

A Face for Giving Thanks

Mask (*Mawa*), Unidentified Kalaw Lagaw Ya Artist

Mawa means “face” in Kalaw Lagaw Ya, the language of some Torres Strait Islanders. This wooden *mawa* mask is an elongated oval with a thin nose, narrow mouth, and white eyes. Locks of hair made from plant fibers surround the face. Shells and red fibers adorn and decorate the perimeter of the mask, and red and white pigments accentuate the mouth, eyes, and cheeks. The many materials in this mask reflect the specific environment of Saibai, one of approximately 274 small islands that are a part of the Torres Strait archipelago. *Mawa* masks appeared during annual celebrations by the same name in September or October on these islands.

Most *mawa* masks from nearby islands are made of turtle shells, a material generally plentiful in the region. However, because Saibai’s coasts are lined with mangroves and brackish swamps, which limit the turtle habitat, the island’s *mawa* masks are made of wood. Additionally, Saibai is situated about three miles off the southern coast of Papua New Guinea. Ample trade and interaction occurred between Papuans and the people on Saibai Island, and Papua New Guinea’s strong tradition of sculpture and carving in wood influenced the material chosen for this mask.

The annual *mawa* mask ceremony celebrated the harvest season and the arrival of native fruits such as *ubar*, a wild plum; *kowai*, a bush apple; and root vegetables like yams and taro. Male performers, dressed in coconut leaves, wore *mawa* masks to masquerade and give thanks for the bounty of the harvest. They believed their performance would ensure good crops and fertile soil for future years. This celebration connected the dancers and onlookers to the life forces they believed flowed through the trees, oceans, and themselves.

Many *mawa* masks, including this one, have a crescent shaped protrusion on the back of the mask, suggesting that they may have been hung as architectural ornaments when not being used in a ceremony.



Unidentified Kalaw Lagaw Ya Artist. *Mask (Mawa)*. 1850–1875. Saibai Island, Torres Strait Islands, Queensland Territory, Australia. Wood, shell, plant fiber, pigment, paper, ink. The Baltimore Museum of Art: Gift of Alan Wurtzbarger, BMA 1955.251.100

Challenges for students

- The BMA *mawa* mask was created from found materials. Ask students to gather materials from their school or neighborhood. Have students compare the found materials, making a list of how they are similar to and different from those that were used to make this mask. Invite students to create a work of art using the materials they collected.
- *Mawa* masks were used in traditional, annual ceremonies of thanksgiving and celebration of harvest. Lead your students in a discussion about traditions they practice giving thanks. Invite students to research how other communities and cultures celebrate the harvest season.
- Saibai’s population was 4,000–5,000 at the time this mask was made in 1850–1875. The 2016 census reported 465 people living on the island. Invite students to research reasons for this change, including the effects of global warming on the population and island.

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Map of Torres Strait Islands