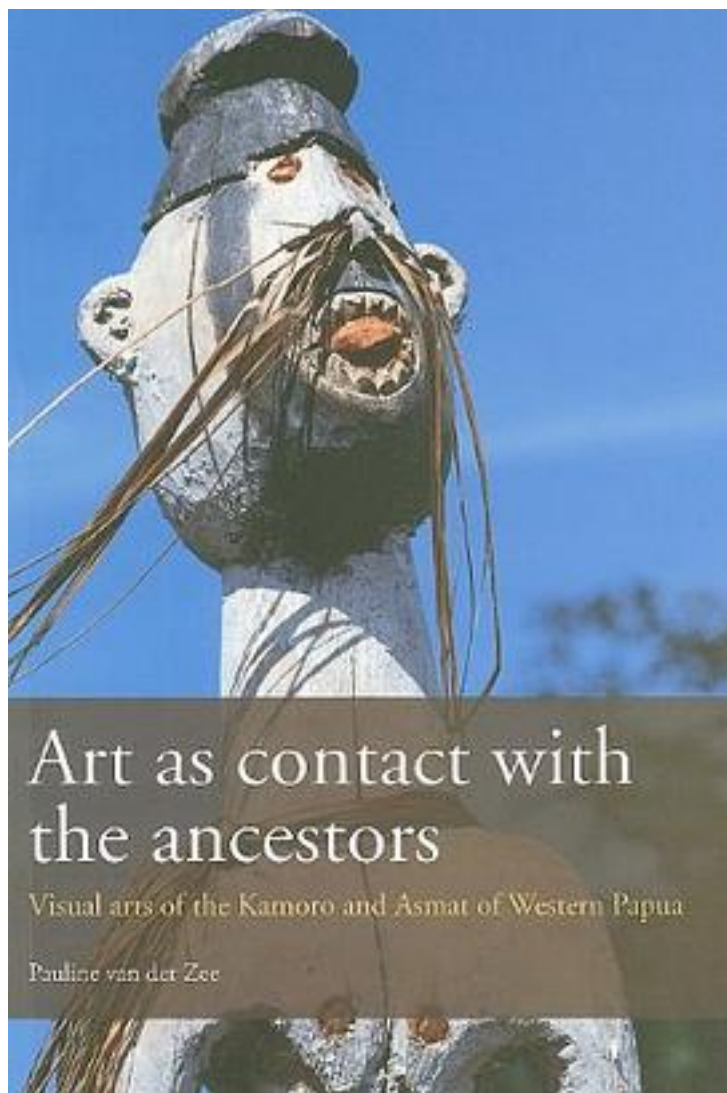


Art as Contact with the Ancestors



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Questions about meanings of non-western art keep intriguing western art observers. There are no ready-made and unambiguous answers to be given -- every interpretation is a partial one. For the artist himself interpretation is not always an issue, he follows the traditions of his ancestors. In some cases meanings belong to culturally concealed knowledge, not to be shared with outsiders. Yet sometimes a bit of this knowledge is disclosed. Adriaan Gerbrands (1967), drawing on the work of Ref. Gerard Zegwaard, a profound scholar of Asmat culture, and on his own extensive fieldwork, discovered that many Asmat designs can be interpreted as symbols of headhunting ideology. Gerbrands focuses on what he calls the headhunting-nexus; a nexus of related forms which can all be connected to headhunting practices and their meaning in the given cultural context. In fact many more interpretations are possible... This is a recent comparative research focusing on related yet different artistic expressions of the Asmat and the neighbouring Kamoro. The analysis is based on an investigation of the Asmat and Kamoro collections at the Tropenmuseum Amsterdam. The approach taken here emphasises relationships between art, rituals and mythology. Artifacts perform in rituals. These rituals, according to native beliefs, were introduced by mythical heroes. Combining cultural information embedded in myths and rituals with an investigation of various design elements and comparing Asmat and Kamoro data, results in innovative interpretations resonating arts ambiguity.

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