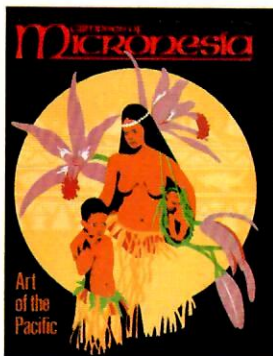
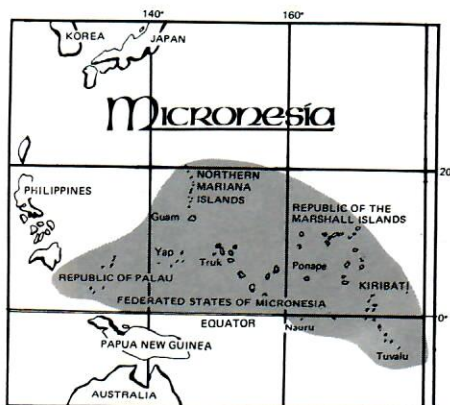
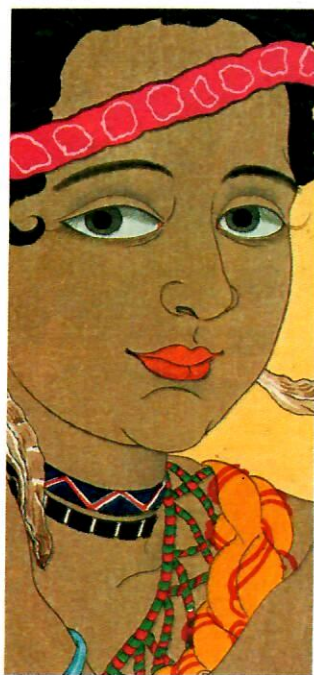


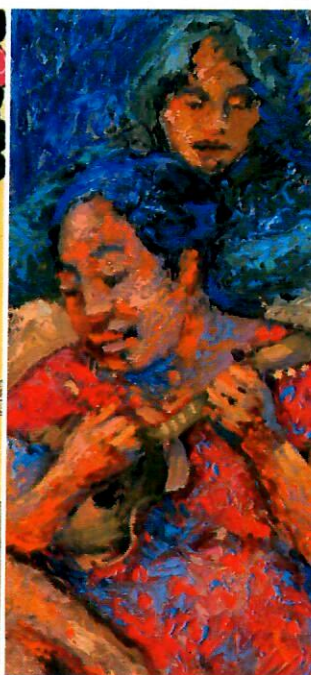
# contents



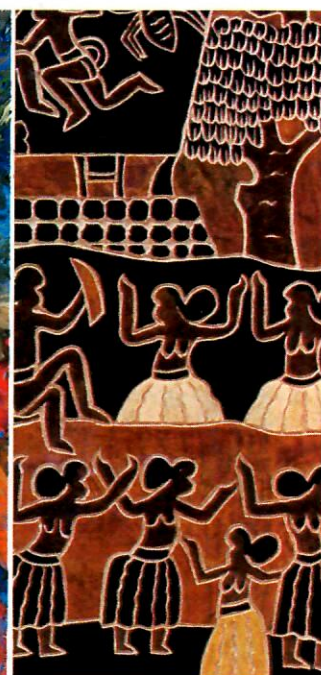
Cover:  
"Mind's Eye of Micronesia,"  
a 20"x 30"  
acrylic painting  
by Larry Bush.



Pg.34



Pg.46



Pg.68

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INSIDE MICRONESIA	7
CONTRIBUTORS	9
ISLAND VIEWS	60

<b>GUAM'S AD INVENTORS</b> By Mike Malone	12
<b>SOUTH SEAS CINEMA</b> By E. Rampell	22
<b>PAUL JACOULET: PORTRAITS OF PARADISE</b> By Richard Miles	34
<b>PAUL JACOULET: A CATALOGUE</b> By Ronn Ronck	41
<b>BALAZS SZABO: PAINTING LIFE'S EXPERIENCES</b> By Mike Malone	46
<b>GUAM'S ART APOSTOLATE</b> By Mike Malone	54
<b>LIVING ART: PALAU'S STORYTELLERS</b> By Bill Lockhart	68
<b>LIVING ARCHAEOLOGY: THE POTTERS OF ATULU</b> By William L. Hernandez	74
<b>NEPAL: TREKKING INTO THE PAST</b> By Scott Josiah	80

