Papuan Gulf
Spirit Boards

Collected and Donated By
James Wasserstrom
In Honor of Daniel Munzert ’05

To The College at Brockport – SUNY
via The Brockport Foundation
350 New Campus Drive | Brockport, NY 14420

Background information and details provided by:
Scott Rodolitz – Certified Member of the International Fine Art Appraisers
From Papua New Guinea to Brockport: Renowned UN retiree donates rare gope boards in honor of Brockport alum and 9-11 first responder

BROCKPORT—James Wasserstrom (in photo, on left), whose career of fighting corruption across the globe included 30 years with the United Nations, has made a generous gift to The College at Brockport in the form of handcrafted gope boards from Papua New Guinea. Wasserstrom did so in honor of Daniel Munzert ’05 (photo, right). The two are partners at The Wasserstrom Group, a Washington, D.C.-based firm specializing in anti-corruption. Wasserstrom was joined by Munzert on Nov. 12 at the Tower Fine Arts Center to make the formal presentation to the College.

“It feels really good to be able to give these to Brockport in honor of Dan,” said Wasserstrom. “I admire where he comes from and what he did. He speaks so fondly of Brockport.”

Wasserstrom first met Munzert in 2012 when the two were working in Kabul, Afghanistan. It wasn’t long before Wasserstrom learned that Munzert was one of the first responders during the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks in New York City, where Wasserstrom lived at the time.

Munzert, a native of Medina, NY, first attended Brockport in 1999. Soon after, he joined the United States Army. He took time away from his studies due to deployments to New York as well as Iraq before graduating in 2005 with a degree in business administration.

“Brockport opened my eyes to the different types of people in the world,” said Munzert. “I took a lot away from that.”

Munzert also praised his Brockport professors, especially during the fall 2001 semester when he spent several weeks deployed to NYC. Through their help upon his return, he was able to stay on track and complete the required coursework.

“My professors were tremendous,” Munzert said.

Gope boards, which are carved from canoes and depict the human face in some fashion, are believed to provide a link between people and their ancestors at all social levels. Some of the larger gope boards are believed to embody powerful nature spirits while smaller ones are not considered sacred at all. They hold an important use in battles between warring tribes. A unique aspect of the artifacts is the use of colorful dyes made from various materials found in the region.

Wasserstrom, who is originally from Rochester, accumulated his gope board collection in the 1980s while working for the UN in Papua New Guinea, located off the north coast of Australia. He has donated hundreds of similar pieces to universities and museums, including many in upstate New York. His gift to Brockport included 20 from his collection.
The Art of the Papuan Gulf of New Guinea…

…is primarily represented by two art forms; enormous masks made from fiber, and decorated boards, carved in relief known variously as Hohao, Kwoi or Gope. Dealing with boards from the Central Gulf region, we use the term ‘Gope’ as it is the correct regional name.

Much has been written on who or what exactly Gope boards represent. Opinions differ as to the boards being the abode of ancestral spirits or powerful spirits of nature. No clear answer emerges in all of the study of the region, and in all likelihood, both spirits of clan lineages and of regional powers of the land or water were represented; a one to one relationship need not have existed.

These boards were originally placed in shrines within a men’s house that would have been divided into clan segments. Each clan group would have had a central area decorated with numerous boards and human skulls taken in battle, as well as pig’s skulls representing feasts and wealth. Each board originally would have had a personal name, and in some cases, individuals would have been entrusted to care for and protect a given board if considered very potent and important to the clan.

The Boards are usually made from pieces of old canoes; most often war canoes, as these would have been felt to contain a large amount of spiritual energy. The thinner boards were made from the gunwales of the long narrow canoes while the thicker and latter boards were often carved from the bottoms of the boats.

The designs vary by region, however the most interesting and diverse styles come from the area of the Central Gulf, between the Urama River, Era River and Wapo Creek areas. The Wasserstrom examples are all from this area. These boards often depict a single head at the upper part of the board carved with a stylized body below that may be naturalistic, skeletal or made of elaborate design elements related to clan totems or body paint designs.

The boards are most often burned on their surfaces and then carved in relief; the blackened surface being in stark contrast to the carved areas painted with infilled lime-white paint and red/brown ocheres from Iron Oxide rich clays.

Map of the Papuan Gulf, detailing Baimuru Village in the ‘Era River/Wapo Creek/Urama Region’ where the Wasserstrom Boards originate.
Gope Board of classical form, made from a slightly bowed piece of hardwood, possibly the bottom or gunwale of a war canoe; and carved in relief with depictions of standing figure in classical style for the region. Originally from the area between the Era River, Purari Delta and Urama region.

This particular example displays a fully worked out body with typical decoration beneath a classical Central Gulf style head. The depiction of the naturalistic body is possibly a later innovation, though absolutely traditional in its context.

