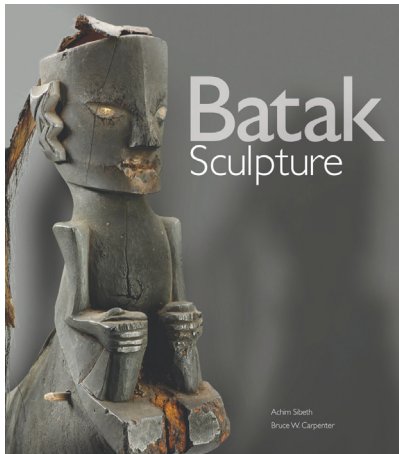


TOKO BUKU

Reviews of English language books on Indonesia

By Pak Bill

Batak Sculpture by Achim Sibeth and Bruce W. Carpenter



Batak Sculpture brings to life the powerful, highly distinctive and underappreciated art of the Bataks. This lavishly illustrated book presents literally hundreds of stark images of Batak sculpture, vividly reflecting the rich cultural history of a nearly forgotten

traditional society.

Seven million strong, the sturdy rice-growing Batak people live in spectacular mountainous valleys deep in the interior of northern Sumatra, their homeland extending up to 200 kilometers north and 300 kilometers south of Lake Toba. The tribe is divided into five related ethno-linguistic groups, each sharing many of the same cultural and artistic patterns and traditions.

Developing an early reputation for ferocity and cannibalism, the Batak have retained their own way of life right up to the middle of the 19th century when Dutch and German Christian missionaries first discovered and then began to convert them. When the colonial government finally incorporated Batak lands into the Dutch East Indies by force in 1907, the use of all religious objects and weapons were prohibited. Samosir Island was the last bastion of the Toba Bataks, conquered at last by back-packers in the early 1970s.

Remarkable among anthropologists as a literate people who at the same time ritually consumed human flesh, the Batak have long been sophisticated artisans in the working of metal, woodcarving, stone carving, boat-making, tie-dying, and bone, shell and bark fabrication.

The profusion of art and craft objects in Batak culture is an expression of their religious ideas and their obvious deep belief in magic. Batak woodcarving incorporates magic signs and fertility symbols. Living around the shores of a massive volcanic lake, motifs point to the Batak's dependence on canoes. Sorcerer's long wooden staffs, like grotesque miniature totem-poles, feature weird figures climbing up the whole length, while eerie old *pustaha* magic augury books - now virtually unobtainable - are made of bark or bamboo.

Within the pages of *Batak Sculpture* are also images of medicine horns, pouches, masks, containers, weapons, knives, swords, metal antiques, lutes, medicine horns, house carvings, statues with riders. All show a mixture of Dongson and Indian influences. Some of their stone sculpture bear uncanny resemblances to certain stone sculptures created in other parts of Austronesia.

Unlike most art books published in Indonesia today, *Batak Sculpture* was not written as a hardcover magazine but as a serious reference and pictorial work that is meant to stand the test of time. The project took over 2-1/2 years to complete and involved the participation of dozens of international experts.

Although their art has been known in the West for more than 150 years, *Batak Sculpture* at last fills the glaring lack of books solely dedicated to one of Indonesia's major and undervalued tribal art traditions. This welcome

publication is only the second English language book and the fourth book in any language that is solely dedicated to the subject of Batak art and culture. The last work on Batak art, *The Batak: Peoples Of The Island Of Sumatra* by Achim Sibeth, was published over 18 years ago.

Batak Sculpture illustrates more Batak art than all other publications, both specific and general combined, including many unknown specimens presented from many different angles. The photography is superb, made all the more so because it is printed on high-quality glossy art paper.

The book brings into public view hundreds of rarely seen artifacts matched with concise descriptions. The majority are unpublished, unlike those of the Barbier Indonesian collection in Paris which have appeared in so many publications so many times that one began to wonder if there were only two extant Batak magic priest's staffs in existence.

Batak Sculpture also includes informative and enlightening essays on Batak art and culture by Bruce Carpenter and Achim Sibeth. Both writers have reviewed all the important English-language literature written about Batak art and have established a standard by which Batak artistic styles can be measured and judged.

Bruce Carpenter's groundbreaking essay "To Be or Not to Be Art" demonstrates the direct early impact that Hindu-Buddhist influences have had on the tribe's architecture, language, script and religion. Dr. Sibeth's chapter, "Batak Art, Culture and Religion," serves as an introduction to Batak art, informing readers of the background, mythical origins and pre-Christian and the post-Christian historical eras of the Batak people.

Bruce Carpenter is a noted American art writer and critic based in Indonesia with deep experience in the artistic traditions of Indonesia and Achim Sibeth is one of the world's preeminent experts on Batak art, currently the Southeast Asian curator at Frankfurt's ethnological museum in Germany. The book's introduction is written by Miranda Goltoem, part of a new generation of young and successful Batak discovering the greatness of their ancient art and material culture that for the most part was lost to them.

Batak Sculpture is published by Singapore-based Editions Didier Millet, well known for their attractive general, trade and illustrated reference books on Indonesia. Through the use of EDM's skilled and experienced editors and designers, *Batak Sculpture* has obviously benefited from the publishing house's long association with the Southeast Asian region.

Batak Sculpture by Achim Sibeth and Bruce W. Carpenter, Editions Didier Millet 2008, ISBN-10: 9814155853, 368 pages, dimensions 11.8 x 10.6 x 1.3 inches, weight 5.9 pounds.

Available for Rp1,000,000 at Periplus Bookshops in the Bali Galleria, the Matahari in Kuta, Made's Warung in Seminyak, Ngurah Rai Airport, Gramedia Bookstores, and at Ary's and Ganesha Bookshop in Ubud and Ganesha@Biku in Kerobokan.

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