

Intrepid Voyages

RETRACING A PIONEERING JOURNEY FROM
THE 1920S INTO THE HEART OF MELANESIA.

Text and Photos: MICHELE WESTMORLAND AND KAREN HUNTT

Some say exploration is dead. Indigenous culture? There's nothing left. With most of the world trod upon and charted, and most indigenous cultures clad in western-style t-shirts and shorts, many people feel that the glory days of true exploration are over. But despite the fact that scaling Mount Everest has become commonplace, and more and more 'adventure tourists' seek out remote areas and tribal groups, we beg to differ that 'there's nothing left.' Exploration is alive and well – how exciting it was to hear recently of a forest of unidentified creatures in the mountainous area of West Papua! – but it has also changed. Can we 're-discover' a culture that has endured tremendous change since it was first contacted by outsiders? Can we and do we have a responsibility to re-evaluate past explorations? These and other questions were foremost in our minds as we set off a year ago on an expedition through the heart of Melanesia.

The inspiration for this project came to Michele some 12 years ago when a dying family friend gave her a dusty book, written in the 1930s by the American portrait artist Caroline Mytinger, describing an unusual and unique journey. Nearly 80 years ago, Caroline and her childhood friend Margaret Warner, set out by freighter from San Francisco with little more than US\$400 and a tin of paints. Their objective was to paint portraits of the tribal peoples of Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands before the encroachment of modern, European-style culture changed their ways of life irrevocably. Caroline had been a successful portrait painter of high society subjects in the United States, yet had always dreamed of documenting the world's native cultures. On a foggy day in March 1926, they set out on their journey, to the land of headhunters and cannibals. The two intrepid women travelled throughout the South Pacific for nearly four years. An exhibit of Caroline's work, curated by Margaret Mead, was held at the American Museum of Natural History in 1930. Later, Caroline wrote two books about her adventures: *Headhunting in the Solomon Islands*, published in 1942, and *New Guinea Headhunt*, published in 1947.

One of Caroline Mytinger's most striking portraits, 'Heera'.





We were enthralled with their journey and their spirit, and the more we learned about them and their accomplishments, the more we became convinced that we had to pick up where they left off. The first step was to find Caroline's paintings, hopefully in good condition and of a quality that would provide solid ethnographic information with value to contemporary society. Two years after we began, after months of investigative work, we found 23 oils at the Phoebe Hearst Museum of Anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley. With the premise that there has been considerable impact in traditional practices, we wanted to travel to the areas where Caroline painted to document just what type of changes have occurred and to witness what has been retained and lost.

Our journey would eventually take us over 3,200 kilometres by sea throughout the remote islands and coastal areas of the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea. But we began in Rabaul, on New Britain Island where we hoped to find some trace of the practice of headbinding. A local contact introduced a gentleman who was one of the few living people exhibiting the shaped head. Jacob Virio, age 63, explained that through the influence of the missionaries, the practice was stopped sometime during the 1960s. Babies' heads were bound from two days after birth to the time they began walking. Breadfruit tree bark was pounded into the shape they desired, then dried and placed on the baby's head. The child only wore the 'cast' during the daytime, and there was no adverse affect to the brain. The purpose was to identify the tribe and as a sign of beauty. As one of the last living representatives from his tribe, Jacob seemed to finally show some pride in his heritage, after years of being derided, and graciously allowed us to photograph, film and record him.

