



Baby carrier

On display

Title/Description: Baby carrier

Object Type: Implement

Materials: Shell, Wood

Measurements: h. 356 x w. 445 x d. 180 mm

Accession Number: 797

Historic Period: 19th/20th century

Production Place: Borneo, Pacific, Southeast Asia

Cultural Group: Kayan, Kenyah

This is one of several wooden baby carriers (*hawat*), some of them virtuoso pieces of sculpture, which have been published (see Richman, 1980: 132; Avé, 1981: 105; Barbier, 1984: pl. 26; Feldman, 1985: pl. 7), though none appear to have any collection data associated with them. Their age and precise provenance therefore remain uncertain, although on stylistic grounds they can be attributed to the Kenyah or Kayan of the central highlands. Roth (1896: I: 100), however, illustrates a shell-inlaid example, confirming the antiquity of the type, which is much rarer than rattan-backed examples or those with beadwork decoration. This is a form of baby carrier used widely by the Dayak of Borneo, Dayak being a term used to describe the Indigenous people of Borneo, as distinct from the Malays, Chinese and others who now live in the coastal areas.

There are few signs of wear, though these heavy examples would not have been for daily use, and Nieuwenhuis (1904: pl. 14) shows how cloth padding was used on the inside of the curved backboard. Three pegs secure the backboard where it is slotted into the semi-circular base; four carved lugs along the top and two holes in the base were for shoulder straps, now missing. A number of the conus shell discs have been replaced by a previous owner.

The two lugs at each side are in the form of 'dog-dragons' (*am*) with gaping jaws, while further *aso* motifs appear beneath the three main figures. The ass profile is frequently found on carvings associated with high-ranking Kenyah and Kayan, as are frontal anthropomorphic figures. These are widely explained as having protective functions (see Sumnik-Dekovich, 1985: 103, 109; Ave and King, 1986: 62), and since baby carriers have a shield-like quality, such tutelary carvings are not inappropriate.

Steven Hooper, 1997

Entry taken from *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, Vol. 2: Pacific, African and Native North American Art*, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997) p. 88.
