



CALL OF THE WILD

THOMAS MURRAY

'Ancestors of the Lake: Art of Lake Sentani and Humboldt Bay', just ended at The Menil Collection in Houston, featured New Guinean art and artefacts acquired during a pioneering period of research and collecting by the Swiss explorer and ethnologist Paul Wirz and the French adventurer, art dealer and author Jacques Viot.

THE MENIL COLLECTION IN HOUSTON is a jewel of a museum, worth a visit whenever one has the pleasure to be in Texas. Located in a residential area, the grounds have more of the feeling of a park or an Ivy League campus with the primary Renzo Piano designed building housing stunning works of art assembled by John and Dominique de Menil over a good part of the 20th century. These range from themes of classical Mediterranean archaeology, as in their early Cycladic and Anatolian idols, to Surrealist paintings, both with marvellous abstractions of the human form that permit

them to fit so well together. Subtle and sublime too are the African, Oceanic and American Northwest Coast works of art, newly reinstalled by *wunderkind* curator Kristina van Dyke. For me the recent exhibition 'Ancestors of the Lake: Art of Lake Sentani and Humboldt Bay, New Guinea' served as an irresistible magnet in its own right. What we are talking about here is perhaps the greatest assembly of Lake Sentani material culture seen since the legendary 1959 Museum of Primitive Art exhibition in New York. I missed that last one, being only seven years old and on the wrong coast,

but I would not make the same mistake twice! How could I not respond to this 'call of the wild', in light of just how exceptionally rare are the works of art and how fascinating the culture of this remote area of Indonesian New Guinea ... and, dare I say, the appeal of the tales of great adversity overcome by explorers such as Paul Wirtz and Jacques Viot, who first ventured there in the 1920s to bring these artefacts back. They managed to collect and photograph a society soon to be transformed by tireless missionaries, together with circumstances and events taking place far away in Europe and Japan. But at the moment of their independent arrival, it was still possible to acquire bark cloth paintings, *maro*, and old ancestor figures (some of which were retrieved from the lake bottom using diving gear). The organic nature of their art forms was recognised as coming from a people living in a 'pure state'. The famous Parisian gallerist Pierre Loeb championed the affinities between Surrealism, the curvilinear abstraction of Humboldt Bay and Sentani *maros*, and the Minimalism of Sentani sculpture in exhibitions beginning in the 1930s. Man Ray was drawn to them as subjects for his photography and patrons of Surrealism like the Menils bought pieces fresh from the Viot

expeditions, forming one of the larger holdings in the world of these all too scarce items. So it made sense that Virginia-Lee Webb, formerly at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York and now an independent scholar-curator, having come up with the idea to revisit this important yet esoteric theme, would begin her worldwide quest for great objects in Houston, and from there reach out for pieces that include loans from several noteworthy private collections, as well as institutions such as the de Young in San Francisco, Quai Branly in Paris, the MMA, and to the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra for the greatest of all, known as 'Double Figure of a House Post'. Although this show has just closed, it is memorialised in a must-buy catalogue filled with essays and vintage photos, including the work of Man Ray, not to mention great visuals of the New Guinean masterpieces themselves! For me a completely unexpected and totally overwhelming additional delight was the magnificent exhibition in the gallery space just next to 'Ancestors'. Entitled 'Up-Side Down', it was an examination of the Inuit shamanic aesthetic, including dozens of the finest surreal Eskimo masks and excavated artefacts, my favourite among them the Okvik charms which resemble

1 'Ancestors of the Lake' at The Menil Collection
 2 Loin cloth (*kain kaioo*), New Guinea, early 20th century. Painted tapa cloth, 0.67 x 0.79m (2'2½" x 2'7"). Menil Collection, Houston, CA 3204
 3 Barkcloth (*maro*), New Guinea, early 20th century. Painted tapa cloth, 0.73 x 1.52m (2'5" x 5'0"). Menil Collection, Houston, CA 3203
 4 Woman's grave with *maro* on display, New Guinea, early 20th century. Silver gelatin print by Paul Wirz. © Dadi Wirz and Museum der Kulturen Basel. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Photographic Study Collection, Department of the Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, PSC 2000.2.14, Art Resource, NY

monumental Easter Island figures in form but are made in small scale of tooth ivory and at 2,000 years old are some of the earliest New World artefacts. This was the final exhibition curated by the Menils' son-in-law, the late Dr Edmund Carpenter, a famous anthropologist. He created an all-white space to remind viewers of the austerity of the Great North, with background sounds of birds and breaking ice floes recorded on site to set the ambience. Also not to be missed are nearby structures like the non-denominational Rothko Chapel with deeply meditative oversized purplish canvases,

and a profound Byzantine Chapel featuring the 13th century Christ Pantocrator dome fresco, the only example of its type in the US, gifted by the Menils to the Church of Cyprus. A more sensitive and thought provoking gift to the community can hardly be imagined!

ANCESTORS OF THE LAKE: ART OF LAKE SENTANI AND HUMBOLDT BAY, NEW GUINEA
 The Menil Collection
 1515 Sul Ross, Houston, Texas
 6 May – 28 August 2011