Upon leaving New Britain Island, we endured a very rough 45-hour crossing to get to the Solomon Islands. Many of the old practices that involved headhunting were completely eradicated by the introduction of Christianity and white Europeans coming to the islands in search of new lands to cultivate. This included the demise of the magnificent war canoes that were used to make raids on neighbouring islands. Today, there is a resurgence, and just in the last year, 15 new war canoes were built to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the formation of the United Methodist church – a blending of old and new that we were to encounter throughout our expedition. The builders had to research old books to be able to properly design them. Much of the detail work and design done previously in mother-of-pearl now had to utilise plastic for the small inlays, due to the difficulty in obtaining the shell. The inlays consist of three repetitive patterns and represent the eyes, mouth and nose. The timber used to construct the vessel includes *goliti* for the hull, *lako* for the brace inside, and *bose* for the paddles. The separate structure of shells and cockatoo feathers attached to the bow is known as *rege*, and the two figureheads on the very tops of the bow are *qela*. Wire instead of twine is used to attach the lower figureheads called Nguzu-Nguzus. Each has a direction it must face so that the spirit can watch for any coming danger. Village women are not allowed to be in the canoes, however, we were allowed the full (and very wet) experience in Serubule, 14 metres long and carrying 18 paddlers. In the old days, if a man broke his paddle, he was unceremoniously put overboard.

Facing Page: Kaluabu Skull Cave near Hiliwae village in Milne Bay province.
Below: Caroline Mytinger painting 'Sarli and Wife'.



NEW GUINEA HEADHUNT
CAROLINE MYTINGER

WE MET OUR FIRST FULLY TATTOOED WOMAN ALONG THIS COAST, IN THE VILLAGE OF SIUKOKOILO. WE HAD THE PRINT OF 'SARLI AND WIFE' WITH US, AND WHEN THE OLD WOMAN EMERGED FROM HER HUT, REPLETE IN TRADITIONAL GRASS SKIRT, WE BOTH STOPPED IN OUR TRACKS.

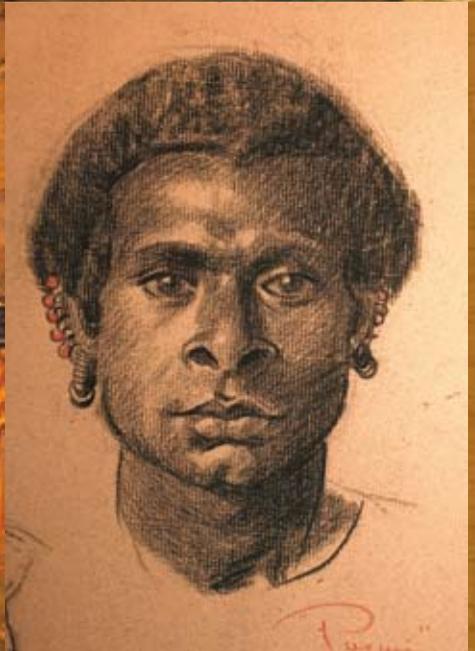
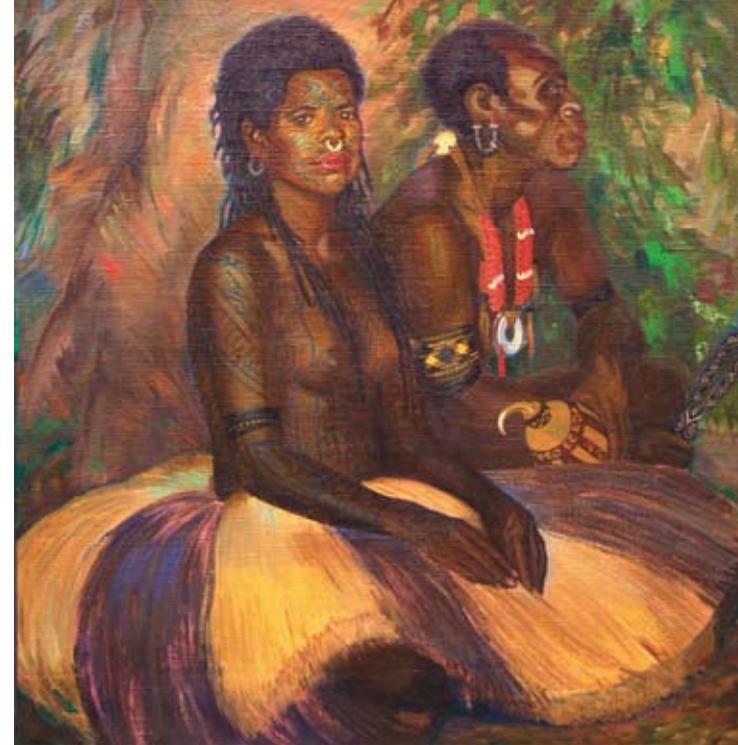
After two weeks in the Solomons, we made another 40-hour-plus crossing to the remote island of Yela, also known as Rossel Island, the easternmost landfall in Papua New Guinea. We arrived under a shroud of clouds and anchored within the Rossel Lagoon that is formed by the reef, approximately 65 kilometres in length. This is the rainiest area of the island chain and therefore the greenest. Unlike the 'fierce natives' described in Caroline's books, the people welcomed us warmly. We were taken by surprise to find yet another descendant of a painting, the 'Yela Fisherman,' Caroline's portrait from the area. After less than three weeks we had already discovered three descendants of Caroline's paintings, and we'd seen how people held on to the old ways, mixed them into their new Christian belief systems, or hid them away and practiced them in secret. We were also amazed to realise how much movement there was on these open waters. Historically, locals travelled hundreds of kilometres in small, hand-built vessels, and they still do today.

