

THE  
VOICE  
OF THE  
SPIRITS

*Indigenous Art  
of Indonesia*

Boston College  
Art Gallery





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curated by  
Andrew Tavarelli

Boston College  
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October 2–December 1, 1989

*This exhibition is dedicated to the memory of  
Professor Marianne W. Martin, whose spirit endures.*

## PREFACE

Toward the end of 1987, I embarked on a five month journey through Indonesia and South East Asia. It was a true adventure, fascinating beyond imagination. I was the omnivorous eye, looking, painting, and taking photographs. I returned with a stack of images rivetted to my mind, with an itch to build on this experience. This exhibition was born of that itch.

As a painter, I conceived of the exhibition in visual terms. An anthropologist would have approached it differently. The principal intention has been to present an exhibition which is visually captivating while honoring the major ethnographic concerns.

*The Voice of the Spirits* is comprised in large part of three dimensional work in carved wood.<sup>1</sup> I have tended toward objects with formal clarity, a big visual presence, and spirit power. This is my eye; it has been my guiding light.

Many people have made this exhibition possible and I would like to thank them all. I would first like to thank Rodger Dashow for his friendship, his generosity in lending to this exhibition and for his boundless and contagious enthusiasm for the people and art of Indonesia. He started the wheels turning for me. It was Rodger who introduced me to Steven Alpert, one of the most respected godfathers of Indonesian art. I wish to extend my deepest gratitude to this kindred spirit whose contribution to the exhibit, guidance and support were invaluable. The generous loan of works from the Karob Collection and the Peabody Museum of Salem added greatly to the quality of this exhibition. I wish to thank John Grimes and Lucy Butler of the Peabody Museum of Salem, for their interest and kind patience. Honey Swartz and Stoney Conley of the Boston College Gallery valiantly handled the administrative nuts and bolts which made the idea of the exhibit an actuality. They have my sincere thanks and affection. My appreciation to Professor Reva Wolf for her thoughtful reading of the manuscript. Lastly, I wish to thank the Office of the Academic Vice-President and the Friends of Art of Boston College for their generous contribution to the catalogue.

<sup>1</sup> The rich Indonesian textile tradition of ikat weaving and batik deserves its own exhibition and has not been included.



1. Magic staff, *tunggul panaluan*,  
Toba Batak, wood, hair, feathers.  
78"H, Karob Collection



2. Magic horn, *sahan*. Toba  
Batak, horn, wood, 18"L. Rodger  
Dashow Collection



## THE LAND AND THE PEOPLE

Indonesia is a necklace of over 13,000 islands draped along 5000 kilometers of the equator. A saw-toothed spine of volcanic peaks cut the larger islands into tracts of dense jungle, swamp, arid wasteland and forests of spices and exotic woods. Wet rice terraces sculpt the hills; pastures and tilled fields interlock the ragged geometry of the flatter lands and along with cities and villages mark the peoples' attempt to imprint their needs on the land.

Over half of the islands are inhabited. Although many of the people have roots in the Western Austronesian language family and appear to share a common archaeological history, the diversity of the ethnic groups is more evident. Many factors contributed to the richness and complexity of the larger cultural picture. Early trade routes through the archipelago brought contact with China and India and made inter-island exchange commonplace. The influx of Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic peoples suffused the foundation of early animist belief which supported the indigenous peoples. As early as the 16th century clashes with European colonial ambition (the Dutch in particular) and contact in the 19th century with missionaries, further impacted on this mosaic of archaic societies.

The ability of the original societies to maintain their essential shape into this century is a remarkable testament to their integrity, resilience and isolation. Modern times have been less forgiving. World War II, tribal warfare, the attempt to suppress cultural differences in the interest of political unification and the exploitation of natural resources are causing rapid disintegration of the fabric of traditional life. Still, a traveler encounters

pockets of life built around the old ways. Among the Asmat of Irian Jaya, in the long houses of the Dayak peoples of Kalimantan, in the lands of the Pak Pak and Toba Batak of Sumatra, in the smaller outer islands of Timor and Sumba there remains a vital connection between the people, the spirits of their ancestors, and the spirits of the natural world. This is the link which gives rise to the remarkable art which is truly the eye and voice of the spirit.

## THE HEART OF THE MATTER

The belief in ancestor spirits is widespread throughout Indonesia. The ancestors' names, deeds and demands might vary with the region but their omnipresence is a constant. Ancestors are engaged in all aspects of tribal life. To insure a propitious unfolding of events, these spirits must be spoken to. The tribal craftsmen create the visual medium through which the voices can be passed and mutually understood by the entire community.

