



Hornbill carving

On display

Title/Description: Hornbill carving

Born: 1880 c.

Object Type: Animal, Figure

Materials: Pigment, Wood

Measurements: l. 813 x h. 345 x d. 105 mm

Accession Number: 942

Historic Period: Late 19th century

Production Place: Northern New Ireland

This is an exceptional sculpture of the Papuan hornbill (*Acerosplicatus*), a large, noisy, fruit-eating bird, with distinctive behaviour (see Rand and Gilliard, 1967: 302-3), which inhabits the forest canopy of New Ireland and neighbouring islands. Hornbill sculptures are rare; comparable examples are in Hamburg and Berlin (Krämer, 1925: pls. 71-2), and Sydney. The Hamburg hornbill was acquired in 1886 from the Godeffroy Museum, which had ceased to function after the company of the same name became bankrupt in 1879. It is described as being part of a *Totenboot* (mortuary or death boat; Führer, 1984: no. 247), an assembly of human and animal carvings mounted in a canoe which was displayed at the climax of *malagan* (a complex series of ceremonies and the visual art forms associated with them) rites. This example has a hole pierced through the body of the human figure, but whether this was for mounting on a canoe is not known.

Interpretation of the symbolic significance of this and other *malagan* sculptures is problematic. The relationship between the hornbill, frigate bird (on the back), two skeletal fish and prone human figure may have been interpretable in the original context of display, but no longer. Small carvings of hornbill heads are known to have been held in the teeth by dancers, whose movements imitated those of the bird (Lincoln, 1987: nos. 20,43).

The eyes of both birds are set with the opercula of the *Turbo petholatus*, a hemispherical valve which seals the entrance to the shell when the animal is alive. The eyes of the figure are small chips of shell with a banded pattern. The broken right leg of the figure and right tail feather of the frigate bird are old breaks, visible in the earliest published photograph (Brown, 1908:200). The piece is likely to have been collected by George Brown in 1880.

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. 309.

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

Versailles is a long way from New Ireland, and from the taste of the Sainsburys, but the colour, refinement and formal complexity of this piece of funerary art are worthy of Louis XIV. The difference is that here the allure derives not from precious metals and crystal mirrors, but from products of the soil, water and air of a Pacific island. Dazzling patterns pick up the shimmer of feathers and scales in pigments gathered from plants, their accents heightened by shell fragments and the brilliant opercula of snails. Its maker has taken his lessons in display from tropical birds, fish and flowers, and, as if out of admiration for the power of the beak of the hornbill, the speed of the frigate bird and the agility of fish, it is these that constitute the dominant forms above. Only below do we find a diminutive specimen of our own species.

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