Located just north of Australia, the independent country of Papua New Guinea (PNG) occupies the eastern half of New Guinea, the second largest island in the world. This land mass with its multiple adjacent islands is home to over six million people. The country hosts the most linguistically diverse population in the world, with over 700 indigenous languages being spoken. PNG's geography features a wide variety of environments from vast river systems, swamps, grasslands, and mountainous areas, to volcanic islands and tropical rain forests, all of which contribute to the physical and cultural isolation of the people. This has resulted in a wide variety of art styles.

PNG gained its independence from Australia in 1975. This historic event also marked the explosion of the contemporary art movement, through which artists explored the visual interpretation of nationalism. Artists began to formulate a new national identity through their art, illustrating what it meant to be a
Although the atmosphere and national spirit were sympathetic, the first artists needed guidance and a source of foreign art supplies to hone their skills and create their initial works. Several people were instrumental in supporting and nurturing the fledgling contemporary art movement.

Three master artists, Timothy Akis, Jakupa Ako, and Mathias Kauage emerged at this time and had a profound effect upon Papua New Guinean contemporary art development. Like many of the first artists, all three were informally trained and had prior occupations as laborers or agriculturalists. They drew their inspiration from their indigenous cultures and showed younger artists that customary designs and subject matter could be incorporated into contemporary art forms.

Georgina Beier, an accomplished English artist and art promoter, mentored and sponsored Timothy Akis, Mathias Kauage, and Ruki Fame through the Centre for New Guinea Studies. In 1969 she organized Timothy Akis’ first exhibition. This was effectively the first exhibition of contemporary Papua New Guinean art and the catalyst for the art career of Mathias Kauage.

Kauage was one of the best known contemporary PNG artists. He trained several clan and family members to draw and paint, forming a new school of contemporary art that focused upon social commentary and PNG modernities. The work of his wife, Elisabet Kauage, is featured in the “New Art Forms / New Artists” section of the exhibit.

Beier was also pivotal to Ruki Fame’s career; introducing him to art welding and metal sculpting. His large public art pieces introduced contemporary art to the wider community and inspired Benny Moore and Gickmai Kundun to pursue sculpture at the National Art School.

Award winning artist, Jakupa Ako was mentored by Tom Craig, head of the Expressive Arts Department at the Goroka Teachers’ College in the Eastern Highlands. On the other side of the island, Simon Novek worked with art advisor; Helen Dennett, to translate customary Kamot clan carving and painting designs into commercial paintings.

PNG contemporary art production in the 1970’s and 80’s was unprecedented. Both the Centre for New Guinea
new art forms / new artists 1990-2007

with the 1990 merger of the NAS into the university of papua new guinea, there was a marked decline of artistic productivity and the end of assistance for new artists without a formal educational background. the nurturing artist colony atmosphere has become a thing of the past. artists still work together but they now have to promote themselves through new art forms and self-promotion.

larry santana is an example of a “new artist.” he specifically pursued an art-related degree in graphics from goroka technical college. after working for a commercial firm, he formed his own business promoting his graphic and mural painting skills. his large realist paintings and drawings are beautifully rendered social commentaries derived from life experiences.

more women artists are starting to appear on the art scene. even though the social restrictions have not relaxed, women artists are better educated and more prepared to enter the art market. elisabet kauage worked with her husband and occasionally sold a painting, but she did not fully enter the market until after his death. jane wena, on the other hand, is an employed artist who fully participates in the promotion and sale of her art. she is a graphic designer for the post courier newspaper and an accomplished artist whose large scale paintings encompass the ideals of nationalism.

waki wailiki and albert susuve have embraced new art forms based on customary designs and stories. wailiki’s sand paintings use ground pigments found in the local environment rather than expensive imported paints, while susuve uses acrylic paints to transform carving motifs into appealing contemporary paintings. both artists are aware of the international art market and what art forms might appeal to it.

this collection presents a visual chronicle of contemporary art and social change during a pivotal time in png history. as seen in this exhibit, new forms are constantly emerging as new media, artists and the market converge.

jacquelyn lewis-harris is the director of the center of human origin and cultural diversity at the university of missouri. dr. lewis-harris received her doctorate in cultural anthropology from washington university in st. louis. she has lived and traveled extensively in the pacific, particularly in papua new guinea, and has worked in the visual arts as both an artist and a curator.
The East-West Center is an education and research organization established by the U.S. Congress in 1960 to strengthen relations and understanding among the peoples and nations of Asia, the Pacific, and the United States. The Center contributes to a peaceful, prosperous, and just Asia Pacific community by serving as a vigorous hub for cooperative research, education, and dialogue on critical issues of common concern to the Asia Pacific region and the United States. Funding for the Center comes from the U.S. government, with additional support provided by private agencies, individuals, foundations, corporations, and the governments of the region.

The EWC Arts Program, part of the Office of External Affairs, for 25 years has enriched the community through concerts, lectures, symposia, and exhibitions focusing on traditional arts of the region, and by arranged cultural and educational tours by artists who are skilled in bridging cultures.

EWC Arts Team: Karen Knudsen, director; External Affairs; William Feltz, coordinator; Michael Schuster, Ph.D., curator; Eric Chang, arts program assistant; Nathan Nass, student assistant; mahalo also to Derek Ferrar, Lynne Najita, Shayne Hasegawa, Ralph Carvalho, Loraine Ikeda, Carol Matsuda, Deanna O’Brien, Floren Elman-Singh, Lucy Kamealoha, Reynold Balintec, EWC Facilities Management, Leilani Ng, Color Prints, Carolyn Yacoe, Pamela Rosi Ph.D, Gunther Hintz M.D., Roger Rose Ph.D., Wright E. Harris III, Susan Chang, Nancy Hubirt; Kennedy & Preiss Design.

Special Events
All in the EWC Gallery, admission free

Sunday, June 29, 2:00-3:30 p.m.
Opening festivities, including reception and exhibition walk-through with guest curator Jacquelyn Lewis-Harris, Ph.D.

Sunday, July 13, 2:00-3:30 p.m.
The Drum and the Mask: Time of the Tembuan
Documentary film with introduction by the filmmaker Carolyn Yacoe

Sunday, August 24, 2:00-3:30 p.m.
“The Art of Early Times: Traditional Arts in PNG”
Illustrated talk by Jerome Feldman, Ph.D., Professor of Art History at HPU

East-West Center Gallery
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These EWC Arts Programs are supported by the Hawai‘i Pacific Rim Society, Friends of Hawai‘i Charities, the Cooke Foundation, Atherton Family Foundation, Jackie Chan Foundation USA, and generous contributors to the EWC Foundation, including members of the EWC Arts ‘Ohana.

Gallery visitors interested in joining the Arts ‘Ohana can obtain the appropriate flyer in the Gallery, telephone 944-7105, or go online: http://arts.EastWestCenter.org.