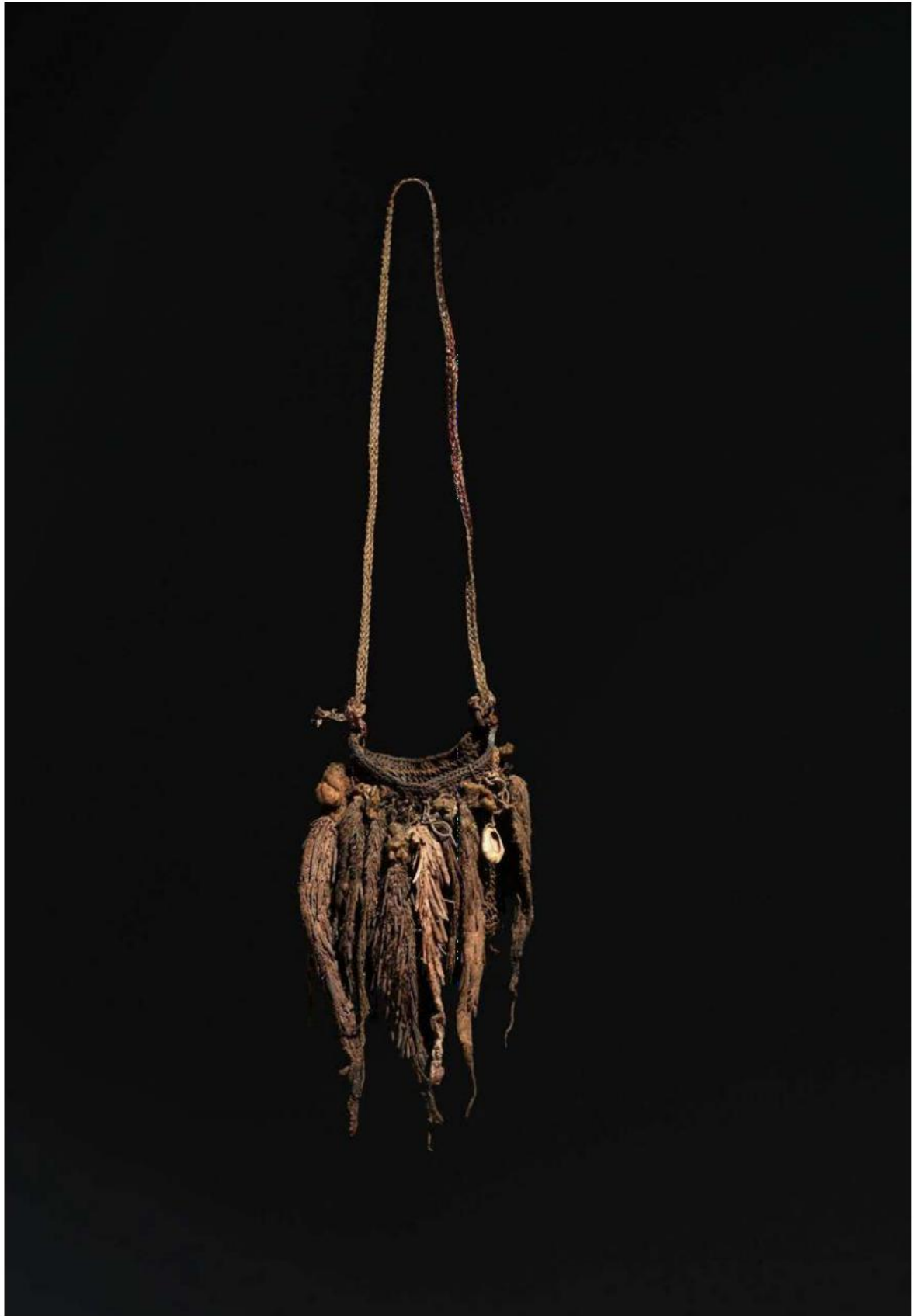
Its diminutive size, and the fact that it is adorned with a symbol of transformation between immature to mature states, leads one to believe that it may have been an adolescent's bag. While impossible to ascertain, this observation serves to underline the representative nature of bilum.

7"

Published:

New Guinea Highlands
Art of the Jolika Collection
Pg 567, Illus 17.22 (b)





East Sepik

71.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

This is a fine and well loved woman's bilum from Abelam. With wide open loops rendering the bag's contents visible the woman's bag is banded in white and yellow tones.

Bilum bags stayed with their owners for life. Often, as in the present case, old bags would require re-netting to repair tears or losses.

16" wide





East Sepik

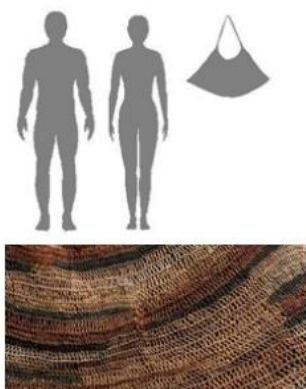
72.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

As with the previous entry this bilum has been lovingly re-netted and kept, rather than replaced.

This points to an interesting practice given that the aesthetic quality of the bag, such as we understand it, is clearly affected by the obvious repair. Still, despite this, the bilum has been kept, and re-woven, instead of being discarded and replaced.

20" wide





Highlands

73.

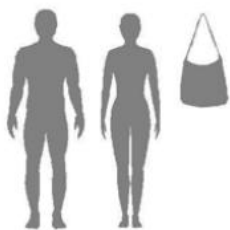
ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

This medium sized man's bag seems to have once been destined to become a magician's bag.