The concept of *adat*, or the way of the ancestors, is essential to an understanding of art and how it functions in village life. The *adat*, passed down orally through successive generations, is viewed as the voice of the ancestors and the powers that be. It provides a cosmology and a prescription for behavior. It sets forth rules for social interchange, and justifies hierarchical structure and political organization. The rituals performed at weddings, feasts, births, funerals, agricultural rites and battle are governed by *adat*. Art, as the repository and carrier of cultural traditions, accompanies these events. Its form, function and the process by which it is made are thus designated by the ancestors.

## BATAK

The Batak occupy the lands of North Sumatra in and around the vicinity of Lake Toba. Samosir Island, in Lake Toba, is believed to be the home of the ancestors of the Toba Batak who consider themselves to be the original Batak tribal group. The Batak are divided into Pak-Pak, Toba, Karo, Angkola, Mandailing and Simalungung sub-groups. The early missionaries found them to be a fierce, warlike peoples who practiced cannibalism but also developed a complex hierarchical society. They were known for their elaborate houses which symbolized the structure of the cosmos. The Batak cultures had a rich mythology. They developed a written language whose letters were derived from Sanskrit, a complex numerology and a system of magic as evidenced in the Batak book of magic in this exhibition.

The magic wand, *tunggal panaluan*, (ill. 1), carved from the hard wood of a thorn tree, was used by a *datu*, or magician/priest, in performing the rites through which he spoke to ancestral spirits. From them he sought advice on governing, warfare and rain-making. With the wand he cast spells controlling sickness and death, and sought information on thievery and other wrongdoings. The spirit of the staff was impregnated with life-force created by the insertion of a magic substance into a crevice of the wand. The *pukpuk*, as the substance was called, was made from the brain matter of a victim whose spirit was thus transferred to the wand.

The Batak excelled at working in miniature. This wand is an exceptional example of a form typical of the Toba area. Human figures and beasts are entwined along the staff. A *naga*, the serpent who supports the world, slithers down the spine. A large figure, the legendary *datu*, Si Borong Borong sits astride the *Singa*, a mythical beast at the top of the totem-like stacking. The headdress of human hair, horse hair and cock feathers is bound with faded white, black and red fabric, colors symbolically significant for the Batak. The wand is sensitively carved with smooth transitions that soften the angularity of the forms. Its full, rounded proportions and light honey-red patina give it a beauty and sensuousness which complements its otherwise frightening visual presence. It is an instrument of great power.

The *sahan*, or magic horn (ill. 2) is a fitting accompaniment to the wand. Used by the *datu*/

priests to store their paraphernalia of charms, potions and magic substances, it is made from a buffalo horn with a carved wood stopper. The head is a *singa* carved in archaic style, simple yet not overly stylized. Later styles have interlaced figures carved along the back of the *singa* and curvilinear embellishments. The particular beauty of the magic horn in the exhibition is in the haunting human visage of the *singa*. The natural curve and sweep of the horn brings our attention to rest on the fixed serenity of the *singa*'s head.

## TORAJA

The Toraja homeland is in the mountainous interior of Sulawesi. They are an agricultural people who until this century practiced head hunting. The Toraja have evolved a stratified society with a nobility and a common class. As a culture this concern with status extends to their buildings, art and ceremonies.

A funeral is an elaborate affair often involving, in the case of a highly placed person, the carving of a *tau tau*, or death effigy, and a lavish feast. Many asiatic buffalo, revered and valued beasts, are sacrificed on these occasions. This is not only an honoring of the deceased but a conspicuous display of wealth and status for the feast giver.

The houses of the Toraja are striking. They are shaped along a curved ridge line that evokes the form of an ancient ancestral boat or buffalo horns. The eaves rise dramatically to the sky. The boat shaped houses symbolically remind the Toraja of their ancestors who as argonauts travelled the island in remote time long before the Toraja settled in their present mountainous location. Careful attention is also paid to the site of the houses in relation to rivers. The directions in which they run are associated with good and bad events. This concern with harmony and cosmic balance is a key concept in understanding Toraja ceremonial cycles and Toraja art.

