

«Dayak. The art of Borneo's head-hunters»  
28 September 2019 – 17 May 2020  
MUSEC – Museo delle Culture  
Lugano, Villa Malpensata, Spazio Mostre

## Media release

### **The greatest exhibition of the last 45 years about Borneo's Dayak art opens in Lugano**

**From the 28<sup>th</sup> of September the Museum of Cultures in Lugano presents its the new main temporary exhibition: “Dayak. The art of Borneo's head-hunters”**

Lugano, September the 27<sup>th</sup>, 2019

The new MUSEC's exhibition is dedicated to the art and material culture of the the Dayak people from Borneo and is the result of multi-year research conducted by MUSEC, in collaboration with international scientific partners. This is one of the largest exhibitions in the world ever made on this subject and certainly the largest in the last forty-five years. The exhibition goes with an illustrated book by Paolo Maiullari (*Arte dayak*, Culture Arts & Books, Lugano 2019, 296 p.). Together they are the highest achievement of the study, valorisation and growth of MUSEC's Borneo's art collections; the project was started by the MUSEC fifteen years ago and led to the production of exhibitions and books, as well as cultural diplomacy actions in synergy with the Indonesian authorities.

The 170 works exhibited were produced for the most part between the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and come from the MUSEC, from four other Swiss ethnological museums and from Swiss and European private collections. They are representative of the major dayak art genres well known in the West: monumental wooden sculptures, masks, hunting magic sticks, paddles, shields and traditional weapons, fabrics, body ornaments, garments, skulls, tattoo matrices, baby-carriers, architectural elements, musical instruments, jars; basketry and other decorated objects.

The exhibition occupies fourteen rooms of the first and second floors of Villa Malpensata and has eleven thematic sections. There are two main themes: the first part focuses on the encounter between the Dayak people and the West, the early ethnographic research and collecting interest, which influenced the Western way of looking at Borneo and its native inhabitants. The second part of the

exhibition, suggests a change of perspective and progressively leads the visitor to discover the meanings and values of the exhibited works, as expressions of the relationship between men, gods and natural phenomena in one of the last unknown lands of the planet.

At end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the first scientific and military expeditions began to explore the hinterland of the largest Indonesian Island, where they had to deal with the challenging access routes and the bellicose local people who defended their land. From that hard experience a double perception of the island emerged in Western imagination: on one side, the luxuriant forests and the uncontaminated beauty of its nature, which evoked the idea of a primordial Golden Age; on the opposite side, the native Dayak, represented in the literature and iconography of the time as cruel head-hunters. A distorted and limited perception of Dayak's cultural tradition also concerned the objects produced by local populations, which were considered mostly as fetishes and «primitive» objects.

The knowledge conveyed by European and American ethnological museums and the ethnographic field research have progressively contributed to produce more accurate descriptions and to better understand the culture and art of Borneo. This knowledge was however exclusively shared between a restricted circle of specialists which only partially affected the vision of the native populations of Borneo and their art in the Western imagination. If approached with other eyes and explored in its profound motivations, the artistic production reveals instead the surprising socio-cultural depth and the mastery of the peoples who produced it.

The interest of Lugano's Museum of Cultures for the art of Borneo was born with the appeal that the art of this part of the world exercised on Serge Brignoni (1903-2002), whose collection represents the founding nucleus of the Museum. Like many avant-garde artists of his generation, the Swiss artist's collecting passion has always been oriented towards the traditional arts of the South Seas. Among the latter, Brignoni was particularly attracted by the large wooden sculptures coming from the Indonesian areas of Borneo: top sections of ceremonial poles depicting anthropomorphic figures with a remarkable expressive impact, accentuated by the action of the climatic agents, which carved and hollow the wood out. Brignoni's intimate bond with this particular genre of works perhaps explains why, at the time of the donation to the City of Lugano in middle eighties, he decided to keep fourteen sculptures of Borneo for himself. Later on, Brignoni gave them to Bern's Art Museum, which last year donated them to MUSEC. As a result, today MUSEC has one of the largest and most important collection in the world of monumental sculptures from Borneo.

