

OCEANIC ART COLLECTION

Papua New Guinea, Mapric region

Clan Spirit Figure (*ngwalndu*)

Twentieth century

Wood with red, yellow, white, and black paint

95¼ × 21¼ × 9¼ in. (241.9 × 54 × 23.5 cm)

Gift of Dr. Samuel Spring

S85-SPNG-G148

Ngwalndu are clan spirits. Representations of them are prominently featured in men's ceremonial houses, or spirit houses, and are the site of important communal rituals. In addition to promoting fertility and health, the *ngwalndu* are also responsible for providing yams, a crop that is not just a favorite food but of great spiritual significance for the community. Long yam cultivation, carried out exclusively by men, is the focus of ritual life for the Abelam. So close is the spiritual connection between the ritually attended yams and the grower and his clan that the most prized yams, the largest of the long yams, are named after the grower's *ngwalndu*. In the ceremonial house, *ngwalndu* figures preside over initiation ceremonies that reveal the secrets of long yam cultivation and other male powers embedded in the lore of each clan. The ornate adornment of black and white, yellow and red, and the elaborate headcrest resemble the body adornments for male initiates. The pigments are thought to have magical qualities: red is the most powerful and refers to the substances used for sorcery and long yams; white refers to nourishment and the full moon, and yellow to the sun and the crescent moon.

Clan spirit figures are usually male, but their iconography incorporates both male and female principles. The figures are almost always surmounted by birds, and many figures are depicted straddling birds. Dozens of bird species that inhabit the Abelam region occur in Abelam mythology and art, particularly cassowaries, birds of paradise, hornbills, cockatoos, and parrots. Each clan identifies with particular species of birds as their totems, and the paramount totem is depicted atop *ngwalndu*. Two birds flanking this *ngwalndu* head have circular motifs on their wings symbolic of the moon and its associations of female fertility and male nurture. The large bird between the figure's legs extends its beak to the penis to imbibe sustaining life force from semen. The bird may be a cassowary, a bird that figures prominently in Abelam ritual iconography. According to Abelam creation myths, human beings were generated from the bones of a cassowary. The cassowary is thus considered to be the mother of humankind, and clans want to ally themselves with her procreative powers. The cassowary bird is also known as a powerful creature that fights fiercely to protect herself and her young. Thus she is also a symbol of male aggression and warfare.



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The lower portion of the figure is flanked by reptiles, and the patterns on them are conflated with crosshatched areas. These may refer to women's net bags, used to carry everything from infants to foodstuffs, and would thus constitute an acknowledgment of women's roles in sustaining life. Swirl patterns that may be variously interpreted as ferns, river eddies, or a pig's leg illustrate the complexity of *ngwalndu* sculptural iconography.