Doors with the images of a buffalo are used on houses, storage buildings and family tombs. This old, beautifully designed door from the Rembon area (ill. 3) exemplifies Toraja art at its best. It combines power and authority with a sense of contemplative refinement. The buffalo, a symbol of wealth and status, fills the rectangular panel with exquisite grace and symmetry. The horns join in a protective circle and speak of the continuity





5. Door, Toraja, wood,  
25" x 19". Private Collection

of all things; the image of the tree of life is evoked, rather than graphically depicted. The horns and curvilinear design spread outward from the "trunk" of the vertical axis. The ears, picked up in a repeated decorative motif contribute to the larger image as they become the leaves of the tree. The entire surface is alive with carved, curvilinear motifs, which ease the intense power of the rigid symmetry of the composition.

This sculpture of a Toraja warrior from the district of Mamasa (ill. 4), once occupied the central position on the facade, under the eaves of a noble house. Only the nobility were permitted to adorn their houses with human images. The figure is astride a ship's prow which recalls the historic arrival of the ancestors by boat. The sculpture has the dignity and power befitting an important ancestor or mythological figure enhanced by the bold planar construction, dramatic symmetry, and frontal presentation. This affect is in part a result of an intelligent artistic solution to the problem of attaching a sculpture to a wall to be viewed from a considerable distance.

## ASMAT

The Asmat villages are found in the vast swamps of southern Irian Jaya. The tidal rivers that lace the dense jungle serve as highways. Solid ground is a rare occurrence and the people live in communal long houses built high above the ooze of the jungle floor. Theirs is a difficult and rudimentary existence dependent on hunting, fishing and gathering. Of the people of Indonesia, the Asmat come closest to our idea of primitive man.

Animism, the belief in omnipresent spirits, and ancestor worship find their fullest expression among the Asmat. Nothing happens without the participation of a spirit or an ancestor. Each object which the Asmat make—shields, canoes, bowls, drums and masks—is named for an ancestor whose spirit then enters the object.

The Asmat have an unstructured society without chiefs and sorcerers. They practiced headhunting and warfare until recent times and this has heavily shaped their rituals and symbols. In Asmat, no one dies by accident or as a natural consequence of sickness. Death is caused by a malevolent spirit sent by an enemy, and the spirit of the dead must therefore be avenged.

As with other people bound to the cosmic circle, there is an intensely creative aspect to their life. They excel at woodcarving and have produced some of the more powerful images in all of Indonesia. In their creation myth, *Fumerpitsj* the master carver, fashioned the first Asmat from a tree. The identity of a person with a tree is crucial. All boys learn to carve the utilitarian objects necessary for daily life. Those who excel become the *wow ipits*, the artist carvers called upon to make the shields and ancestor poles associated with special events.

Shields are made to protect the owner (literally and spiritually), to terrify the enemy, and honor an ancestor. The powerful shield (ill. 5) carved in relief from a single plank of wood is large with a pointed top and flat bottom typical of those found in the Brazza river area. The face of the ancestor for whom the shield is named appears at the top. The abstracted imagery on the body of the shield appears to be two figures in a mirrored arrangement. Other interpretations linking the symbols to specific natural forms are also possible. The shield is painted with the three colors used by the Asmat: red, white, and black which have meanings associated with head hunting symbols.

The drum (ill. 6) is made by a difficult process involving the use of a digging stick and hot coals to bore out the core of a tree. The outside is shaped and carved using shells, bone and simple metal tools, and finally capped with lizard skin bound with rattan and blood. The hour glass form of the drum is typical, but here it is gracefully sloped and well proportioned. The carved handle representing a praying mantis with an ancestor's head sensitively enfolds the drum. The surface of the drum is covered in low relief with symbols from the natural world.

## DAYAK

The Dayak people dwell in the interior of the large island of Borneo; in the Indonesian sector designated as Kalimantan and in the region of Sarawak, East Malaysia. Dayak is an umbrella grouping which covers a multitude of tribal societies including the major subdivisions of Iban and Kayan/Kenya. Customs, beliefs and village organization vary from area to area. Some practices are shared, including rice cultivation and living in communal long houses. Most Dayak believe in the dual nature of the human soul. One aspect dies with the dis-





4. Figure astride a prow, Toraja,  
carved and painted wood 46"H,  
Private Collection



5. Shield, Asmat, carved and painted wood 76"H, Peabody Museum of Salem



6. Drum, Asmat, carved wood,  
lizard skin, rattan, 24"H, Karob  
Collection



integration of the body; the other remains in the village of the deceased until it ventures to the Land of Souls where it may become deified.<sup>2</sup>

A recurring motif of the Kayan/Kenya is the *aso* a mythical dog-dragon who serves as a protective spirit. The *aso* also identified with deified ancestors, is an elastic visual image which is often transformed into startling anthropomorphic designs.