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General information

**Dayak. L'arte dei cacciatori di teste del Borneo  
[Dayak. The art of Borneo's head-hunters]**

Curated by Paolo Maiullari

Project and production: MUSEC

**September 28, 2019 – May 17, 2020**

**MUSEC – Museo delle Culture Lugano**

Villa Malpensata

Lugano, Riva Caccia 5 / Via G. Mazzini 5

main entrance through the garden

Phone +41(0)58 866 6960; [info@musec.ch](mailto:info@musec.ch)

Opening hours

11 am – 18 pm. Closed on Tuesday

Admission tickets

Full price (16+); CHF 15.-

Reduced price: CHF 10.- (over 65; AVS-AI; University students, FAI Swiss)

Children (6-15): CHF 5.-

Schools: CHF 3.- (+ 1 teacher free)

Free:

children under 6; ICOM-AMS; Swiss Museum Pass; Raiffeisen Members; Swiss Travel Pass

Groups (min. 10 persons): - 10%

Lugano Holyday Card: - 20%

Guided tours for groups: CHF 150.- (CHF 120.- for schools)

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## The exhibition's sections

### **A crossroads of civilization (room 1)**

Over thousands and thousands of years, numerous Asian peoples travelled across the oceans to migrate, trade, or conquer new lands, disseminating their culture along the way. Some crossed paths with the island of Borneo, located in a strategic position along the Maritime Silk Route, in the immense Malay archipelago, on the border between the Indian and the Pacific Oceans. The interactions between these peoples led to the emergence of a multiethnic world, where those who spoke different languages shared the same objects, adapting and interpreting them according to their needs.

The resulting material culture, along with the many ideas introduced in Borneo, provided rich sources for the artistic languages of the Dayaks leading to the creation of an original and locally distinctive system of ideology and expression..

### **The construction of an imaginary (room 2)**

Around the mid-nineteenth century, a new world opened up to the West, when for the first time ever Europeans systematically ventured into Borneo's hinterland for the purpose of collecting information on its resources and its native Dayak inhabitants. These scientific and military expeditions often met the resistance of valorous and bellicose warriors, whose defence of their territory frustrated the Europeans' attempts to permanently settle in many parts of the island. These experiences ended up in the pages of European newspapers and in travel and adventure novels. The press, along with photography, contributed to disseminating the notion that the Dayaks were dangerous, particularly emphasizing their most "savage" tradition, headhunting.

The weapons, decorated skulls, and war costumes that were gathered on the field became emblematic of Borneo: they were as disturbing for the contents they evoked as they were intriguing for the high quality of their production.

### **The ethnographic research (room 3)**

Starting from the mid-nineteenth century, the exploration of Borneo's hinterland gave Westerners the opportunity to set up expeditions aimed at documenting Dayak traditions via ethnographic research and the collection of material culture.

The collections would include a wide range of artefacts that, despite their diversity, provided a detailed picture of the everyday lives of the Dayaks.

Knowledge of Borneo's art and material culture was filtered through the activity of the numerous European and American ethnological museums where the first collections were formed. The ethnographic data collected in the field was used in copious scientific publications that nevertheless remained the purview of a small circle of specialists.

It was not until the 1970s that Dayak ethnographic materials were presented in the first major temporary exhibitions devoted to Borneo, exhibitions that introduced Dayak art to the public at large.

### **A passion for collecting (room 4)**

Beginning in the 1920s, various typologies of art from Borneo attracted the collecting interest of many artists who placed the value of ethnic creativity at the centre of their aesthetic reflections.

These included the famous French poet and writer André Breton (1896-1966), who collected ceremonial hudoq masks, as well as the Surrealist Swiss artist Serge Brignoni (1903-2002), one of the first to curate an important collection of monumental sculptures. Brignoni classified the art of Borneo within a vaster geographical whole that he referred to as the art of the "Southern Seas", which he believed cast light on the attraction towards the imaginary and the irrational that had seduced the poetics of the Surrealist movement.

