

Roof ridge of a ceremonial house



- *Bilishoi*
- Melanesia
- PNG, Lower Sepik, Yuat River
- Biwat (Mundugumor)
- Early 20th century
- Wood, traces of pigments, shells, vegetal fibres, cassowary feathers
- H : 146 cm
- Formerly A. Speyer collection, Berlin (years 1930), L. and E. Eckert-Voegelin collection, Basel (1978).
- INV. 4077

A squatting man, perilously balanced on top of a post, watches us. This piece has been hollowed at the base to a diameter of 13 cm. Seen in profile, the character's head, thrust in front of the shoulders, has almost no chin or lower jaw.

These features lead us to believe that the sculptor (or sculptors?) crafted it so as to present the character from a very particular perspective: i.e. from far below. This type of roof ridge piece is in fact very rare in Melanesia and, despite the stroke of luck that enabled several examples to be photographed during the *La Korrigane* expedition's journey through the region of the Yuat River; [1] we have no precise information about the origin and function of this sculpture.

What makes the Barbier-Mueller collection ceremonial house roof ridge so extraordinary is that when viewed from behind, it gives the distinct impression that the sculptor perfectly mastered the dynamic of forms between the back, the heavily bent legs and the head. The traces left by the adze are clearly visible and this work can be dated back to the first decades of the twentieth century.

If we refer to the myth recounted in the neighbouring village of Kinakaten, the man's squatting position strikes the author as implicitly referring to the scene where Bilishoi, the ancestral hero, once again malevolent after leaving his sisters and village of origin, kills the men who

are building a ceremonial house. Obligated to defend himself from their attacks with bows and arrows, he takes refuge on the roof ridge of the house. He repels the spears with his elbows but is finally hit by one of them, propelled by a man from the Sepik with the help of a spear-thrower. His body is boiled, then eaten by those he had attacked. [2] This effigy revived the memory of death through war and the fate of a man too powerful to respect social rules.

Christian Kaufmann *Arts of Africa and Oceania. Highlights from the Musée Barbier-Mueller*, musée Barbier-Mueller & Hazan (eds), 2007: p. 282.

[1] Coiffier [ed.] 2001, fig. bottom, p. 21.

[2] McDowell 1991, p. 159.