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# LIVING ART

## Palau's Story Tellers

story and photos  
by Bill Lockhart

Carving in wood, cutting into a virgin surface with stories of the past makes time a meaningless concept. Palau's storyboards today are an accumulation of the changes and different directions of their 50-year history. They have evolved from the folk stories that were portrayed as integral parts of the decorations of the traditional *bai*, the men's meeting houses.

Prior to a written language, the stories from Palau's rich cultural heritage were painted and carved on the end gables and interior beams of the *bai*. The stories told legends, stories of the past, stories with a moral, hero stories, recorded events and taught social and moral behavior, often in seemingly earthy and humorous ways. One legend tells of a woman who ate too much and became a giant; she was killed so that the villagers would not starve, and when she fell, her body became the Palau Islands. The "Last War" in which the Spanish intervened and stopped the warfare between the villages was one of the events recorded. Another story tells of how a man learned of his wife's unfaithfulness and how he tricked the guilty man into betraying himself, thus leading to the culprit's death.

In the early 1930's Hisakatsu Hijikata, a Japanese folklorist and artist, taught young men of Palau to produce the first of the present-day storyboards. Hijikata selected approximately 30 of the stories from the *bai* and insisted that these be portrayed in traditional ways. This resulted in very little individual expression by the artists. The major change in the format was in the reduction of the stories from the 15 to 30-foot length of the beams to the shortened storyboards. Due to the reduction in size only selected events and symbols could be used to present the story. Even on the *bai* beams, the stories were scenarios which came to life through the skill of the

"story teller" who interpreted and filled in the story.

On the beams and gables of the *bai* and in the early storyboards, the only carving was a thin outline around the highly simplified and stylized figures and objects. These were painted with limited, earthy colors made from clays and charcoal mixed with sumac oil; the background was painted a lime-white which tended to unify the total composition. Designs were uncrowded and used little overlapping.

During the late 1940's some of the boards were painted in a wide range of bright commercial colors. The designs became slightly more complicated with decorative and repeated patterns appearing on objects and in the background. Individual styles and expression began to appear.

Next, relief carving began to replace the thin outlines with less importance being placed on painted surfaces. The natural color of the wood was enriched with shoe polish. Carving on the storyboards may have moved in this direction since some of the artists had executed *dilukai* (three-dimensional figures) prior to producing storyboards. The designs tended to become more complex with increased overlapping and pattern. Additional figures and objects which were not necessary to the story began appearing. Several different directions became apparent; greater individual expressions in technique and design were evident.

Over the years some variety was reflected in the shape and execution of the board. At first all boards were rectangular in shape, following the horizontal format of the beams of the *bai*. Some carvers began using a vertical format, while others shaped the boards to represent fish, turtles or other animal forms. Storyboards appeared on the natural

shape of the wood and on three-dimensional roots and stumps. Stories were carved on table-tops, doors and other functional objects. Two or more stories might be told on one board, while some had a different story on each side of the board.

Perhaps the best way to understand the history of the storyboards is to study the photographs of a few examples of present-day work. The obvious change is from the painted boards to the carved boards which are produced by the majority of the artists today. However, the most important change may be the strong increase in individual expression as evidenced by the differences in design and technique. While some artists sign their work, the work of many artists is so unique that no signature is needed for identification.

Faustina Rehuher, head of the Belau National Museum, and her staff has provided positive leadership to promote the artists and quality art production, as well as encourage the use of different stories. While many of the carvers have favorite stories, most of them will produce any story which a customer requests. Some artists take pride in using stories which others do not use.

Today there may be more artists producing quality storyboards, either full-time or part-time, than at any other period during their 50-year history. While the majority of the boards are produced for economic reasons, they serve as an important means of preserving the culture and heritage of Palauan people.

