



The Sarawak Museum Journal

Vol. XL No. 61

December 1989



ISSN: 0375-3050

E-ISSN: 3036-0188

Citation: Heppell, M. (1989). Whither Dayak Art. The Sarawak Museum Journal, XL (61): 75-92

WHITHER DAYAK ART?

Michael Heppell

Dayak art is in the final stages of a slow terminal illness. It will pass away having contributed many beautiful objects to museums in the world. The objects are likely to remain curiosities because of the dearth of reliable information about them. In libraries one searches in vain for books on Dayak art, for none exist. Compare this state of affairs to other areas of the world. There are many books on African, Oceanic, American Indian, and south-east Asian art. The few thousand Aborigines of Australia have had numerous books written about their art; the few million Dayaks none. The art of the Aborigines is actively promoted and sold to collectors, museums and the like. Dayak art is not. Disinterest is paramount. Is it any wonder then that the art of the Dayak is under appreciated and undervalued both in the world at large and, more importantly, by the very people themselves, the Dayaks, in whose hands the continuation of some great art traditions absolutely depends?

That Dayaks can and do produce major works of art is amply demonstrated by the prices that pieces can obtain in the major art auctions of the world. Major exhibitions devoted to Dayak art are held from time to time. One is planned later this year in Philadelphia; a second in two year's time by the Museum of Mankind in Great Britain. Such exhibitions draw the attention of the world to Dayak art and generate an interest in it. For anyone stimulated to acquire examples of Dayak art, the interest is shortlived for the supply is now virtually exhausted and good modern examples are extremely rare.

WHITHER DAYAK ART?

by

Michael Heppell

Dayak art is in the final stages of a slow terminal illness. It will pass away having contributed many beautiful objects to museums in the world. The objects are likely to remain curiosities because of the dearth of reliable information about them. In libraries one searches in vain for books on Dayak art, for none exist. Compare this state of affairs to other areas of the world. There are many books on African, Oceanic, American Indian, and south-east Asian art. The few thousand Aborigines of Australia have had numerous books written about their art; the few million Dayaks none. The art of the Aborigines is actively promoted and sold to collectors, museums and the like. Dayak art is not. Disinterest is paramount. Is it any wonder then that the art of the Dayak is under appreciated and undervalued both in the world at large and, more importantly, by the very people themselves, the Dayaks, in whose hands the continuation of some great art traditions absolutely depends?

That Dayaks can and do produce major works of art is amply demonstrated by the prices that pieces can obtain in the major art auctions of the world. Major exhibitions devoted to Dayak art are held from time to time. One is planned later this year in Philadelphia; a second in two year's time by the Museum of Mankind in Great Britain. Such exhibitions draw the attention of the world to Dayak art and generate an interest in it. For anyone stimulated to acquire examples of Dayak art, the interest is shortlived for the supply is now virtually exhausted and good modern examples are extremely rare.

Among their numerous art forms, Dayaks produce monumental or civic art. As a tourist wanders around the many towns of Sarawak, where will he glimpse Dayak monuments commissioned by a civic or state authority? Over the border in Kalimantan, there are many examples of Dayak sculptures on public display. In Samarinda, for example, both the governor's residence and the governor's office have ceremonial pole (*beliring* — after the Kenyah poles which were erected after a head had been taken) in their grounds. Other government offices and civic buildings also have Dayak monuments at their front. Roofs of buildings display the two dimensional Dayak designs that traditionally would have graced a Kayan, Kenyah or Kajang *salong* (grave house). For a time such recognition gave many communities pride in their art and a desire to continue to design, carve and paint. Many have built *balai desa* or *rumah adat* which are resplendent with local designs.

Despite these hopeful signs, there are contrary ones. Javanese design and craftsmanship now appear to be in the ascendant in Kalimantan. A Javanese sculptor was commissioned to produce a sculpture of dolphins which graces the approaches to a new bridge erected across the Mahkam river. In a recent reconstruction of a famous Benuaq longhouse near Tanjong Isui, the Dayak figures placed in front of the entrances to the longhouse were carved not by Dayaks, but by Javanese and Buginese craftsmen imported to do the job.

Now in Kalimantan, the able Dayak artists and carvers are all middle aged or more. The young take no interest in artistic endeavours. For them, the art of their mothers and fathers, to their shame, is a token of their former primitivism rather than of an expression of a unique way of seeing and representing aspects of their world and a set of art forms of undeniable beauty.

Among the Dayaks, in one generation traditional art has moved from the esteemed to the embarrassing. In the past, the artist was highly valued. For example, among the Iban skill at carving was a token of refinement and added greatly to a person's eligibility. A future carver would serve his apprenticeship by decorating bamboo cylinders with foliate scrolls and give them to attractive girls he was wooing. The cylinders would be a token of a love affair and would be used by the girl to store small pieces of weaving equipment like bodkins. Girls were more likely to be attracted to a man with artistic skills than one without because the tokens of an affair were highly desirable. In turn, the girl would reciprocate such a gift by weaving something like a tobacco pouch for her beloved. Weaving too was a highly respected skill among the Iban and accomplished weavers were very desirable partners. Consequently, artistic skills and accomplishment gave both sexes the pick of the available bachelors.

To survive and flourish in a modern idiom, Dayak art will need imaginative programs on the part of government to re-instill the high sense of value the various groups living in Borneo once had in their art. Hitherto, as governments have concentrated on economic development, encouragement of art forms has tended to be neglected as scarce resources are channelled into high priority economic programs. With the acquisition of reasonable levels of wealth comes the time when funds can be diverted to the development of traditional art. If spent wisely, funds diverted to art will show a good economic return, though one which is much more difficult to quantify than, for example, an investment in an oil palm project. Art, if marketable, obviously can be sold. Increasingly in the world, as leisure itself becomes a major industry, art is becoming a major lure to bring people to a place and there spend their leisure dollars.

In this paper, I would like to consider the whole of the great island of Borneo, but with a special emphasis on Sarawak. I do this because I believe that an enduring future for Dayak art can only be secured by concerted action on both sides of the border, employing the few individuals who still have the skills, inspiration and understanding to pass on their knowledge to future generations.

Having talked about Dayak art using the expression 'Dayak' as a word of convenience to include all the inland peoples of Borneo, I would now more correctly like to consider the art of individual groups. A general description