



On the Warp Path

Sacred textiles of Iban headhunters

VALENTINE
WILLIE
fine ART

Pua kumbu

Cotton

Warp ikat

197 cm x 92.5 cm

No heads are better than one. Decapitated corpses, such as these lively figures, are a mark of real rarity.



For scenic variety, jungles have much in common with deserts. The Borneo rainforest offers occasional sightings of a wild orchid or a tree aflame with fireflies; more likely is the flash of a rich-hued cockroach cleaning up the longhouse. The jungle dweller's response to the visual tedium of his habitat is the same as the desert dweller's — add some colour.

Whilst the tribal rugs of Iran and Central Asia are among the most treasured of all textiles, the tribal weavings of Borneo take up considerably less wall space in the great museums of the world. The subject of this exhibition is pua kumbu, the supreme example of Bornean loom artistry. As a collectable item, the name itself provides the first step towards a credibility problem. "Blanket" is the usual translation, and somehow the dignity of a blanket is easy to overlook. If there were a word which combined the roles of sacred relic, icon, wall partition, chasuble and story book, this would be a better description of the pua kumbu, or pua as it is usually called. A short word for an item so beautiful, powerful and useful.

The masters of pua manufacture are the Iban peoples of Borneo, now mostly settled in the East Malaysian state of Sarawak. Not all of the many travellers to this enormous island have liked the Iban. Victorian opinions of them varied between idle charlatans and quick-witted warrior heroes, although almost every chronicler has agreed on Iban supremacy in two fields: weaving and headhunting. Taking heads has not been practised much this century, apart from an assortment of bespectacled Japanese skulls that have been hanging from longhouse rafters since World War II. Collectors might hope that a peaceful Sarawak means more time for the Iban to let

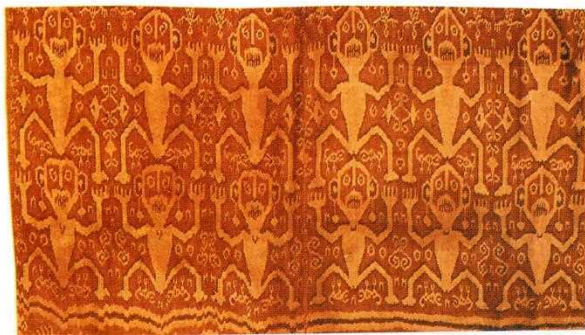
rip with their looms. This is not the case, as weaving has always been an entirely female pursuit. In addition, the entire culture that culminated in headhunting has decayed.

A pua that does not reflect the Iban way of life is no more than a blanket. In fact, blanket would be a generous term for many of the minuscule display items that now emerge from the production line. Contemporary designs would also cause dismay among an older generation of weavers who believed in the magic of their work. In the past, to depict a headless corpse was to tamper with forces so dark that only ancient women with a limited expectation of life would take the risk. The current output often features enough human wreckage to put a Malaysian news editor fully at his ease.

The contents of this exhibition follow the traditional concept of a pua, the most important features of which are the dyeing and weaving techniques. Ikat is the term used for textiles that are resist-dyed before being woven. The pattern appears on the warp threads in the case of Bornean ikat, often with bewildering complexity. To achieve this from memory, rather than pattern books, makes the whole operation impressive enough to have won the admiration of 19th-century Western travellers. These Victorians, familiar with the mechanised marvels of Bradford and Manchester, gave grudging praise to the sophisticated products of Iban looms. On this primitive equipment, described by the itinerant Thomas Chapman as "picturesquely clumsy", doughty longhouse maidens wove the shortest skirts and the longest blankets. The size of a pua varies considerably, with typical examples measuring 6 or 7 feet long by 3 or 4 feet wide. They are always made in two halves, sewn together.

218.5 cm x 149.5 cm

Engkaramba spirit figures are among the animated motifs to be found on pua kumbu. This cloth is unusual both for its large size and for the vigour of its subject matter.





197 cm x 92.5 cm

Traditional Iban weavers were as concerned with the cycle of life as with the dynamics of death. This design follows the metamorphosis of a bug on its journey to full insecthood.

