



# Beauty and Diplomacy

The Malcolm MacDonald Collections



## Large Print Guide

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Malcolm John MacDonald (1901-1981) was a British politician, diplomat and colonial administrator. He was also an important collector and enthusiastic patron of the arts. At first devoted to Western art-forms, his work overseas inspired Malcolm with new conceptions of beauty from the cultures of Asia and Africa. The pursuit of beauty governed all his collecting, whether landscape paintings by Turner or the intricate silverwork of Brunei.

The son of Prime Minister Ramsay MacDonald, Malcolm served as a cabinet minister in the 1930s before his first diplomatic posting to Canada. In 1946 he was appointed Governor-General in Malaya. From 1948-1955, he served as Commissioner-General for South East Asia, co-ordinating all British diplomacy and colonial policy in the region. An energetic and unconventional diplomat, Malcolm vigorously supported the peaceful end of Empire and forged new partnerships with Asian nations. His vast offices in Singapore were called '*a tropical duplication of Whitehall*'. After 1955, Malcolm continued to represent Britain on the world stage with appointments to India and Kenya.

Malcolm's appointment in Singapore provided the perfect opportunity to indulge his passion for the arts. He lived in a Sultan's palace at Bukit Serene. This provided the perfect setting for his vast and varied collections. Even the canons now in the Oriental Museum were bought to decorate his veranda. Soon Malcolm discovered his greatest collecting passion: imperial Chinese ceramics.

But art and beauty are not just about objects. In later life, Malcolm reflected that *'one of the things one collects is people. I have made a fine collection through the last sixty years'*. Personal relationships were central to his success as both an eccentric diplomat and eclectic collector. The objects in Malcolm's collections tell many stories of friendships with world statesmen, master craftsmen, antique dealers and Borneo head-hunters.



## **A Collector's Legacy**

### **Malcolm MacDonald in World Museums**

Malcolm MacDonald assembled an impressive variety of collections during his adventurous life. His greatest passion was for antique Chinese ceramics. But Malcolm was more than just a private collector. He believed that art and craftsmanship were important to national identity. It was his goal to leave behind a legacy which would inspire future generations.

Malcolm donated some of his collections to museums in Brunei, Malaysia and Singapore. When he was appointed High Commissioner to India in 1955, Malcolm decided to donate his collection of Chinese export ware ceramics to establish an art museum in Singapore. He persuaded fellow collectors to donate pieces, including Dato 'S. Q.' Wong who had presented Malcolm with his first imperial Chinese bowl. Malcolm also used his diplomatic influence to persuade the governments of India and Cambodia to donate gifts to the new museum. Malcolm's gallery became the kernel of today's National University of Singapore Museum.

Upon his retirement, Malcolm had hoped to donate his collection of imperial Chinese ceramics to the Oriental

Museum where it was already on loan for assisting in Durham University teaching. But having spent all his money on beautiful things, Malcolm needed funds to buy a house. He sold his ceramic collection to the Museum but only for a third of its market value and helped them raise the money from generous benefactors.

## Collecting Heads

### The Adopted Son of Temenggong Koh

The Iban people of the island of Borneo had a reputation for being fearsome head-hunters. This sword belonged to Temenggong Koh (1870-1956), Paramount Chief of the Ibans and the most successful head-hunter of his day. Iban head-hunters would tattoo one joint of their fingers or thumbs for each head taken. Once their digits were full, they would continue along the back of their hands. By the time Malcolm MacDonald met Temenggong Koh, Koh's hands were completely covered in tattoos. He is said to have taken over 100 heads with this sword. On his first meeting with Koh in 1946, Malcolm was greeted with a bamboo reconstruction of Marble Arch adorned with severed heads.

Despite this ferocious reputation, Malcolm and Koh quickly became good friends. They quickly discovered a shared passion for collecting Chinese ceramics. This relationship soon went beyond ordinary friendship, as Koh adopted Malcolm as his son (*anak*) and gave him this sword. Malcolm wrote that *'one of my proud boasts is that I have had two fathers, one of whom was a Prime Minister of Britain and the other a Paramount Chief in Borneo'*.

With its carved bone hilt ornamented with human hair the sword is a fine piece of craftsmanship. As Malcolm described, *'the Bornean tribesman's skills in creation were just as impressive as their cunning in destruction'*. Head-hunting was not allowed under British rule although was tolerated during the Second World War. But when some British expatriates started criticising Malcolm's drive for racial equality, Temenggong Koh asked his adopted son *'can we go and take these writers' heads?'* Luckily for his critics, Malcolm was in a magnanimous mood.