On the island of Panapompom we searched for information on the painting of 'Iomai,' the sea canoe carver. There we made 'talk talk' with Onismo in the village of Galowesan (also known as Howaguma) about a man whose grandfather may have been brothers with Iomai. We discussed the meaning of the facial markings on Iomai and related body décor. Later that morning, we hiked back to the south side to discover a sea canoe in the process of construction. The residents of Panapompom are known regionally as master sea canoe builders, and we were able to learn many details about the building process. Technical and spiritual knowledge is always passed down only from the mother's brother to the nephew. But the biggest kick we got was the next day when the two of us got to ride in one of the 'canoes.' They are really more like outriggers, and our film crew in a nearby skiff was not able to keep up with us. These canoes are the established mode of transportation for the islands, and people and cargo travel great distances in them.

We motored to Hoia Bay at Tawali on the East Cape peninsula above Alotau where we investigated two skulls caves near Hiliwao village. The caves are formed of calcite mineral stalactites, and each shelter hundreds of century-old skulls. Many of the skulls exhibit holes, but we don't know whether they were the actual cause of death, or were made after the skulls were placed in the cave. The locals have either lost the knowledge of the significance of these places, or they weren't talking. Or perhaps they are a group of people who have no connection to the caves any more. After the Second World War especially, groups moved from one area to another and so there's not always generational continuity.

Our route took us through a very narrow channel of the China Strait where the depth changed from 150 metres to less than five metres in a matter of minutes. We spent nine hours in rougher seas than we had yet encountered, but our iron vessel with her big 350 twin reverse gear boxes and 300-horsepower Cummins diesel engines handled the churning with confidence. We met our first fully tattooed woman along this coast, in the village of Siukokoilo. We had the print of 'Sarli and Wife' with us, and when the old woman emerged from her hut, replete in traditional grass skirt, we both stopped in our tracks. Her tattoos were of the same design as the young wife in the painting. Noevae Salagomgom was born sometime before the Second World War. Her recollections of the tattooing were translated through her relative since she only spoke *tok ples*, her clan language. The art of tattooing is *di pinis*, which in pidgin means it's over, gone, finished. We were able to locate three more women along this coast with the same pattern of full body tattooing, all extremely elderly and the last of their kind.

