

Study: New Guinea art older than thought

October 12 2005

When San Francisco's de Young Museum reopens Saturday, it will debut the world's largest collection of New Guinea art -- some pieces 100 generations old.

Gregory Hodgins and A.J. Timothy Jull of the University of Arizona radiocarbon dated some of the collection that New York-based entrepreneur John Friede and his wife, Marcia, are giving the de Young Museum.

Two years ago, Friede asked UA scientists to date some collection pieces at the university's National Science Foundation-Arizona Accelerator Mass Spectrometry facility in Tucson.

Results of the dating project are preliminary, but the findings have stunned museum curators and anthropologists.

The scientists' findings challenge previous assumptions that such objects are inherently ephemeral, perhaps surviving only a few generations.

Of the objects dated, 78 contain wood that pre-dates the 18th century and 33 contain wood from before 1670.

"A small percentage of this collection are pieces that are very old -- 600, 700, 800 years and older," Hodgins said.

The oldest mask in the collection is dated at between 660 and 860, implying a few of the objects were in use for more than 50 generations

-- and perhaps up to 100 generations.

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Citation: Study: New Guinea art older than thought (2005, October 12) retrieved 23 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2005-10-guinea-art-older-thought.html>

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