### **Head-hunting sword (*parang*)**

**Steel, brass, horn, rattan and human hair**

**Sarawak**

**Early 20th century CE**

Malcolm MacDonald Collection

DUROM.1976.119



## Constant Surprise

### Learning from Local Cultures

For Malcolm MacDonald, collecting was not just about acquiring objects. He saw himself as a collector of people. In his diplomatic career across Canada, Asia and Africa, Malcolm loved to explore indigenous cultures and saw beauty in their traditional ways of life. He enjoyed watching the Inuit peoples of the Canadian Arctic make warm clothing out of caribou hide. He was impressed that their traditions were still flourishing in the modern world. In contrast, Malcolm was saddened that the peoples of East and South East Asia were abandoning their beautiful traditional costumes in favour of bland, functional western clothing. He regarded this cultural loss as a '*worldwide aesthetic tragedy*'.

Whenever Malcolm wanted to escape from his official duties, he would requisition a flying boat to take him to Borneo. He was awestruck by the natural beauty of the rugged jungle landscape and enthralled by the traditions of the Borneo head-hunters. Malcolm loved to visit his Iban friends and experience their way of life. They would explore the jungle rivers by wooden canoe or simply talk, dance and feast. Malcolm had to be careful not to drink too much rice wine (*burak*) as it did not agree with his constitution. His collections contain several everyday



objects and articles of clothing from Borneo and further afield, demonstrating Malcolm's fascination with the people he encountered across the world.



## Basket

Plant fibre

Sarawak

20th century CE

Malcolm MacDonald Collection

DUROM.1980.53



This basket was made by the Dayak indigenous peoples of Malaysian Borneo (Sarawak). The pattern of hooks and triangles on this example is a traditional design favoured by the Kanowit people. Baskets such as this were essential tools for everyday tasks including carrying food collected from foraging or fishing.

Malcolm MacDonald was fascinated by everyday life in tribal Borneo. He regularly escaped the confines of official life to explore the jungle by canoe and spend days living in the longhouses of remote villages. Proudly wearing his kilt, Malcolm felt a sense of equality between himself and the peoples of Borneo also clad in their traditional costume. *'I expected to like the wild men of Borneo a great deal'*, he recalled, *'no doubt because I am a bit of a wild man myself'*. In the nearby images by Malcolm's friend K. F. Wong, you can see such baskets being made and in use.

## Carving of an Iban warrior

Wood

Sarawak

Around 1950-1970 CE

Malcolm MacDonald Collection

DUROM.1976.124



Malcolm MacDonald enjoyed escaping his official duties to the longhouses of his Iban friends in Malaysian Borneo (Sarawak). He was enraptured by their traditions and way of life. Whilst some diplomats and colonial governors preferred to mix only within the European expatriate community, Malcolm was more comfortable relaxing in an Iban village than in Singapore's racially segregated clubs.

His closest Borneo friend was Temeggong Koh, the Paramount Chief of the Ibans. Koh adopted Malcolm as his son. This was not an empty political gesture but a real expression of love. In his younger days Koh was a renowned warrior. This carving depicting an Iban warrior shows the skill of their craftsmanship which Malcolm so admired. The warrior is wearing only a loincloth. When Malcolm visited the Ibans he would wear his Scottish kilt *'so as to show them that they were not the only wild men*

*in the world and this gave us a sense of equality’.*

Another close friend was Koh’s right hand man, Penghulu Jugah. *‘Rapid in thought, quick in decision and energetic in action, he was sometimes likened to a human dynamo’.* Thus Malcolm described Jugah, but it could equally be a description of Malcolm himself. Unsurprisingly the two became firm friends.

### **Inuit shoes (moccasins)**

**Leather and textile**

**Canada**

**1900-1950 CE**

Malcolm MacDonald Collection

DUROM.1980.64



Malcolm MacDonald’s first diplomatic appointment was as High Commissioner to Canada from 1941-1946. He expected this to be just a temporary break from British politics, but it turned out to be the start of a new career as a diplomat. Malcolm’s subsequent postings in South East Asia and Africa enabled him to expand his collecting horizons to encompass a broad range of global art forms.

