

Palau Storyboards

During our stay in Guam, Tom and I had an opportunity to visit the nearby island of Palau. Palau is the western most group of islands in the Micronesian Islands located in the Pacific. It is less than 500 miles (about 2.5hrs by plane) east of the Philippines and over 4,500 miles (about 8hrs by plane) southwest of Hawaii - just about 2 hours from Guam. The entire Palau archipelago, including the capital and the only city of Koror, is 325 miles long. Despite influences from the US and other countries, Palau retains much of its indigenous culture, now incorporated in its present political and social structures, and its arts. The matrilineal system is still intact and is the foundation of the modern political system, where this concept translates in the practice of giving only men the right to hold office, and the women the sole right to vote. For the family, it means, for example, that when a young boy is to be disciplined, his mother's uncle or aunt appropriates the duty. With deep-seated traditions, Palauans continue their practice of the arts through dance, music, and storyboards.

It is hard to describe the beauty and peacefulness of this tropical island group. Palau is one of the real paradises we have seen on our travels, with white sands, crystal clear waters, and mangrove forests unaffected by tourist traps. We were fortunate to have a private tour by a local guide who regaled us with the legends and history of the region. Among our stops, we visited WWII relics, ancient stone monoliths, and local villages. One particularly interesting stop on our tour was to the local jail, where the inmates carve storyboards to earn money that supports their families. The small shop in the jail had hundreds of storyboards and it was hard to select only three to bring home!

History of Storyboards:

The people of Palau have long been both good storytellers and skillful woodcarvers. As a result, the practice of telling stories through woodcarvings is a natural extension. For centuries, Palauans etched legends and tales about love, nature, truth, betrayal, the birth of a child, and the death of a loved one... on the inside and outside of the men's meeting houses, called Bais. The current storyboards are a relatively new creation introduced by a Japanese artist and anthropologists, Hisakatsu Hijikata, who came to Palau in 1929 when the region was under Japanese administration.

The storyboards themselves are carved from several good hard woods that are grown on Palau. The first of these is ironwood, or Dort as it is known in the Palauan language. This is the preferred kind of wood as it is both strong and long lasting. If ironwood cannot be obtained or is too expensive, mangrove wood is used, or occasionally imported woods are used for storyboards.

Creating a storyboard may take some weeks to complete depending upon its size. In some cases, several people take part in the process, with one drawing the design, another carving, and a third sanding and staining the wood. When the construction of the storyboard is complete, it is painted with different colors, or treated using black and brown shoe polish for the wood to retain its natural colors.

Traditional Bai

Men's meeting house



Interior of Bai

Storyboards



SURECH & DULEI

SURECH & DULEI

This is a story that took place in a hamlet called Ngebuked in Ngaraard.

Dulei, a young man from Ngebuked, was in love with a very young, beautiful woman named Surech, who lived in Ngkeklau hamlet. Dulei, with Surech on his mind most of the time, one day told of her beauty to the chief of the village, Marra Ngebuked. Upon learning of her beauty, the chief instructed young Dulei to bring Surech for him to see. The following day, Dulei set out to Surech's village, and as usual, they went to the hills. They stayed there for seven days, as Dulei could not bring himself to relay the unfortunate turn of events to Surech. She finally conned him out of his bad mood and brought out the story. Unfortunately, Dulei had misinterpreted the chief's order. He thought that because Surech's face was so beautiful, the chief wanted her head only. When she heard the story, she pitied Dulei, as he struggled with his feelings. She assured him that she would be willing to do this sacrifice for him. She started gathering fronds of palm trees nearby for the basket, which would carry her head to the chief. On its completion, she laid her head down and asked Dulei to

hurry with the task for it was fast becoming dark and he had a long journey before him. He quickly chopped off her head, put it in the basket and returned to Ngebuked to find the chief.

On his arrival, however, it was night, and coming to the Bai where the chief would be, Dulei had to hang the basket on the limb of a nearby tree. He himself was aware of the grotesque sight he would present if he were to meet anyone. He found the chief in the Bai and thus informed him of the situation and the manner had brought Surech. The chief was so horrified with the news and shocked that he had the villagers kill Dulei for misinterpreting his order.

Some say that Dulei intentionally misunderstood the order, for he knew that if the chief were to see Surech's beauty, he would take her for his own, and poor Dulei could not bear this.

Ngemelis: The Discovery of the Egg-Laying Cycle of the Turtle

Though the shell of the turtle is prized in Palau, in ancient times the people of Palau did not know how to catch the turtle. Or know much about it.

Once there was a youth of Peleliu and a maiden of Arkabesang who fell in love with each other and decided to hold a tryst on Ngemelis Island, which lies somewhere between the two islands.

According to their promise, they met on Ngemelis on the night of the new moon. They discussed plans for their future late into the night. When the maiden awoke the next morning, she found that her skirt had disappeared. She searched over the whole island with the aid of her lover, but she could not find the skirt. Alongside the place where she had been sleeping, however, could be seen the marks that the turtle's flipper made in the sand during the night. The maiden was finally forced into gathering leaves of the coconut palms for another skirt. After remaking the garb, she bid farewell to her lover with the promise of meeting on the island again during the full moon.

On the appointed evening, the youth was on the island to await the arrival of the maiden. She had not forgotten her promise and she came sailing over the lagoon under the light of the full moon. After the first embrace, they were sitting on the beach when they saw a turtle crawling towards them. Taking a closer look, they were surprised to see that one of its fins was dragging a skirt that had become entangled in its flipper. It was the very skirt that the maiden had lost on the night of the new moon.

Ngemelis: The Discovery of the Egg-Laying Cycle of the Turtle



That was how the people of Palau learned of the egg laying cycle of the turtle.



The Breadfruit Tree

The Breadfruit Tree

In the old days, there was an island called Ngibtal, near the village of Ngiwal, and on its shore an old woman lived alone. She had a son named Mangidabrutkoel, but she never knew where he was or what he was doing, for he usually traveled to other villages. The people of Ngibtal used to pass by the home of the old woman each day as they returned from the sea with their fish, but none of them ever offered her any of their catch. Though the old woman was particularly fond of certain fish, she was never able to eat them.

One day, after a particularly long absence, Mangidabrutkoel came home to visit his mother, and she took the opportunity to complain to her son that while others had much to eat, she never had a fish for her pot. Mangidabrutkoel listened to his mother's complaint and, before setting out on his next trip, he went out into the yard of his mother's house.

Coming to a breadfruit tree growing by the water's edge, he chopped off one of its branches, and where the branch had been, water immediately gushed from the tree and

flowed to the rhythm of the waves on the shore. With each surge, a fish leapt out of the tree.

This tree became the envy of all the other villagers and they complained. "While we must go out to sea for our fish, the old woman can get all she wishes by sitting under her tree." Finally one night, an envious old man stole over to the wonderful fish-bearing tree and chopped it down.

The water that had before flowed forth intermittently now burst out in a torrent and very soon the whole island was flooded. To this day, the site of the island, with its stone pathways and platforms can be seen from the water's surface just off the shore of Ngiwal.



Detail of *The Breadfruit Tree* storyboard carving



Palau