Larry Santana is a Papua New Guinean graphic designer and painter whose work is nationally acclaimed. Like other contemporary PNG artists, his art has received little global attention, although he visited the United States as an artist-in-residence in 1989 and 1998.

Santana grew up in Madang in the 1960s when Papua New Guinea was preparing for independence in 1975. In high school an expatriate art teacher helped him enter Goroka Technical College, where he received his diploma in graphics in 1980. His first job with Air Niugini brought him to Port Moresby, where exposure to the capital’s art world stimulated him to mount his first exhibition at the Waigani Arts Center in 1983. Since then, he has struggled to exhibit his paintings while working in graphics for various firms and government agencies. In 1993, he opened his own small graphics business, but it closed in 2002 due to Papua New Guinea’s deepening fiscal crises. Tired of fighting to survive in Moresby, Santana moved his family to Madang. He now teaches art at Tusbab High School and is involved in local environmental and beautification projects while he prepares for a major new exhibition.

Santana’s career has been sustained by his work as a graphic designer, but his passion is painting, which he regards as imaging the heritage and changing lifeways of his modernizing country. Displaying a style that combines Western realism with traditional designs, motifs, and shading techniques, his paintings embody two major themes: narratives of traditional stories whose layered meanings reference indigenous cultural wisdom, and social criticism of “the dark side of progress” where images of prostitutes, beggars, or civil war serve as symbols of uncontrolled capitalism and westernization. Pertinent to this issue, Santana’s deepest concern is with imagery inspired by environmental concerns for preserving his country’s natural resources for future generations of Papua New Guineans. Shimmering birds of paradise (the national symbol), lush tropical foliage, and crusty, ancient turtles also dazzle the eye as art.

Pamela Rosi
Bridgewater State College
Living Together: The New Oil Industry Must Not Destroy Our Traditions. Chevron Oil 1997 calendar, November. Watercolor and gouache, 17" x 11.5"
Drilling the Earth: Sophisticated Technology Changing Traditional Lifeways. Chevron Oil 1997 calendar, August.
Watercolor and gouache, 17" × 11.5"
Unpolluted Waters: Traditional Life Goes On.
Chevron Oil 1997 calendar, October.
Watercolor and gouache, 17" x 11.5"

Contact the artist for reprint permission.
Immiwang the Bird of Warning.
Pen and ink and colored wash, 1986,
17" × 14"

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Turtles: An Endangered Species.
Pen and ink drawing, 1989, 23" x 16"
Disco Girl.
Pen and ink drawing, 1986, 24" x 16"
The Beggar.
Pen and ink drawing, 1988, 24" × 16"
Self Portrait: Struggle and Pain at the Six-Mile Dump.
Watercolor on paper, 1989, 21.5" x 14.75"
The Virgin Mary as a Traditional Young PNG Woman. Christmas card distributed by Independent Design, Papua New Guinea, 1989, 8.25" x 4.75". From an original painting (watercolor).