

ENVIRONMENTS



BISJ POLES – Sculptures from the Rainforest

AUTHENTIC PERSPECTIVES

Fifty-eight BISJ poles were brought together for a temporary exhibition at the Amsterdam ethnographic Tropenmuseum. The challenge in designing *BISJ Poles: Sculptures from the Rainforest* was to expose the BISJ poles in a way that visitors could experience the magic of the BISJ ritual. A deeper layer of this project was to investigate the different views about the meaning of the BISJ ritual.

These wooden sculptures, some more than 12 meters high, were made by the Asmat people from Papua, Indonesia. The poles are used during BISJ ceremonies, centuries-old ancestor-worship rituals to commemorate the deceased. Each BISJ pole has its own powers of expression and symbolism, and every sculpture mirrors the world view of the Asmat. The Asmat believe that natural death is a rare occurrence; most deaths are really caused by evil powers. Until a person's death is avenged, the spirit of the recently deceased is present among the living. In portraying an ancestor in a BISJ pole, that person is honored, the death is avenged and the spirit of the deceased is free to leave the living.

The design of the exhibition brought stories and images to life in an exciting interplay of film, sound and light. The Light Hall, the open heart of the museum visible from all three floors, was turned into a magic forest of monumental poles. Images of the Asmat people and fragments of the BISJ were projected onto a large cloth surrounding the BISJ poles. From different heights and angles within the Light Hall, visitors could investigate these unique sculptures.

The BISJ poles not only tell the stories and heroic deeds of the ancestors, but they also speak to each other. A 30-minute theatrical performance of documentary clips and sound bites, combined with a light game of colors and shadows, brought the BISJ poles to life. Since the meaning of the BISJ ritual can be widely interpreted, six specially made film productions showed various perspectives: from the perspective of the Asmat people, from an anthropological perspective and from a collection-history perspective. Visitors were soaked in the BISJ feast and could experience the deep intensity of this magic ritual. ■

Designed by [Kossmann.dejong](#) (Netherlands)

“This space communicates the sublime quality of the exhibit with a minimal and elegant procession of space and light.”

—August de los Reyes, IDSA, creative director, Windows Platform Core Innovation Team, Microsoft Surface