The Kenya/Kayan shield (ill. 7) belonged to a warrior indicated by the anthropomorphic image painted on its front. Like the Toraja, the use of human or humanly derived images are prohibited to the lower born. The shield exemplifies the lively, sinuous design found in the ornamentation on long houses, textiles and utilitarian objects which is indicative of the Dayak. This decorative sense, coupled with a fierce expressiveness, is unparalleled in the archipelago. The central image is framed with rows of human hair taken from the victims of its owner. The pointed ends are typical of the form. The reverse side of the shield is decorated with painted motifs derived from the image of the *aso*.

For agricultural peoples, harvests are special events marked with festivals. This mask, *hudoq*, of Apo/Kayan origin (ill. 8) was used to celebrate the rice harvest and to promote fertility. Originally worn with a headdress of hornbill feathers mounted over the ridge at the top of the mask, it was part of a total body costume made of straw and grasses. The participants entered the village from the surrounding forest, dressed as protective nature spirits and represented the ancestors' return to community life.<sup>3</sup> The visage of this fantastic carnivore is enlivened by the inventive shape of the ears, painted designs and rows of teeth. The long earrings recall the practice of stretching the ear lobes for beautification. When not in use, these masks were stored in the houses and sometimes repainted before being used again.

## NIAS

Nias lies in the Indian Ocean off the coast of West Sumatra. The nobility of Nias link their ancestry to *Hia*, a deity of the sky and a central figure in their creation myth. The demarkation between nobles and common people was clearly drawn in pre-

modern times. The association of nobility with deity finds expression in the art forms and architecture of these people. There is an ancient megalithic tradition of stone carving. Stone thrones (*osa osa*), figurative ancestor sculpture, and stone totem-like pillars (*behu*) can still be seen in situ in the hills and archaic villages.

Chiefs' houses are elaborate and beautiful constructions, ornamented with lavish carving, painted motifs, decorative panels and ancestor sculptures. The plan of the house is identified with the dualistic structure of the cosmos and contains many references to male/female symbolism, deities, ancestors and the spirits of nature.

Ancestor sculptures (ill. 9) were always placed in a revered position in a house and considered to have protective power. In the exhibited piece the angle and proportion of the neck and head which support the crown contribute to the dignity of the figure. The crown, tiered like the cosmic tree, and the braided necklace indicate a high ranking person. The earring is in the right ear as was the custom for males at the time. These accoutrements of the nobility are carved on the figure as they were considered to be in the permanent order of things. The figure is seated on a stool which elevates him from the ground and holds a cup, into which offerings are placed. The sculpture has a rich, varied patina and is sensitively carved.

The slender tip of this Mentawai shield (cover ill.) relates it to the form of Nias shields.<sup>4</sup> It differs in the flattened top and graceful vase shape. The rounded knob near the center, and the exquisite painted spirals set it apart from the clunkier Nias shields with flattened knobs and unpainted surfaces. This is a rare piece of exceptional beauty.

<sup>2</sup> This concept is referred to by E. Sumik-Dekovich in "The significance of the Ancestors in the Arts of the Dayak" *The Eloquent Dead* edited by J. Feldman.

<sup>3</sup> *Islands and Ancestors* edited by Jean Paul Barbier and Douglas Newton: p. 242.

<sup>4</sup> This shield is listed at the Peabody Museum as having been collected in Nias. A consideration of its characteristics in discussion with Steven Alpert led to the more specific Mentawai attribution.

7. Shield, Kenya/Kayan, painted  
wood, human hair, 46"H,  
Peabody Museum of Salem



## THE ATTRACTION

There is much here for both the aficionado and the viewer who comes upon this work for the first time. All the work is authentic; it was created for use without a glance to an audience beyond the village culture and its ancestors.

Some residue of the necessity which impelled these forms to be created remains in the objects. Something of the directness and immediacy of the making is fused with the piece. The essential core of belief of a culture travels through the hands of the maker and lodges in the heart of the wood. These qualities inform the object with a visual intensity that seizes the eye and tells us with a *basic certainty* that here is art capable of carrying meaning. Although the specific symbols and functions of these objects may elude us, it is this primal recognition which reaffirms our humanity and connects us to these people we have never met. Living as we do, insulated by our media from the raw data of experience, divorced from the natural world, we are hungry for the directness and connectedness offered us by indigenous art. Preoccupied as we are with concepts of appropriation and the problematic search for meaning in our own art, we find these exotic objects spellbinding in their authenticity.