Pua designs were more symbolic and less explicit before mass-tourism reached Borneo. Despite abstraction being the way of the weaver, some pictorial elements are still recognisable on older pua. The crocodile, for example, is hard to miss but might be mistaken for land-bound cousins such as the monitor lizard. Spirit figures are also easy to spot, and closely resemble the first generation of computer-game characters. Other motifs make more demands on the viewer's imagination. A white shrew on a bangkit fruit or a bird in the body of a spider can look so similar that only the weaver herself would be able to distinguish them. Since many designs were the property of their creator, intellectual copyright was a keenly contested matter. These designs were handed down from mother to daughter or sometimes sold for a fee, usually a jar, although this never applied to standard designs, such as crocodiles. The closest we are likely to get to an artist's signature is where the motifs of certain virtuoso weaving families can be seen.

The multiplication of individual features into one cohesive picture of the Iban world is what makes pua so special, and so confusing. The pioneer work on interpreting the details was started a century ago by Alfred Haddon, and almost everything that has followed borrows extensively from his research. In addition to analysing pua designs, Haddon had a lot to say about colours. His conclusion, along with every later commentator, was that a rich red colour is the supreme accomplishment of the Iban weaver. Only



divinely inspired artists have the expertise to do this, and the rites involved in dyeing thread to exactly the desired shade might go on for days. Like much of the weaving process, superior dyeing technique is tied to the world of dreams and instructions from the deities who dwell there.

Writers have generally avoided association of the preferred red colour with an essential element of Iban life; pua had a starring role as receptacles for freshly taken heads. There were, of course, many other applications more in keeping with current norms of textile usage: to decorate the longhouse for big festivals; to create an enclosure for shamans conducting sacred rites; or for draping over the shoulders of individuals in need of spiritual protection at poetry recitals and dyeing ceremonies. Unlike other status objects, such as jars and gongs, pua are useful as well as being decorative.



Iban weavings are an astonishingly brilliant and beautiful record of a society with no written language. They provide a unique reflection of Iban beliefs and aesthetics. The changing ways of a people in transition were noted by Redmond O'Hanlon in his 1983 journey *Into The Heart of Borneo*. An Iban blanket, dyed a rich red-brown colour, hung outside a longhouse, "and beneath the large-headed figures of the spirits at its base were woven four glasses, full of Guinness Stout".



