

Beginning of the Becoming: Batak sculpture from northern Sumatra

The Asian Civilisations Museum (ACM) in Singapore is currently presenting an exhibit that examines the extraordinary sculptural traditions of the Batak people, who live in the mountain heartlands around Lake Toba. This striking environment has nurtured an intriguing culture rooted in early Austronesian traditions including animism and ancestor veneration.

David Alan Henkel



THE COLLECTION OF BATAK SCULPTURE and other ritual or daily use objects began in the mid-to late 19th century as part of what was then the emerging science of ethnology. Inspired by the principles of Linnaean classification, colonial officials, missionaries and museums began obtaining and exhibiting these objects, not as art, but as artefacts of what they viewed as primitive, backward societies. It was believed that these objects could shed light on the communities as well as the history of man. Over the course of the twentieth century attitudes toward ethnographic art began to change and some collectors began selecting works based on their aesthetic merit.

Art or ethnography

This exhibition at the ACM – titled ‘Beginning of the Becoming’, which is a literal translation of the name of the Batak’s supreme god *Mula Jadi Na Bolon* – is more art historical than ethnographic and focuses on sculptural works. Many of these sculptures were made by the *datu*, an important functionary who served Batak society as a sort of shaman, priest, ritual practitioner and healer. The works were largely made for ritual purposes and had to conform to formal standards in order to be effective. However, given the great variety and creativity of these sculptures it is also clear that there was substantial leeway for the carver to express their imagination and creativity. Scholars argue about the relative importance of aesthetics in tribal art, but this exhibition suggests that Batak sculptors meant for their works to be beautiful, even as they were also meant to be ritually powerful.

A wide variety of three-dimensional human figures or *gana-gana*, were produced by the Batak sculptor. These included *debata idup*, literally ‘living ancestors’, which represent departed relatives and sometimes came in male and female pairs. *Pangulubalang* figures on the other hand were carvings of dead spirits enlisted by the *datu* to protect the community and ward off supernatural attacks. They can usually be identified because they are charged with *pupuk*, a magic substance inserted into a cavity carved into the figure and plugged with a peg or with resin. *Pagar* figures were also protective and were meant to ward off malevolent spirits. The most important item in a *datu*’s paraphernalia was certainly his staff. These come in two main forms, the *tungkot malehat*, which is characterised by a large human figure usually shown riding atop a mythical *singa* or lion. He is usually surrounded by other smaller figures with their hands pressed together in what appears to be a sign of obeisance. The totem pole-like *tunggal panaluan* on the other hand is characteristically topped by a male figure, usually shown standing over a female figure with a descending series of human and animal figures including, lions, buffaloes, horses, elephants, dogs, snakes, lizards and crocodiles.

Magic and mythic

The *datu* needed to produce a wide variety of medicinal concoctions both for use in healing and for the animation of protective amulets and figures. The most infamous of these were a class of magic substances known as *pupuk* made from disagreeable substances such as rotten leaves, soil from the site where two animals had fought or the itchy scales of the sugar palm. The *datu* stored his concoctions in ceramic or earthen



Top left: Introductory section of the exhibition highlighting masterpieces of Batak sculptural art.

Centre: Magic staff (*tungkot malehat*) Karo Batak, late 19th century Mandala Foundation Collection.

Bottom right: Seated male figure Toba Batak, 17th or 18th century Mandala Foundation Collection.

jars with carved wooden stoppers, known as *guri-guri*, or in lidded wooden or bamboo containers called *perminaken*. Often these were imported stoneware or ceramic jars from China and Southeast Asia which were highly prized as heirlooms. Medicine horns known as *sahan* were containers for *raja ni pagar*, or ‘the king of protective medicine’, one of the most powerful magic substances in the *datu*’s pharmacopeia. They were made from the hollow horn of a water buffalo with a wood stopper that is often carved with elaborate *naga morsarang*, a powerful mythical dragon-like creature.

Mythical creatures such as the *singa* and *naga* are common in Batak carving and often adorn containers or the handles of tools and weapons. Lizard images were regarded as protective and are often carved on house doors or covers of boxes and other containers. Aside from mythical creatures though, carved, three dimensional figures of animals are comparatively rare in Batak art. Among the more intriguing are large bird figures called *manuk manuk*, which appear to have been suspended, probably in the rafters of the traditional clan houses. These almost certainly relate back to an almost ubiquitous Austronesian belief in a spirit bird that could communicate with the gods and ancestors in heaven.

Not all forms of art in Batak society were strictly the province of the *datu*. Some craftsmen specialised in making *hasapi* lutes and other musical instruments. Iron smiths forged beautiful yet functional weapons, bronze smiths cast containers, tools and decorative handles or finials and gold and silver



smiths produced jewellery and added decorative touches to a host of other objects such as the sheaths of swords and daggers. Weaving was the province of Batak women and the most skilled of these were much admired for their dexterity. Houses were built by specialists known as *pande rumah* (literally house building masters) who specialised in the construction and decoration of these often immense structures. The most skilful were widely celebrated and richly rewarded for their work and were in constant demand among the wealthier clans.

The exhibition

This exhibition challenges preconceptions and asserts a rightful place for Batak sculpture in the global artistic canon. It includes over 80 works in wood, stone, and bronze, most on loan from the famous Mandala Foundation collection, including 20 objects that have been generously donated to the ACM by the foundation. The show will be on view at the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore, until 29 March 2015.

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