**Approximate date and country of manufacture:** 20th Century, New Guinea; Gulf of Papua.

**Medium:** Wood, pigment.

**Size:** 40” x 11” x ¾”

**Condition:** Overall fine condition, some depredation and wear commensurate with traditional use.
Gope Board of classical form, made from a slightly bowed piece of hardwood, possibly the bottom or gunwale of a war canoe; and carved in relief with depictions of a face at top above a stylized body and umbilical motif in classical style for the region. Originally from the area between the Era River, Purari Delta and Urama region. The board shows age and use, with pigments in dark red, black and white.

This superb board is classical in every way with a fine conception of a stylized body with head, torso and umbilicus. Boards of this type can be seen in period photos from the 1930’s. The central motif, possibly a clan-totem, was a favorite canoe-gunwale decoration when turned horizontally.

Approximate date and country of manufacture: 20th Century, New Guinea; Gulf of Papua.

Medium: Wood, pigment.

Size: 43” x 11” x ¼”

Condition: Overall fine condition, some depredation and wear commensurate with traditional use.
Gope Board of classical form, made from a slightly bowed piece of hardwood, possibly the bottom or gunwale of a war canoe; and carved in relief with depictions of a central face with rising liner geometric patterning in classical style for the region. Originally from the area between the Era River, Purari Delta and Urama region. The board shows age and use, with pigments in dark red, black and white.

This board is perhaps later in style than some but completely traditional. The motifs are thought to represent skeletal imagery.

**Approximate date and country of manufacture:** 20th Century, New Guinea; Gulf of Papua.

**Medium:** Wood, pigment.

**Size:** 35” x 6 ¾” x ¼”

**Condition:** Overall fine condition, some depredation and wear commensurate with traditional use.
Gope Board of classical form, made from a slightly bowed piece of hardwood, possibly the bottom or gunwale of a war canoe; and carved in relief with depictions of a figure in abstract form with sinuous limbs in classical style for the region. Originally from the area between the Era River, Purari Delta and Urama region. The board shows age and use, with pigments in red/brown, black and white.

This fine board is large and was probably of great importance to the clan that owned it. The sinuous quality of the figure is a sign of age and the patination is wonderful. The design elements are compelling and well worked out.

Approximate date and country of manufacture: 20th Century, New Guinea; Gulf of Papua.

Medium: Wood, pigment.

Size: 41” x 12” x ¼”

Condition: Overall fine condition, some depredation and wear commensurate with traditional use.
Gope Board of classical form, made from a slightly bowed piece of hardwood, possibly the bottom or gunwale of a war canoe; and carved in relief with depictions of a figure with sinuous limbs in classical style for the region. Originally from the area between the Era River, Purari Delta and Urama region. The board shows age and use, with pigments in brick-red, black and white.

This fine board displays a classical Central Gulf style face with sinuous limbs above a stylized lower portion that may be a part of the same figure or a zoomorphic totem. The umbilicus may here be represented at the top of the board – such deconstruction of anatomy was not uncommon.

Approximate date and country of manufacture: 20th Century, New Guinea; Gulf of Papua.

Medium: Wood, pigment.

Size: 37” x 8” x ¼”

Condition: Overall fine condition, some depredation and wear commensurate with traditional use.
Gope Board of classical form, made from a slightly bowed piece of hardwood, possibly the bottom or gunwale of a war canoe; and carved in relief with depictions of a head atop a body with patterning resembling skeletal remains with legs. Originally from the area between the Era River, Purari Delta and Urama region. The board includes pigments in brick-red, black and white.

This unusual board is carved in the form of a figure with patterning clearly resembling ribs and skeletal structure, the bottom with small legs. A fine and very unusual piece, probably associated with head-taking and placed with trophy skulls.

**Approximate date and country of manufacture:** 20th Century, New Guinea; Gulf of Papua.

**Medium:** Wood, pigment.

**Size:** 36” x 8” x ¼”

**Condition:** Overall fine condition, some depredation and wear commensurate with traditional use.
Gope Board of classical form, made from a slightly bowed piece of hardwood, possibly the bottom or gunwale of a war canoe; and carved in relief with depictions of a figure in segmented form, in classical style for the region. Originally from the area between the Era River, Purari Delta and Urama region. The board shows age and use, with pigments in brick-red, black and white.

This fine old board depicts a spirit in segmented form; the top being the head with classical inverted “Y” shaped white facial painting; the central panel being the umbilicus and the lower portion being the limbs. This is a fine example of powerful Papuan Gulf carving.

Approximate date and country of manufacture: 20th Century, New Guinea; Gulf of Papua.

Medium: Wood, pigment.

