

## Ceremonial Seat

Borneo, Kalimantan, Dayak, 18th-19th century

Wood

Gift of the Christensen Fund, 2001

(10625.1)

This remarkable seat is carved in the form of a mythical, horned animal with short legs and a curled tail. The animal's upper jaw is elephantine in appearance, but the image may be a version of the common *aso* motif, described as a dragon-dog. Carved seats of this type were major symbols of authority. The animated character and sculptural excellence of the seat displayed here suggest it was the treasured possession of a person of the highest stature.



## ZOOMORPHIC SEAT

A large wood stool carved in the form of an animal. Four very short hooped legs support the flattened underbelly section. This protrudes forward to become an elongated neck and great, stylised head. At the rear, the outer edges converge beneath the seat to become a very long thick tail which loops twice whilst curling up onto the seat above.

The head is very round with a ridged crown. Its jaw bares long, inclining teeth. The upper jaw protrudes forward and coils over on itself leaving a round hole in its centre. The upper rows of teeth on each side are pierced by a small deep round hole which may have carried wood fangs or tusks. Another deep round hole in the mouth probably carried the shaft of an iron cutting tool, such as a rasp.

The eyes are large circular cavities into which conus shell disks were inserted. The right shell is missing. Behind eyes are the worn stumps of ears long since broken off. Very long twisted horns project out from head and curve back to merge tangentially with rim of seat which at this, its widest point, overhangs the narrower undersides. The forward rim of seat in between horns converges to a cambered apex above nape while at the rear the rim converges to a point resting on the dorsal edge of the tail within its first, main loop.

There is a shallow circular cavity in centre of seat which once may have been inlaid with conus shell. The upper surfaces horns, seat and tail mostly covered by a black, crusty deposit : the old dark patina of other surfaces obscured by a thin layer of dirt and soot.

Length : 30 inches    76 cms  
Height : 13 inches    33 cms  
Width : 15.5 inches    39 cms

KAYAN or PENIHING  
Reputed to have been collected at Long Tring.

Loaned to the Crafts Council of Australia 1984 for an exhibition entitled Arts of the Indonesian Archipelago.

Throughout Southeast Asia and Indonesia, common people in the past ordinarily used mats for sitting and sleeping. And even today where no ground or floor covering is available people still squat on their haunches. In the olden days rigid, heavy immobile furniture was not employed outside of temples and royal courts. In and outside the dwelling place woven pandanus leaf and split-bamboo mats were used for sitting and sleeping. Readily soiled in daily use, plain mats were replaced by other precious mats often woven with coloured genealogical themes for hospitable, public occasions. Whatever the grade, at daybreak after sleeping, after a work pause or guests' departure, the mats were brushed and rolled up carefully. Treated as furniture, one would no more tread barefoot across a mat than in modern society, one would clamber across a sofa or coffee table. Against this background the special nature of carved wood or stone stools can more easily be perceived. The 19th century literature explains how traditional etiquette required all subjects and visitors - dignitaries included - to assume a lower posture than the host's and never to presume to sit uninvited on the same level.

Some substantial seats with buffalo and phallic motifs were collected early this century from the Toraja of Sulawesi. Used only in special circumstances, they were primary symbols of authority. Their place in the social fabric was not unlike the famous orators stools of Papua New Guinea. The splendid Borneo seat presented here is carved from red Artocarpus wood. The work of a master sculptor it is unquestionably the largest and finest of the only three figurative seats known. The smallest, in the Itzikowitz collection exhibited at Geneva and Brooklyn Museums is the least pleasing. A second larger stool with a mythological Aso head is in the collection of James Freeman, Kyoto. Having carefully studied the important museum and private collections worldwide, our conclusion is that these seats are the extremely rare, precious relics of a vanishing forest civilisation. The photographs fail to portray this seats' massive proportions. Its animated character and sculptural perfection epitomize the strong prestigious attributes expected from holders of high office. It is a seat which in its ancient setting was perceived and treasured as a throne to which only a penghulu of the highest statures was elected.

Bibliography :

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