

Bis Pole Background Information

Bis poles are a striking form of Asmat art and are central to one of their most important cultural ceremonies. According to Asmat tradition, death is never natural or accidental but is always caused by an enemy and must be avenged. After a number of deaths occur in a community, a bis feast is held to commemorate the dead, to send their spirits off in a fitting way to the spirit world, and to promise retaliation. In the past, retaliation was accomplished through violence (usually headhunting). Today, however, the Asmat no longer engage in warfare, and a bis feast is only ceremonial.

Reaching heights of up to 20', bis poles are created by male carvers, who are important figures in the Asmat community. A bis pole is created in one piece, carved from an inverted mangrove tree. All of the tree's roots except one are cut off; the remaining root makes the dramatic projection at the top of the pole and is the most distinctive feature of the art form. Sometimes red, black, and white pigments - the traditional colors of Asmat art - are added to areas of the pole.

A bis pole is carefully and artfully carved, with especially intricate, lace-like designs in the projection, (called the *cemen*). Some poles include three sections - the top projection, which includes symbols representing ongoing life and vitality; the middle section, which contains carved figures representing specific ancestors; and the bottom section, called the *canoe*. This section depicts an actual canoe or another symbol that represents the transporting of the spirits of the dead to the spirit world. The base is carved to a point, which is inserted into the ground when the pole is erected outside the village men's house as part of the feast event. The pole usually faces a river, since rivers lead to the sea and the spirit world is thought to occupy a place beyond the sea.

While the bis pole is very much connected with death, it is also symbolic of life. Not only does the projection represent power and fertility, the ancestor figures serve to change the status of the deceased from a dead relative to an ancestor - in other words, to a being that continues to exist. And although a great deal of artistic effort goes into creating a bis pole, when the bis feast is over, the pole is carried out to the sago palm grove, where it is left to decay. The sago palm is the primary food source for the Asmat. As the bis pole, with all its imbued ancestral strength, returns to the ground, it nourishes the sago palms and provides ongoing spiritual and physical nourishment to the still-living Asmat descendants who have not yet made that final journey beyond the sea.



Asmat Peoples, Papua, Province of Indonesia (Formerly Irian Jaya), *Bis Poles, Bis Pole with double Cemen, and Jo Sise*, late 20th century. Wood with red, black, and white pigments, and some fiber additions. Crocker Art Museum, gift of Loet Vanderveen Collection.



Bis Poles and Totem Poles - A comparison is natural. Totem poles are striking Native American sculptures that are also carved by skilled craftsmen from large trees. Other similarities between the two art forms are the use of symbols, the depiction of human beings, the stacking of images, and the ceremonial nature of their erection and use. Both are usually left to decay after use, and both are still made today. However, there are also important differences. Totem poles are usually much taller, with some reaching heights over 150'. Bis poles are always created in response to death, but totem poles have a variety of functions; some honor ancestors, but others are instruments of storytelling or celebrating beliefs, historical markers, or status symbols. Totem poles are usually carved on the surface only, without the negative spaces created by the more elaborate Asmat carving, and they are often colored with bright pigments. Their human representations are often faces rather than whole bodies, and they very often include animals. While totem poles lack the dramatic top projection characteristic of the bis pole, they can include other projections, such as wings or another animal body part. Despite their differences, though, both bis poles and totem poles provide important information about their cultures.

For a 6th-8th grade lesson using Bis Poles, please see Towers of Power.