Size: 34” x 7” x ¼”

Condition: Overall fine condition, some depredation and wear commensurate with traditional use.
Gope Board of unusual form, made from an old canoe paddle and carved in relief with depictions of a spirit face and linear patterns in classical style for the region. Originally from the area between the Era River, Purari Delta and Urama region. The board shows age and use, with pigments in brown, black and white.

This particular example is similar to one in the Tomkins collection, also made from an old canoe paddle blade. These are quite rare and, though narrow, were probably made to venerate the original owner of the paddle in death.

Approximate date and country of manufacture: 20th Century, New Guinea; Gulf of Papua.

Medium: Wood, pigment.

Size: 33” x 5” x ¼”

Condition: Overall fine condition, some depredation and wear commensurate with traditional use.
Gope Board of classical form, made from a slightly bowed piece of hardwood, possibly the bottom of a war canoe; and carved in relief with depictions of a face atop a set of lozenges indicating bodies in classical style for the region. Originally from the area between the Era River, Purari Delta and Urama region. The board shows age and use, with pigments in dark red, black and white.

This wonderful board presents a classical Wapo Creek style face at the top above a diamond-shaped ‘hocker-figure’ that holds the umbilicus. Below that two additional lozenge-shaped devices are carved, possibly representing the figure or other totemic animals associated with the spirit depicted.

**Approximate date and country of manufacture:** 20th Century, New Guinea; Gulf of Papua.

**Medium:** Wood, pigment.

**Size:** 51” x 10” x 1 ¼”

**Condition:** Overall fine condition, some depredation and wear commensurate with traditional use.
Gope Board of classical form, including dark brown/black and white pigments, made from a slightly bowed piece of hardwood, possibly the bottom or gunwale of a war canoe; and carved in relief with depictions of a figure with a head atop a tapering pointed board with incised, scrimmed designs. Classical style for the region. Originally from the area between the Era River, Purari Delta and Urama region.

This fine old board is somewhat enigmatic in that the design is incised rather than deeply carved; a tradition sometimes found in the Western part of the Papuan Gulf. It may be that this was a figure made for some other purpose than a typical Gope, perhaps an initiation object or sorcery figure. In any case, it is a fine example with power and integrity.

Approximate date and country of manufacture: 20th Century, New Guinea; Gulf of Papua.

Medium: Wood, pigment.

Size: 31” x 7” x ½”

Condition: Overall fine condition, some depredation and wear commensurate with traditional use.
Gope Board of classical form, made from a slightly bowed piece of hardwood, possibly the bottom or gunwale of a war canoe; and carved in relief with depictions of a stylized face above classical patterns, perhaps representing a body. Originally from the area between the Era River, Purari Delta and Urama region. The board shows age and use, with pigments in brown, black and white.

This finely carved board presents a classical Central-Gulf style face at the top with hook-like motifs below, each displaying an umbilicus. The images may represent skeletal imagery or clan-totem animals.

**Approximate date and country of manufacture:** 20th Century, New Guinea; Gulf of Papua.

**Medium:** Wood, pigment.

**Size:** 37” x 6” x ¼”

**Condition:** Overall fine condition, some depredation and wear commensurate with traditional use.
Gope Board of classical form, made from a slightly bowed piece of hardwood, possibly the bottom or gunwale of a war canoe; and carved in relief with depictions of a head carved atop the board and stylized motifs below, in classical style for the region. Originally from the area between the Era River, Purari Delta and Urama region. The board shows age and use, with pigments in red-brown, black and white.

This fine old board is almost a depiction of a figure, which may mean it was associated with the main Clan shrine where trophy skulls were kept. The imagery depicts a head atop a stylized chest with ‘rib cage’ and two sets of curling devices, possibly representing anatomical details.

**Approximate date and country of manufacture:** 20th Century, New Guinea; Gulf of Papua.

**Medium:** Wood, pigment.

**Size:** 37” x 7 ¼” x 1”

**Condition:** Overall fine condition, some depredation and wear commensurate with traditional use.
Gope Board of classical form, made from a slightly bowed piece of hardwood, possibly the bottom or gunwale of a war canoe; and carved in relief with depictions of a squatting figure above radiating umbilical iconography, in classical style for the region. Originally from the area between the Era River, Purari Delta and Urama region. The board shows age and use, with pigments in red, black and white.

This board, though not as old as some of the others, is absolutely traditional, with a powerfully rendered human figure at the top – which is unusual; the lower part of the board, however, depicts classical umbilicus imagery.

**Approximate date and country of manufacture:** 20th Century, New Guinea; Gulf of Papua.

**Medium:** Wood, pigment.

**Size:** 40” x 11” x ¾”

**Condition:** Overall fine condition, some depredation and wear commensurate with traditional use.
Gope Board of classical form, made from a slightly bowed piece of hardwood, possibly the bottom or gunwale of a war canoe; and carved in relief with depictions of a central face beneath a geometric upper register, with a stylized body below, in classical style for the region. Originally from the area between the Era River, Purari Delta and Urama region. The board shows age and use, with pigments in brick-red, black and white.

