



## Crocodile skull trophy

---

**Not on display**

**Title/Description:** Crocodile skull trophy

**Born:** 1800 - 1950

**Object Type:** Ornament

**Materials:** Bone, Cane, Fibre, Gum, Pigment, Shell

**Measurements:** l. 305 x w. 116 x d. 305 mm

**Accession Number:** 164

**Historic Period:** 19th century, 20th Century - Early

**Production Place:** New Guinea, Oceania, Pacific, Papuan Gulf

**Credit Line:** Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

---

The crocodile is seen as the protective spirit of the Sepik people. Of all skulls and bones, crocodile skulls were particularly highly valued and kept for spiritual reasons. The addition of shells as eyes on the crocodile skull offers a particular perspective of a story and beliefs associated with it. The shells show the crocodile is still alive and watching!

One of the reasons why skulls were kept in certain places is that it allowed people to see a man as both a hunter and a leader or chief of the community. For example, in my village or district after we had traditional ceremonies especially feasts, we usually collect pigs' jaws and hang them on small tress if there is one growing within the yard or by the house. Every time when we have a feast with pigs, we keep on collecting and hanging the jaws of the pigs. When we practise this, we are sending a message telling other people that we have a tradition of holding such ceremonial feast activities and we are not new to it. If other people want to talk about anything concerning traditional feasts, the pigs' jaws prove we have experience hosting this type of important event.

Pax Jakupa, February 2023

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

In addition to human skulls, the skulls of crocodiles and pigs were also preserved as hunting trophies by the people of the Papuan Gulf. Wirz (1950: pls. 5-7) illustrates several examples which were displayed in the ceremonial house, arranged in rows with pig skulls or hung from specially carved skull racks. Williams refers to them as evidence of the hunter's prowess in the chase (1936: 286).

The treatment of the eyes, which are cowrie shells set into a reddened fibre pad, suggests that this skull originates from the same area as the wood trophy head I53, the Wapo/Era region of the Purari delta. It has a smoke-blackened appearance, no doubt the result of long exposure in the ceremonial house.

Steven Hooper, 1997

Entry taken from *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, Vol. 2: Pacific, African and Native North American Art*, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997) p. 59.

---

---

---

## Provenance

Acquired by the Sainsbury Family in 1968. Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.

---