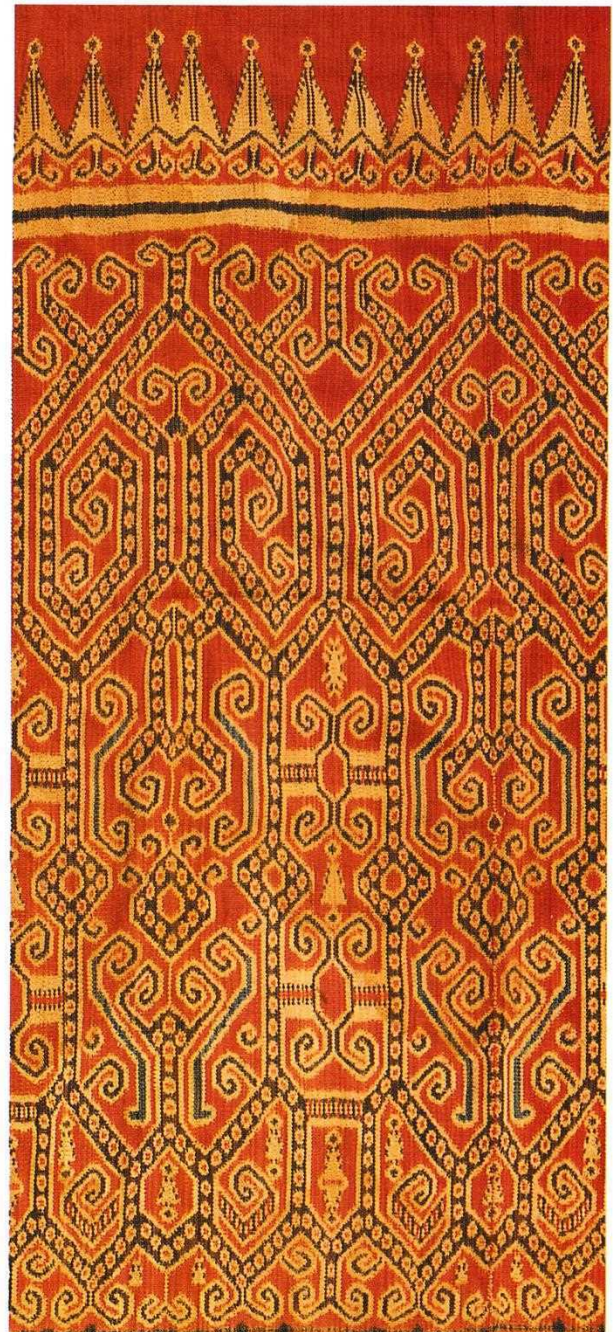
Lucien de Guise





175 cm x 91.5 cm

On Iban textiles, less is often more. The empty space in the middle of this example is associated with those cloths that took on the sacred role of receptacle for captured heads. The accompanying spirit figures create an extra dimension of sanctity.



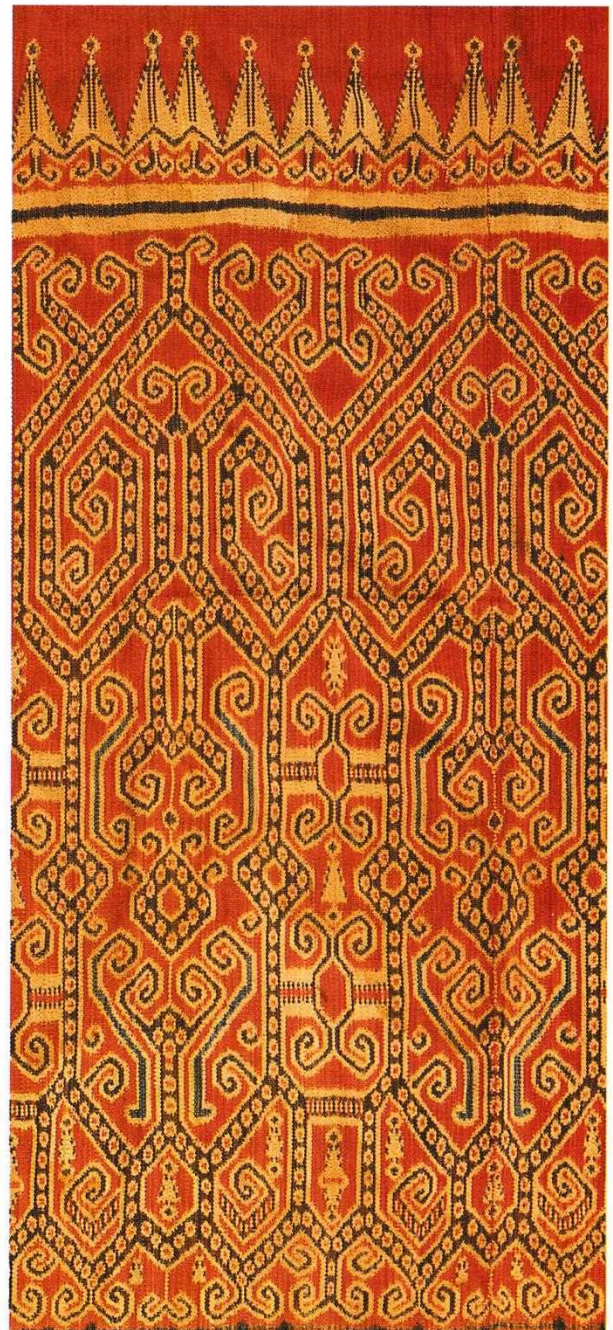
222.5 cm x 108.5 cm

Menagerie in macrocosm. The energy and complexity of Iban textiles can disguise the presence of a generous slice of Borneo's abundant plant and wild life. Pioneers of pua studies in the late 19th century concluded that identification of particular motifs is a somewhat arbitrary matter. Little has changed since then.



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212 cm x 104 cm

The seemingly chaotic look so admired by Iban weavers has been avoided in this example. The neatness of carefully arranged rows of motifs is emphasised by an unusual degree of horizontal symmetry. Because pua kumbu are woven in two halves, they frequently do not quite match.