This board presents a classically carved face with unusual pigmentation on the lower half of the board. This is likely due to repeated paintings, or to an esoteric use for the board.

Approximate date and country of manufacture: 20th Century, New Guinea; Gulf of Papua.

Medium: Wood, pigment.

Size: 38” x 8” x 1”

Condition: Overall fine condition, some depredation and wear commensurate with traditional use.
Gope Board of classical form, made from a slightly bowed piece of hardwood, possibly the bottom or gunwale of a war canoe; and carved in relief with depictions of a stylized face atop a serrated panel in classical style for the region. Originally from the area between the Era River, Purari Delta and Urama region. The board shows age and use, with pigments in brick-red, black and white.

This fascinating example exhibits a finely carved face un classical though highly stylized form atop a serrated body, perhaps representing a ribcage or fish skeleton, though a clan totem association of a centipede cannot be ruled out either.

**Approximate date and country of manufacture:** 20th Century, New Guinea; Gulf of Papua.

**Medium:** Wood, pigment.

**Size:** 37” x 8” x ½”

**Condition:** Overall fine condition, some depredation and wear commensurate with traditional use.
Gope Board of classical form, made from a slightly bowed piece of hardwood, possibly the bottom or gunwale of a war canoe; and carved in relief with depictions of an ancestral face with linear patterning above and below on a white background, in classical style for the region. Originally from the area between the Era River, Purari Delta and Urama region. The board shows age and use, with pigments in white, red and black.

This board, though created later than some others in the donation, is an authentic example; the motif probably representing a depiction of skeletal remains.

Approximate date and country of manufacture: 20th Century, New Guinea; Gulf of Papua.

Medium: Wood, pigment.

Size: 35” x 7” x ½”

Condition: Overall fine condition, some depredation and wear commensurate with traditional use.
Gope Board of classical form, made from a slightly bowed piece of hardwood, the thickness suggesting it was made from the bottom of a war canoe; and carved in relief with depictions of a figurine in two segments in classical style for the region. Originally from the area between the Era River, Purari Delta and Urama region. The board shows age and use, with pigments in red-brown, black and white.

The wonderful stylization on this board is similar to many historical examples in old photos. The segmented body with small umbilicus is very well rendered.

Approximate date and country of manufacture: 20th Century, New Guinea; Gulf of Papua.

Medium: Wood, pigment.

Size: 39” x 11” x 1”

Condition: Overall fine condition, some depredation and wear commensurate with traditional use.
Gope Board of classical form, made from a slightly bowed piece of hardwood, possibly the bottom of a war canoe; and carved in relief with depictions of a face with reptile motifs in classical style for the region. Originally from the area between the Era River, Purari Delta and Urama region. The board shows age and use, with pigments in red-brown, black and white.

This fine and large example would have occupied a prominent part in a clan shrine. The central face motif is of classical/historic style and the chevron elements above and below may refer to a crocodile or other spirit animal. Overall, an exceptional example.

Approximate date and country of manufacture: 20th Century, New Guinea; Gulf of Papua.

Medium: Wood, pigment.

Size: 54” x 11” x 1”

Condition: Overall fine condition, some depredation and wear commensurate with traditional use.
Gope Board of classical form, made from a slightly bowed piece of hardwood, possibly the bottom of a war canoe; and carved in relief with depictions of a figure in classical style for the region. Originally from the area between the Era River, Purari Delta and Urama region. The board shows age and use with pigments in brown, black and white.

This example exhibits an archaic-style face, attesting to its age and simple but powerful renderings of limbs and a central umbilicus in the form of a triangle. This piece has a primal beauty that is simple while structurally cogent.

Approximate date and country of manufacture: 20th Century, New Guinea; Gulf of Papua.

Medium: Wood, pigment.

Size: 40” x 12” x 1”

Condition: Overall fine condition, some depredation and wear commensurate with traditional use.
Gope Board of classical form, made from a slightly bowed piece of hardwood, possibly the bottom or gunwale of a war canoe; and carved in relief with depictions of a central face with curling motifs above and below in classical style for the region. Originally from the area between the Era River, Purari Delta and Urama region. The board shows age and use, with pigments in red, black and white.

This fine board presents a classical Wapo Creek area face in the center of the board with stylized bodies above and below, thus almost referring to a Janus-like quality depicted two-dimensionally. The style is of a type seen in historical images from the 1930s.

Approximate date and country of manufacture: 20th Century, New Guinea; Gulf of Papua.

Medium: Wood, pigment.

Size: 36” x 5 ½” x ½”

Condition: Overall fine condition, some depredation and wear commensurate with traditional use.