After the first major museum exhibitions of Dayak art in the 1970s, European and American galleries also began regularly devoting their activities to the art of Borneo, organizing events that contributed to increasing the art's visibility and the interest of collectors at an international level

### **Heart of darkness (room 5)**

In the second half of the nineteenth century a definite dichotomy in the perception of Borneo and its cultures was gradually established in the Western imaginary. The luxuriant rainforest and the uncontaminated beauty of the island's nature, which harkened back to the idea of a primordial golden age, constituted one extreme of a vision that had, as its other extreme, the

Dayak natives, represented in the literature and iconography of the time as cruel headhunters.

The art of Borneo, conceived in a stereotypical way (as were the peoples that produced it), was burdened and stigmatized by this legacy, and therefore seen as little more than fetishes and other objects of "primitive" worship. This perspective led in turn to a distorted vision of the complex culture of the Dayaks, whose system of expression instead revealed surprising depth, the fruit of the sociocultural creativity of its authors.

### **The art of war (room 6)**

Among the various types of Borneo war shields, the ones that were painted on both sides and decorated with tufts of human hair have always drawn the attention of Western explorers, travellers, and collectors. These shields undoubtedly originated among the Kayan and Kenyah cultures of Central Eastern Borneo; they later spread among other ethnic groups, with local variations in the pictorial decoration.

These shields generally feature a large face with a monstrous appearance at the centre. By contrast, the inner surface instead may display a range of different imagery, depending on the ethnicity of the shields' makers, including anthropomorphic or zoomorphic depictions of spirits, or plant motifs arranged in a concentric pattern.

Shield-makers used a knife tip to make the surface designs. They used either a finger or a chiselled cane to apply pigments (blues, yellows, reds). The shields' tufts of hair came from the heads of enemies killed in battle. Shield-makers attached the hair to the shield by forcing one end of the tufts into narrow slits in the soft wood and then gluing them with fresh resin.

Four parallel reed bundles were meant to reinforce its structure, making it more solid so that it could withstand sword blows. Some shields have no pictorial decorations or human hair; these were used and disseminated in the past by a number of different Borneo cultures.

In the first quarter of the twentieth century, the pacification of the Dayaks led to the gradual disappearance of battle shields.

### **Prestige and dignity (rooms 7- 8)**

Dayak art and material culture are a privileged means of communication, in many cases used to advertise the social status of individuals in a community.

The most sought-after objects, such as ones decorated with special motifs or ones of great economic and ideological value, were reserved for valorous men, and expressed both their prestige and their dignity.

These were the same individuals who were depicted in carved representations of dignitaries or authoritative ancestors whose presence safeguarded tradition within the community.

The values and merits of the individuals who played a crucial social role within their local community were also key to a series of decorations that can be found in body art, in ornaments, in prestige items (especially weapons) and in architectural structures

### **The religious universe (room 9 - 10)**

The religious life of the Dayaks was marked by numerous ceremonies enacted by the community or by the extended family. These events were either periodical or they occurred on particular occasions. Birth, marriage, healing, and death were also the subject of important celebrations.

Funeral ceremonies, in particular, were the subject of important rites among many Dayak peoples: from an ideological perspective, these ceremonies marked the rebirth of the deceased in the afterlife and their return and acceptance by the ancestors' community. On such occasions, the most important deities in the cosmology were summoned to take part in the celebrations in order to guarantee the deceased person's soul successful arrival in the afterlife. Those same deities, along with the deceased who undertook the journey towards their final dwelling, were often depicted in sculpture.

### **The dog-dragon (room 11)**

The theme of the dragon was widespread throughout Borneo and it was the object of a great number of variations in form and meaning. Many studies have been dedicated to its origins, studies that have emphasized the strong association with Chinese dragons featuring a snake body, paws, and a long, fanged face, as well as with the makara water monsters of Indian and Javanese Hindu-Buddhism mythology, characterized by a highly stylized open mouth with a jaw that curves upwards, and an elongated body. Among the figurative cultures of Borneo, the dragon can assume various forms and be represented in multiple objects of material culture. Often, it is hybridized with other animals, such as the tiger, the crocodile, and especially the dog.