Once we reached Port Moresby, we flew across the island to spend three nights in Kofure village where we knew the art of facial tattooing was still practiced as a coming-of-age ritual. At this point, Karen was considering getting a traditional tattoo, or *boare* ('bwa-ray'). Ana, the woman who does the tattooing in the village (and also the headman's wife), drew several designs. We knew it would involve sago palm thorns and charcoal scraped from the bark of a nearby burnt tree trunk, but we didn't know much else. Karen was intent on doing this and so volunteered to go first. She lay on her stomach in an open-air thatched roof and the procedure began. No anaesthetic, no antiseptic. Ana had to make three passes over the same areas with



Clockwise from Top Left: 'Sarli and Wife'; one of the last women to have body tattooing (like Sarli's wife) from the southeast coast of Papua New Guinea; 'Iomai', the sea canoe carver; a charcoal sketch by Caroline Mytinger; 'Marovo Lagoon Family' by Caroline Mytinger; a newly built war canoe in the Solomon Islands.



her sago thorns. The procedure took much longer than expected, lasting three hours, and Karen was drenched in perspiration. The design ended up a bit bigger than originally envisioned but it is really beautiful. And yes, it was painful. She could fully appreciate what the local women have endured getting a full facial tattoo, though it is a dying tradition. The younger women are not getting the tattoos any more, and it is not expected of them.

After flying back to Port Moresby, we visited the stilt village of Hanuabada and were amazed again to meet descendants of subjects from two more of Caroline's paintings. The village is a world unto itself, built out over the water on rickety pilings. We met Desmond, the grandson of Ahuia, the Motuan man wearing the striking headdress in 'Heera,' our project's signature emblem. He and Ahuia's great granddaughter, Gertrude, spoke at length of what they could remember about the man who was a messenger for then Governor Sir Hubert Murray. Ahuia was Koitabun, and descended from a long line of sorcerers, according to Desmond.

In that same village, we documented a large and colourful festival honoring the silver jubilee of Father Michael Igo, a Catholic priest ordained by Pope John Paul II and serving in Hanuabada. Father Igo had served in other parts of Papua New Guinea, and dancers from all of those areas had gathered to celebrate in traditional dress along with the standard Catholic mass ritual. The event was a living example of how the old and new beliefs in this land are often celebrated together, something we encountered throughout our journey in the 'Land of the Unexpected.'

The most gratifying result of our expedition so far has been the way the local people have started to reach back and rekindle their own traditions. We are happy that we could be a part of this in a tangible way. For example, we commissioned a headdress based on the magnificent piece in 'Heera.' We spent a morning sitting on a bare wooden floor with Siaka Heni in his shanty on a busy dirt street in the village, surrounded by his family members and friends. He had fasted the night before in order to work on the headdress. We watched him put the finishing touches on the headdress, and when he finally placed it on his head, after painting his face, it seemed we were viewing a living rendition of the painting we had looked at for so long. It was a fitting ending to our long project. We donated the headdress to the National Museum at a reception at the US ambassador's residence on Paga Hill. Siaka himself was there, modelling his work of art. ■

**FATHER IGO
HAD SERVED IN
OTHER PARTS
OF PAPUA
NEW GUINEA,
AND DANCERS
FROM ALL
OF THOSE
AREAS HAD
GATHERED TO
CELEBRATE IN
TRADITIONAL
DRESS ALONG
WITH THE
STANDARD
CATHOLIC
MASS RITUAL.**

Left: A *sing-sing* in Kofure village, Oro province.
Right: Building a canoe on South Panapompom.



MICHELE WESTMORLAND is a photographer who has created a vast and varied library of imagery from around the world. Her skills in underwater photography have been recognised by a large community of divers and non-divers alike. Her topside photography includes the wildlife, landscape, and culture of exotic locations. She's been published in numerous national and international publications. For more on Michele's work, visit www.westmorlandphoto.com.

KAREN HUNTT is a freelance photographer and photo editor. She is the former managing photo editor at Corbis Corporation, and she ran the stills photo department at National Geographic's TV Division, among other work for the Society. She has conducted photo editing and consulting work for entities such as *US News and World Report*, the US Information Agency, and numerous design firms, Internet companies and publications. Her travels have taken her to Canada, the Caribbean, Europe, Mexico, Morocco and Turkey. To learn more about Karen, visit www.karenhuntt.com.