

23 May – 25 August 2007

Patong. Great Figures Carved by the People of Borneo
from the Brignoni Collection, Museum of Cultures of the City of Lugano

The Spirit of Thunder

Among the works exhibited, one in particular is an object of great interest: Due to its ancientness, its expressive strength and the profound significance that was attached to it in the local culture, it is almost an epitome of the anthropological, historical and artistic value of the Collection of the Lugano Museum of Cultures. It is a large sculptural fragment of ironwood (scient.: *Eusideroxylon zwageri*) eroded by rain and over time, with vertical grooves carved across a heart-shaped face (cat. 1). It represents a being which, at first sight, could be connoted in an area of formal ambiguity, halfway from the human and the animal. The round, prominent and flat eyes, placed near the perimeter of the skull, astutely catch the attention and refer to a path of inner exploration of the sculptural values of the work, that become evident through the figurative dynamism: the huge nostrils in the middle of the face and the flat and rhomboidal mouth, showing two long ranges of jagged teeth placed next to the lip line. All is characterized by an impressive emotional deepness, which raises doubts about the real formal soundness of the work. The sculpture belongs to an archaic form of *Dayak* art and is one of the most ancient cultural legacies of Borneo's peoples. It is the extremity of a sarcophagus (*lungun* or *lungon*) which was displayed on a ceremonial platform. The figure represents Pèn Lih, considered by the Modang a powerful psychopomp and guardian, and it was identified, in the legends and myths, as the spirit of thunder. The stylistic traits of the work suggest that it could have been carved by an artist which was active in one of the settlements of Long Glaat, Long Hubun or Keliway (Eastern Borneo).

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