The Kayan, Bahau, Modang and Kenyah cultures of Central Eastern Borneo made many types of dragon-dog representations, the so-called "dog motif" (aso'). This was a powerful spirit that protected the community and the souls of the deceased. The very fact that it was called a "dog" instead of its real name indicates how strong and feared it was, since simply saying its name could arouse its wrath. The representations of the aso' could be further

hybridized with the tiger ("tiger-dog", sah lejiu), the bear ("bear-dog", aso' buang), and the crocodile. These animals were portrayed on doors, sarcophagi, roofs, architectural structures and elements, and other material culture. In addition to protecting a person from bad influences, they could advertise a person's social standing.

### **The supernatural world (rooms 12 - 13)**

According to Dayak ideology, the tangible reality of human beings and the metaphysical world of spiritual beings move with different rationales, but they are closely connected by an invisible thread that allow for organic interaction. The most important deities of the celestial world are normally detached from human events, but they could be called upon in case of need. Other spiritual beings inhabit the natural environment: they live in trees, in rivers, in rocks, and in springs. Some of them are benevolent, like the spirits that protected the village; others are malevolent and need to be appeased or contrasted. The Dayaks appease them by nourishing them with offerings of food, and they contrast them by seeking the intervention of other spiritual beings with whom they had been able to create an alliance, and who are believed to be capable of frightening and chasing the malevolent spirits away.

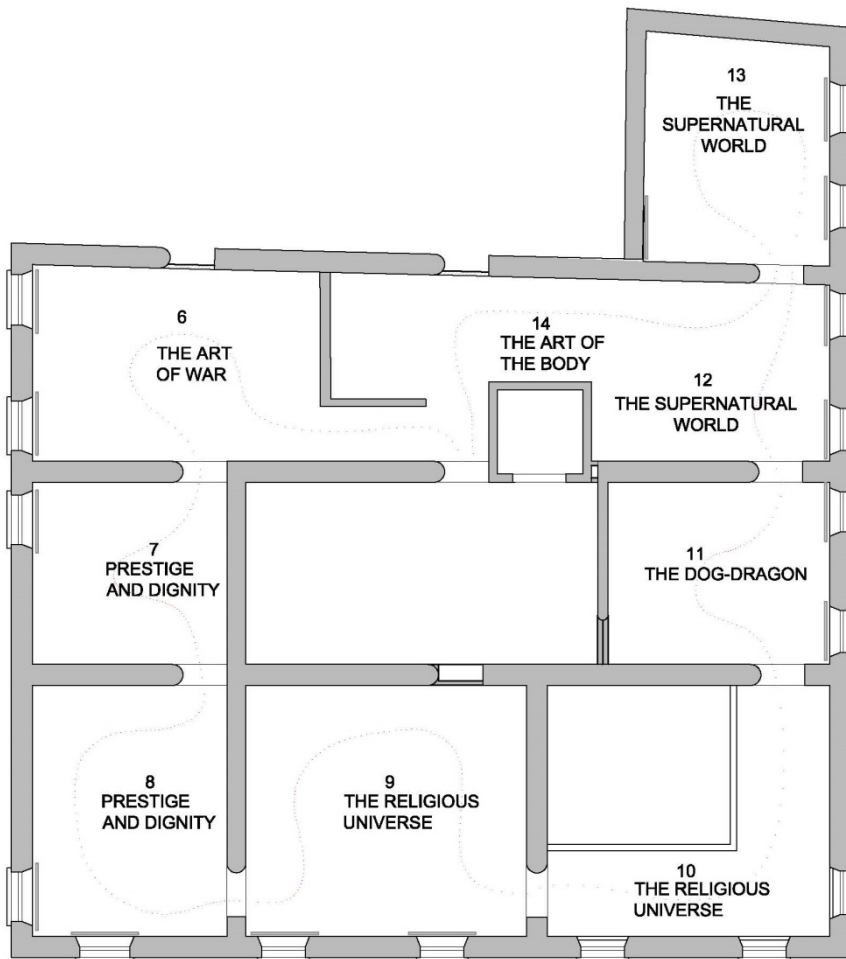
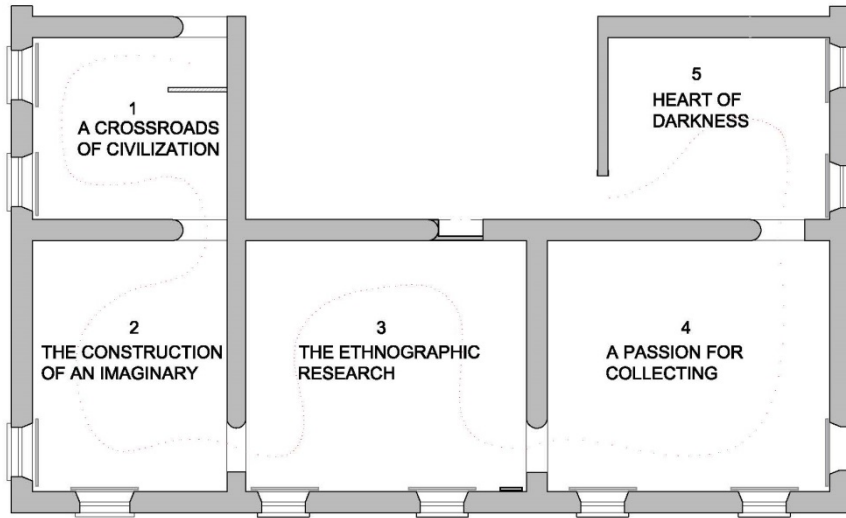
Various genres of Borneo art represent deities or benevolent spirits who are broadly seen as protective. In terms of sculpture, the figures whose purpose is to offer protection against evil beings are often characterized by large bulging eyes, jutting tongues, teeth, fangs, and sharp claws; their function and effectiveness is evident from their scary appearance.