213 cm x 98.5 cm

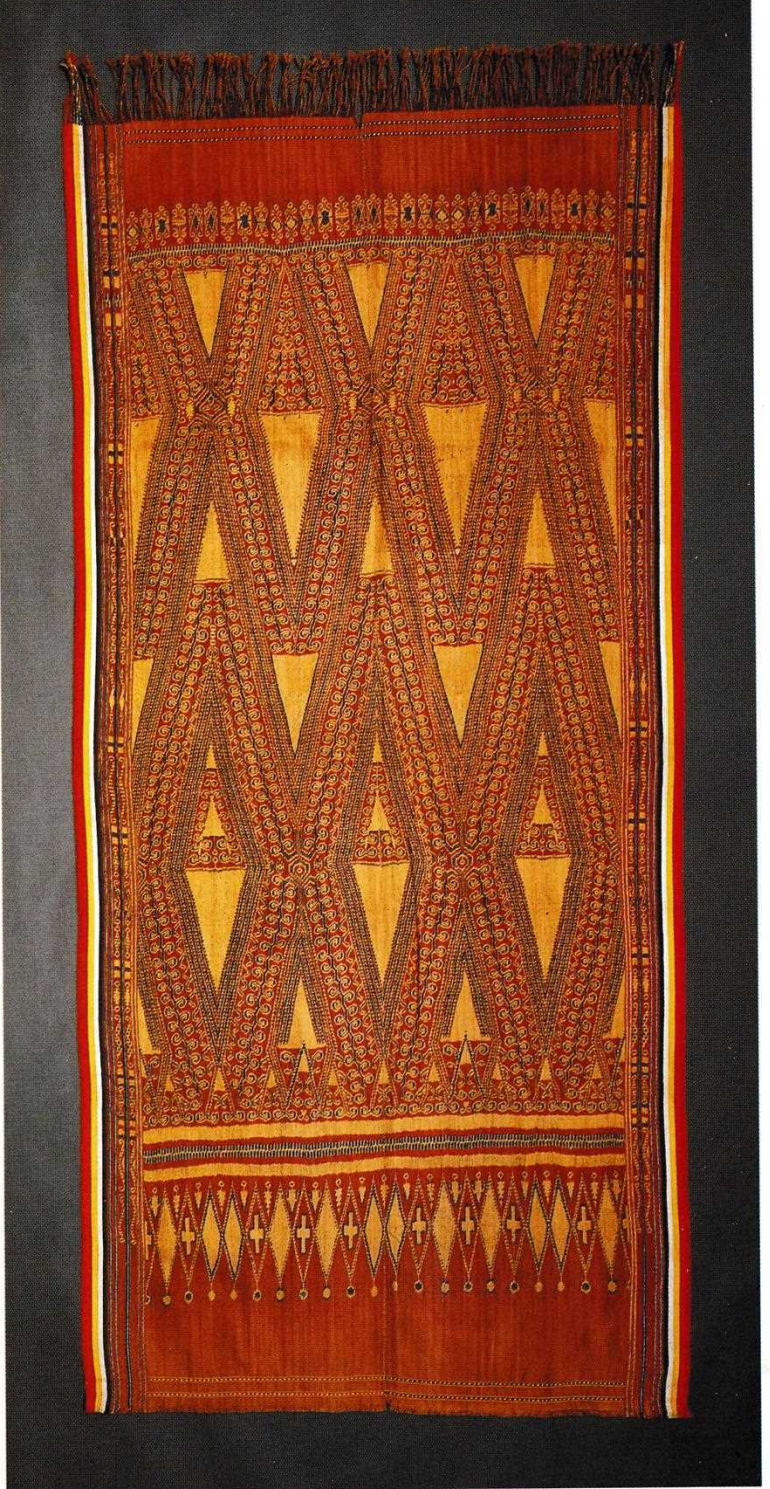
The intricacy that is possible with a basic backstrap loom is clear in this depiction of the rainforest at its busiest. An exquisite, highly stylised view of the surroundings that used to shape every aspect of Iban life.



248 cm x 109.5 cm

The pua at its most enigmatic.

This extraordinary example combines elements of traditional Iban design with a central pattern that must have made its way to Borneo via the Mediterranean and Islamic worlds.



234.5 cm x 103.8 cm

Colour is crucial to Iban weavings.

In an art form where reds and browns predominate to the exclusion of almost anything else, these purple tones stand out as a testimony to the dyer's originality. The use of large, undyed triangular motifs displays an equally bold approach to design.



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Southeast Asian Paintings & Works of Art

This exhibition will be opened by
YB Dato' Shahrizat Abdul Jalil on 14th May 1997,
and will end on 24th May 1997.