Interestingly, the immature, sparse panel seems directly related to the young, immature looking bones attached upon it.

Once again, if one considers the representative nature of the bilum, it would seem plausible that this bag would have belonged to a fledgling magician, who adorned it with equally young, or small power objects.

14" panel





West New Guinea

74.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

This man's bilum that has been decorated with a row of yellow orchid stem weaving on the front lip.

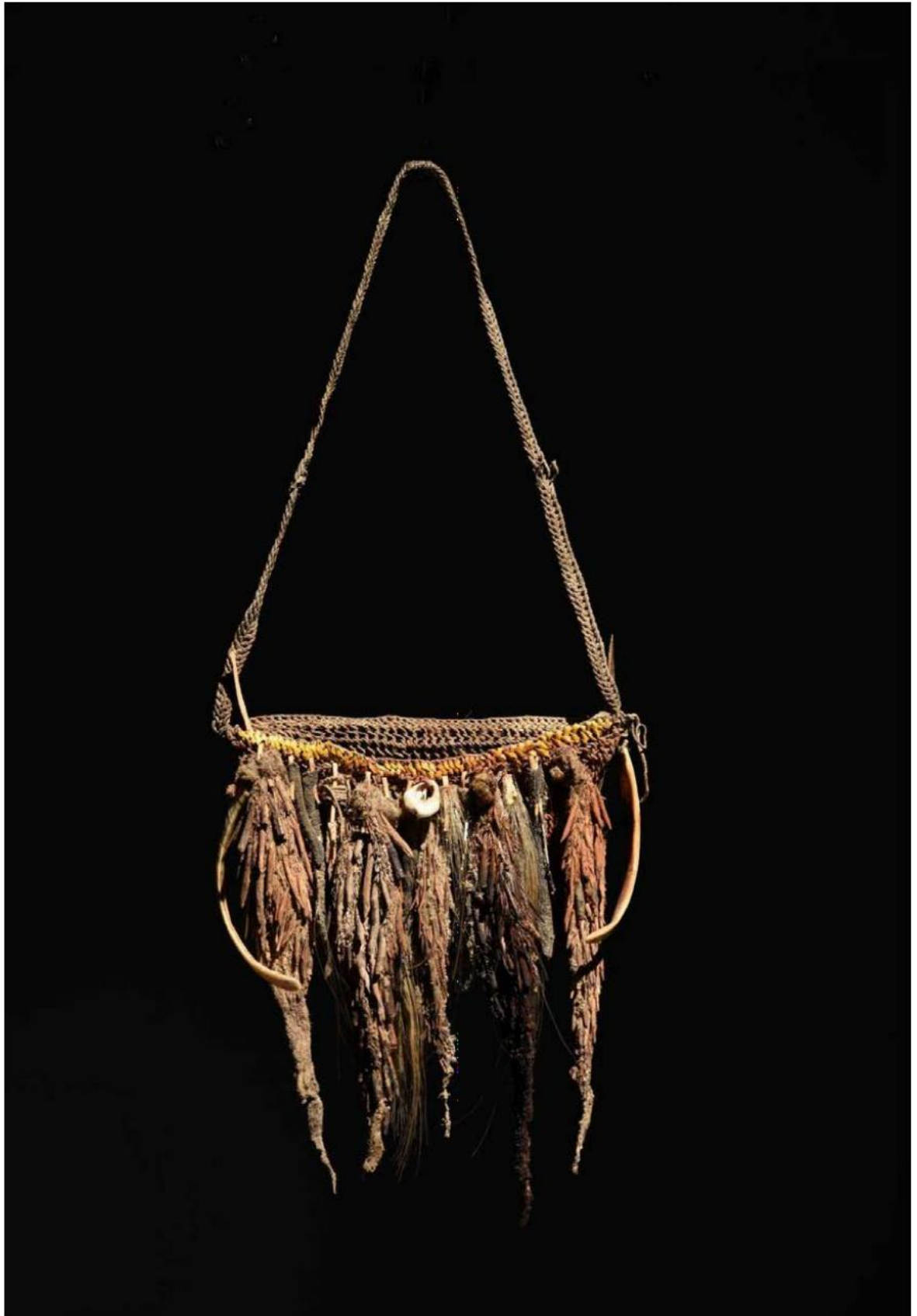
Further adorned with a pair of young boar tusks and a row of butterfly pupae, both signs of youth and transformation, it would seem evident that this bag would have belonged to a young initiate.

9" wide

Published:

New Guinea Highlands
Art of the Jolika Collection
Pg 567, Illus 17.22 (a)





West New Guinea

75.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

ex K. Knol., NL

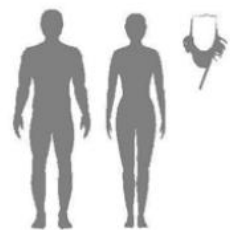
Worn only by men and called *benapa*, the adornment was worn, bandolier style, around the neck and a single shoulder. Apparently the shoulder on which it was worn declared a state of war or peace.

According to published information, the bone signified erect male genitalia.

19"

Published:

New Guinea Highlands
Art of the Jolika Collection
Pg 595, Illus 17.47





Highlands

76.

ex Jolika Collection, Rye, NY

This amulet bag has tight, even weaving decorated by four boar tusks and a central floral like element made of cowrie shells.

This bag is especially interesting in the collection, given that it still contains it's original magic elements within.

5" panel







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