With a greater number of artists of all ages carving, it is normal to expect the quality of the storyboards to increase even more in the future. In their relatively short history, the storyboards have become a unique art form in today's world. Despite many outside influences, they have remained uniquely Palauan.

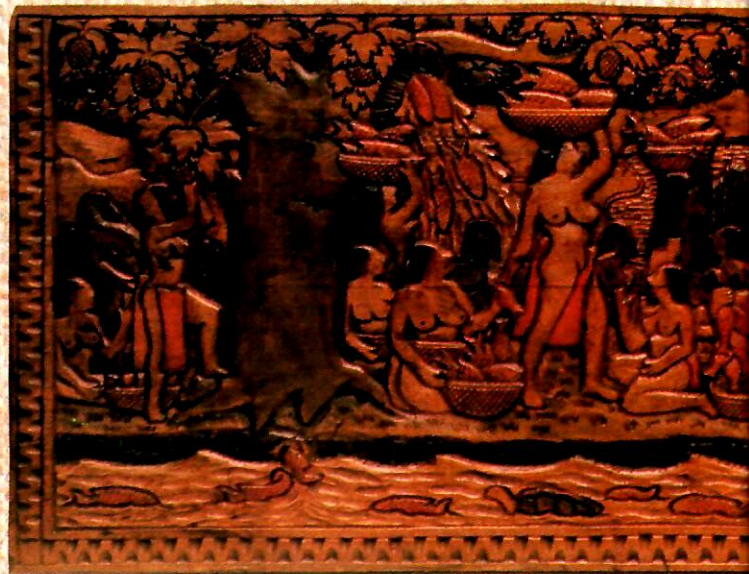
*Maech Ruluked has been working with wood since he was 14 years old. He was trained as a carpenter by the Japanese prior to World War II and has been carving storyboards for six years. A self taught carver, he works mainly with mahogany.*  
Photo by Mitchell P. Warner.

*Mengidabrutkoel* by Skilang Rrull, approximately 19" x 16"  
 Skilang started carving in the mid 1940's and was one of the last artists to paint his boards with earthy colors made from clay. His board *Mengidabrutkoel* (The Story of the First Natural Childbirth), was completed just prior to his death in December 1982, at the age of 72. In his design he used a more traditional format in his treatment of figures and objects. While the design seems slightly crowded, there is a minimum of overlapping figures. The thin carved outlines, painted white, produce an overall pattern that tends to unify the design. ●



Storyboard carver  
 Ngirkiklang Ngirchemuul  
 tells a story from a beam of the *bai*  
 in Airai village for students  
 ● enrolled in a course of the  
 Belau National Museum

*Ngibtal*, by Sikitong Beltau, approximately 16" x 34".  
 Sikitong is one of the younger generation of storyboard artists, in his early thirties, but involved with carving storyboards over a 16 year period. His Board, *Ngibtal* (The Breadfruit Tree), illustrates his use of the combination of carving and limited color. Here he uses black, brown and red softened by the finishing layer of shoe polish. ●



*Demei and the Crocodile*, by Ngiraibuuch Skedong,  
approximately 13" x 36".

Ngiraibuuch achieves a highly decorative quality in his work by combining bright commercial paints with relief carving. The boards, the symbols and events tell the story, but these appear almost secondary to the overall pattern.

The *bai* becomes an important part of the total design. The natural color of the wood in the flat relief carving emphasizes the bright colors used for the figures and objects. Ngiraibuuch uses a precise and disciplined approach to the design and to his work. He was one of the Hijikata's students. ●



*Ngkeklaui*, by Zacharias Omengebar,  
approximately 20" high.

Zacharias is in his early thirties and has been executing storyboards half of his life. He says he learned to carve from Ngirachesimer and Baris. His storyboard *Ngkeklaui* (The Unfaithful Wife), is a three-dimensional carving on a stump.

The design is highly complex with extensive overlapping and a background filled with figures and patterned objects.

Zacharias is a skilled craftsman who prefers to carve tables, often combining two stories on the surface. ●