Whilst in Canada, the few items he purchased were 'Western' paintings by contemporary artists. He visited the Canadian Arctic only three times during his period as High Commissioner, and enjoyed talking with Inuit families in their igloos. Later in life he regretted not discovering the beauty of native North American art until many of its traditions were being lost. This pair of leather moccasins are an example of 'reservation art' produced for sale to tourists. They therefore represent the increasing commodification and westernisation of indigenous culture which so saddened Malcolm. He was particularly interested by traditional clothing and its suitability for the harsh environment. Unlike in South East Asia where Asian garments were being replaced by westernised ones, Malcolm was pleased that *'instead of white men changing Eskimo dress, Eskimos have changed white men's dress in the Arctic. Settlers there in winter more or less adopt native styles of clothing'*.

Malcolm's wife Audrey was a Canadian war widow whom he met whilst skiing in 1946. Theirs was a whirlwind romance. Malcolm wrote that *'her charm and goodness as well as beauty shone from her as brightly as if she were a sun in the sky'*. After their marriage, Malcolm had an excuse for regular visits back to Canada. He probably bought these shoes on one of these later visits.

## Chinese shoes

**Silk, textiles, leather, wood**

**China**

**1850-1900 CE**

Malcolm MacDonald Collection

DUROM.1976.164



Whilst serving as Commissioner-General in Singapore from 1948-1955, Malcolm MacDonald got to know many members of the Chinese community. At this time, over 75% of the Singapore population were of Chinese ethnic origin. They included recent immigrants from China as well as those whose families moved to Singapore many generations before. The Singapore Chinese (or *Baba*) community had a distinct cultural identity, influenced by but also separate from mainland China. Malcolm earned the respect of the Singapore Chinese because he was opposed to racial segregation and supported decolonisation. When he left Singapore for India in 1955, the *Straits Times* wrote that '*particularly among Chinese, he has acquired a popularity that must be almost without parallel*'.

The history of these shoes is not entirely clear. A note found within them indicates that they were a wedding

present made to fit a Mrs Fielding. They were given by the Reverend J. S. Fordham Junior, a missionary in Hankou, China, in the 1880s.

Malcolm gave the shoes to the museum along with a spectacular embroidered gown and collar which had belonged to a wealthy Singapore Chinese businessman. He was given them by the owner's widow, who was nearly 90 years old in the early 1950s. It is possible that she was the same Mrs Fielding who was first given the shoes (perhaps having re-married a Chinese businessman: it was not unknown and more socially accepted for European women to marry Asian men in colonial Singapore than the other way round). Alternatively, they may have changed hands more than once prior to entering Malcolm's possession.

Regardless of their uncertain history, these shoes symbolise the transmission of artistic trends from China to Singapore in the 19th and 20th centuries.

## A Lifetime of Collecting

### Searching for Artistic Beauty

Malcolm MacDonald bought his first collectable in Paris at the age of twenty when he '*fell in love*' with a porcelain shepherdess. During his political career in England in the 1930s he bought fine paintings, antique furniture and more porcelain figures. But when posted to Singapore in 1946, Malcolm found that '*in the sphere of art as well as politics, vast new worlds were open to me*'.

On his first trip to Japan, Korea and China in 1929, Malcolm was overwhelmed by the imperial majesty of sites such as the Temple of Heaven in Beijing. He also discovered an array of beautiful ceramics which greatly surpassed his European collection. As a young man with limited funds he was only able to purchase five items including this pair of Ming dynasty lions. During his appointment in Singapore from 1946-1955, Malcolm was finally able to indulge his passion. He lived in a former Sultan's palace called Bukit Serene. This provided the perfect backdrop to house his growing collections. Under the tutelage of Chinese friends as diverse as the Singapore businessman S. Q. Wong and communist foreign minister Chen Yi, Malcolm became a connoisseur.



When posted to India in 1955, Malcolm did not fall in love with its culture straight away. He was baffled by its styles of art and architecture. Malcolm believed that collecting first required knowledge, and thus by learning about Hindu religion and Indian culture he was able to appreciate their art. He also used his time in India to acquire some impressive specimens of Buddhist sculpture. He was already well versed in Buddhist beliefs thanks to the teachings of his friend the Crown Prince of Laos.