ANDREW TAVARELLI







9. Ancestor figure, Nias, wood,  
42"H, Private Collection



## EXHIBITION LIST

### BATAK OF SUMATRA

Magic staff, *tunggal pananluan*, Toba, wood, hair, feathers, 78"H, Karob Collection

Magic staff, *tungkot malehat*, Karo, wood, hair, feathers, 60"H, Rodger Dashow Coll.

Magic book, *pustaha*, carved wood, palm paper, 5½" × 4" × 1¾", Karob Collection

Magic book, *pustaha*, carved wood, palm paper, 5½" × 4" × 1¾", Karob Collection

Mask, carved wood, painted eyes, 13"H, Private Collection

Magic horn, *sahan*, Toba, horn & wood, 18"L, Rodger Dashow Collection

Datu's suit, wood, feathers, horn-bill, 54"H, Rodger Dashow Collection

House gable mask, *jorngom*, carved and painted wood, 43"H, Rodger Dashow Collection

Containers, wood, 6"-10"H, Rodger Dashow Collection

Chief's bed, carved and painted wood, 96"L, Rodger Dashow Collection

Figure, *pagar*, wood (formerly had hair and arms attached) 16"H, Rodger Dashow Collection

### SULAWESI

Door, Toraja, wood, 25" × 19", Private Collection

Figure astride a prow, Toraja, carved and painted wood, 46"H, Private Collection

Shield, wood, goat hair, shell 45½"H, Peabody Museum of Salem

Shield, wood with shell inlay, 31¼"H, Peabody Museum of Salem

Funeral effigy, *tau tau*, Toraja, 32"H, Rodger Dashow Collection

### ASMAT OF IRIAN JAYA

Drum, carved wood, lizard skin, rattan 24"H, Karob Collection

Drum, carved wood, lizard skin, rattan, 58"H, Rodger Dashow Collection

Canoe prow, wood, 15"H × 28" × 8", Rodger Dashow Collection

Shield, painted and carved wood, 76"H, Peabody Museum of Salem

Paddle, wood, 96"L, Rodger Dashow Collection

Spear, wood cassowary bone, feathers, 96"L, Rodger Dashow Collection

*Yeh*, Dani tribe of Beliem valley, Irian Jaya, stone, feathers, shell, string, 35"H, Rodger Dashow Collection

### DAYAK OF BORNEO

Mask, Kayan or Bahau, wood 11"H, Private Collection

Post figure, *hampatong*, Bahau, wood 45"H, Karob Collection

Post figure, *hampatong*, Bahau, wood 45½"H, Karob Collection

Baby carrier, Kenyah, 12¼" × 15" carved wood, shell, Karob Collection

Shield, bamboo, light wood, rattan 24¾"H, Peabody Museum of Salem

Mask, Apo-Kayan, carved & painted wood with metal earrings, 19"H, Rodger Dashow Collection

Coffin head, Kayan-Kenyah, wood 22 × 23 × 20, Rodger Dashow Collection

Post figure, *hampatong*, wood, 56"H, Rodger Dashow Collection

Shaman box with carved figures, wood, beads, 7"D, Rodger Dashow Collection

Small charms, carved wood figures, 2"-8"H, Rodger Dashow Collection

Beaded vest, beads and fabric 21" × 16", Rodger Dashow Collection

Pig sticks, *tuntun*, Iban, wood, 20"H, Rodger Dashow Collection

Shield, Kayan, painted wood, human hair, 46", Peabody Museum of Salem.

### NIAS

Ancestor figure, Nias, wood 42"H, Private Collection

Shield, Mentawai, painted wood, 40"H, Peabody Museum of Salem

### TIMOR

House door, wood, 45¾" × 22", H, Karob Collection

Mask, wood, 10¼"H, Rodger Dashow Collection

Figure, wood, 9"H, Karob Collection

Whip, wood, leather, bead inlay, 10"H, Rodger Dashow Collection

Spoon, wood, coconut shell, 12"L, Rodger Dashow Collection

### SUMBA

Figure, wood, 20"H, Private Collection

Box, wood, 5" × 6" × 1½", Rodger Dashow Collection

### FLORES

Male & female figures, wood & hair, 36"H, 34"H, Private Collection

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