### **The art of the body (room 14)**

The art of the tattoo was a widespread tradition among many of Borneo's peoples. The designs reproduced on the body of men and women indicated their ethnic origins, rank, the success of an enterprise, or any particular merits they had acquired, or they might just be decorative.

Tattoo patterns were carved in high relief on wooden blocks. The blocks were then coated with ink and stamped on the part of the body that was to be tattooed. The tattoo was made with a small sharp nib attached to a wooden stick. The ink was a mixture of soot, water, and sugar, and it was preserved in a wooden cup. The form and meaning of many of the motifs that spread throughout Borneo changed as they spread from one people or village to another. Studies carried out by the first explorers, at a time when the tattooing tradition was still widespread, clearly show the richness and complexity of an art of the body that today has been largely consigned to history.





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## Something worth reflecting upon

We reproduce below the conclusion of the introductory text of the catalogue of the exhibition, where Francesco Paolo Campione recalls the history of the relationship between the art of Borneo and the MUSEC. The aim of the text is to present a project by establishing the bases for the development of a specific centre of international expertise but even more to address an ethical dimension.


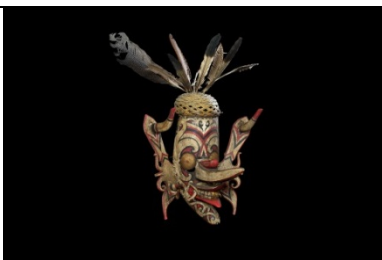
« The museum, like all organisations, not only culture-related, has as much value as a soul and a vision. Evidently, its soul cannot be separated from its mission, the latter being preserving the memory of humanity by starting from the objects that the communities created to give meaning to their existence; his vision, just as obviously, cannot be separated from valuing the memory that it preserves and that's able to trace and consolidate the paths guaranteeing the possibility to track the profound reason of things. The choice of the themes that animate the vision of museums has often depended on history with a capital «h»: the history of the events that made the world. In the case of the ethnological museums, history has long been coupled with colonialism and the affirmation of Western civilisation at every latitude of our planet. This is an incontrovertible fact, against which it is, in my humble opinion, useless and unhistorical to implement the «reparative» policies that are now invoked by many parties, with an ideological attitude extremist as it is unreasonable. Can you give back what history has taken away by turning back the hands of time? The question has its obvious answer in itself. One thing that, instead, can be done is carefully observing the minimal stories – like the one we here tried to tell – in order to accept the values – of a scientific and moral analysis that, while becoming, will not change history, but will set the premises for the safeguarding of a memory capable of creating solidarity dynamics between a multiplicity of actors, where each of them has participated and continues to participate, to the extent of their skills and their availability, to a common project.»





Source: Francesco Paolo Campione, «L'arte del Borneo e il MUSEC: un progetto, una storia minima», in: Paolo Maiullari, *Arte dayak*, Culture Arts&Books, Lugano 2009, pp. 12-13.




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## Images descriptions

Images available to download: [www.musec.ch](http://www.musec.ch)

	<p>01.</p> <p><i>Kapang-ai</i>. Work surface carved with decorations representing the spirit of the "dog-dragon". Modang Long Glaat culture. Before 1939. © 2019 FCM/MUSEC, Lugano. Brignoni Collection, Inv. As.Ins.4.029.</p>
	<p>02.</p> <p><i>Hudoq</i>. Ceremonial masks used in eponymous propitiatory dances aimed at blessing and protecting rice plants, in order to obtain a good harvest. Bahau Saa' culture. Second half of 20<sup>th</sup> c. © 2019 FCM/MUSEC, Lugano. Inv. As.Ins.4.096.</p>
	<p>03.</p> <p><i>Tuntun</i>. Detail of "charmer" stick to hunt wild boar or deer. Iban culture. Early 20<sup>th</sup> c. © 2019 FCM/MUSEC, Lugano. Brignoni Collection, Inv. As.Ins.4.023.</p>

	<p>04.</p> <p><i>Sapundu</i>. Top section of a sacrificial pole representing a pair of dignitaries embracing. Ngaju Katingan culture. 19th c. © 2019 FCM/MUSEC, Lugano. Brignoni Collection. Inv. 2018.Bri.0009.</p>
	<p>05.</p> <p><i>Ba'</i>. Baby-carrier decorated with representations of a deities and protective amulets. Kenyah culture. First half of 20th c. © 2019 FCM/MUSEC, Lugano. Private collection.</p>
	<p>06.</p> <p><i>Sapuyung daré</i>. Large ceremonial headgears produced by a class of women who were "master weavers". Ngaju culture. 20th c. © 2019 FCM/MUSEC, Lugano. Inv. As.Ins.4.078.</p>
	<p>07.</p> <p>Large section of the door of a ruler's house portraying a deity. Kenyah culture. Mid-20th c. © 2019 FCM/MUSEC, Lugano. Private collection.</p>

	<p>08.</p> <p>Fragment representing a dog-dragon, that was at one time a decorative element of a house. Kenyah people. Mid-20th c. © 2019 FCM/MUSEC, Lugano. Private collection.</p>
	<p>09.</p> <p>Fragment of sarcophagi representing Pèn Lih, a being believed to be the lightning spirit, as well as one that guided the souls of the dead into the afterlife (psychopomp). Bahau or Modang people. 18th - mid-19th c. © 2019 FCM/MUSEC, Lugano. Brignoni Collection, Inv. As.Ins.4.034.</p>
	<p>10.</p> <p><i>Kelembit bok</i>. War shield painted and decorated with strands of hair, depicting in centre the face of a protective deity. Kenyah culture. Before 1899. © Musée d'ethnographie, Neuchâtel. Inv. II.C.66. Photo: Prune Simon-Vermot.</p>