



Hornbill image

Not on display

Title/Description: Hornbill image

Object Type: Animal, Figure

Materials: Wood

Measurements: l. 1625 x h. 483 x d. 150 mm

Accession Number: 868

Historic Period: 19th/20th century

Production Place: Borneo, Kalimantan, Pacific, Southeast Asia

Cultural Group: Ngaju, Ot Danum

Birds feature prominently in the cosmology and iconography of many Borneo peoples (see Harrison, 1960, 1965), notably the rhinoceros hornbill (*Buceros rhinoceros*), which this sculpture represents.

The rhinoceros hornbill is smaller than the helmeted hornbill (the casques of which were carved into ornaments), but its long black and white tail feathers, emphasised here, were highly prized for warriors' war cloaks and head-dresses.

Hornbill images were made in several areas of Borneo, the best known being the large and elaborate polychrome carvings of the Iban, which were the centrepiece of *gawai kenyalang* rituals (see Freeman, 1960; Feldman, 1985: pl. 9). This image, however, differs stylistically from those of the Iban and appears to be a very rare type, only one other comparable example being known from the literature (Schoffel, 1981: 134), though regrettably this has an unsubstantiated and unlikely attribution to Samarinda, on the east coast. Victor King (personal communication) suggests an origin for this carving from among the Ngaju or Ot Danum of central Kalimantan.

Among the Ngaju, hornbill images were fixed atop posts erected during mortuary rituals, when the myth of creation was re-enacted. The hornbill represented the deity of the upper world, while the watersnake carved at the base of the post represented the deity of the lower world (see Ave and King, 1986: 36, 60; Scharer, 1963). Similar posts were also used among the Ot Danum (see juynboll, 1909: pl. XIII). The square hole through the body suggests that this hornbill was formerly fixed to a post, and as the piece was reportedly collected at Nangapinoh, in interior Kalimantan, a Ngaju or Ot Danum provenance seems likely.

In sculptural terms, this image, carved from a single piece of wood, has exceptional qualities. The long, slightly upswept tail acts as a perfect counterpoint to the accentuated spiral casque and curving beak. The uropygial gland above the base of the tail, carved with a rosette, is carefully rendered, while the beak holds two fruits, a reference to the hornbill being a voracious fructivore. The casque has six bands of white mineral paint, the remainder traces of black encrustation, apparently cleaned off by a previous owner.

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) pp. 86-87.