## **Malcolm's first Chinese ceramics**

### **Candleholder figures**

### **Stoneware with green and yellow glaze**

### **China**

### **1550-1650 CE, Ming dynasty**

Malcolm MacDonald Collection

DUROM.1969.246.A

DUROM.1969.246.B



Malcolm MacDonald's collection of Chinese ceramics spans over four thousand years. These Ming dynasty lions are where it all began. In 1929, Malcolm attended a conference in Kyoto, Japan. Visiting royal palaces and ancient temples, he was fascinated by Japanese civilisation. On the same trip, Malcolm also visited Beijing where he fell under the artistic spell of China. He visited museums to admire silks, lacquers, jades, bronzes and paintings. But it was Chinese ceramics that aroused Malcolm's passion as a collector. He was already a connoisseur of 18th century English pottery, but now realised that European ceramics paled before those of ancient China.

On this trip of 1929, Malcolm made his first purchase of

Asian art in the Yamanaka Brothers' shop in Kyoto. Aged only 28, his funds were limited. Although enraptured by the sense of life and movement in Tang dynasty figures, they were beyond his price range. Instead, for £5, he bought this pair of Ming lions. They would originally have held incense candles for Buddhist ceremonies. With their gaudy colours and very decorative design, this sort of figure was very popular with European collectors. As Malcolm grew older, he would develop greater empathy for different Chinese conceptions of artistic beauty.

The second lion is on permanent display in the MacDonald China gallery on the bottom floor of the museum. You can also find many more Chinese ceramics collected by Malcolm in our permanent displays.

## **Malcolm's favourite Dingware bowl**

**Porcelain**

**China**

**11th-12th century CE,**

**Northern Song dynasty**

Malcolm MacDonald Collection

DUROM.1969.40



Out of over 400 pieces of Chinese ceramic art given to the Oriental Museum, this was Malcolm MacDonald's favourite. It is a Dingware porcelain bowl made in northern China during the Song dynasty. Its greyish-white glaze becomes pink and translucent through transmitted light. It was fired upside down, leaving the rim without glaze. Instead it is bound with copper. Two mandarin ducks swim across the elegantly carved pond foliage. These birds were thought to mate for life and are a symbol of wedded bliss.

At £750, the bowl was one of Malcolm's most expensive purchases. He bought it on a trip to Hong Kong's Happy Valley. Malcolm obtained many pieces in Hong Kong from art dealers who had moved from the communist People's Republic of China to the capitalist British colony. This amused Malcolm's friend Chen Yi. Chen Yi

was communist China's Foreign Minister and shared the same birthday with Malcolm. They became firm friends and used to refer to each other as their 'twin'. Once Chen Yi joked that Malcolm must be a very big capitalist to own such a hoard of ancient Chinese ceramics. Malcolm replied that it was communism which had made his collection possible by causing so many art dealers to seek relocate to Hong Kong. As a symbol of their friendship, Malcolm gave Chen Yi a cheque for £100 to buy a similarly beautiful specimen for the National Museum in Beijing.

Malcolm bought most of his collection of Chinese ceramics whilst working as Commissioner-General in Singapore from 1948-1955. Rather than invest in stocks or shares, he spent most of his disposable income on works of art. He explained that *'I found it foolish to buy dull bits of paper which would be hidden away in drawers when I could purchase instead beautiful objects to delight the eye in my rooms'*. Malcolm even bought a prize-winning racehorse to fund his collecting passion.

## Teapot

Porcelain, metal

China

1912-1949 CE

Malcolm MacDonald Collection

DUROM.1969.304



This teapot is one of the youngest items in Malcolm MacDonald's collection of Chinese ceramics. It was made during his lifetime after the 1911 revolution. It is in five colour style, often called *Famille Noir* by its French name. The pattern depicts three plants: the pine tree, bamboo and lotus blossom. In Chinese folklore these are known as the Three Friends of Winter because they do not wither like other plants. They symbolise resilience.

Malcolm did not particularly like *Famille Noir* ceramics. He purchased this example from Bluett and Sons of London after retiring from diplomacy solely to fill a gap in his collection. He chose this piece because it has had its spout replaced and was therefore cheaper than a more perfect example. Malcolm set out to assemble a collection representing all the major artistic developments from each Chinese period since

prehistoric times. He had hoped to donate his collection to the Oriental Museum so that it could be used to help teach Durham University students. But having spent all his money on beautiful things, Malcolm needed funds to buy a house. He sold his ceramic collection to the Museum but only for a third of its market value and helped them raise the money from generous benefactors. Malcolm continued to buy pieces which did not inspire him with their beauty in order to complete this ceramic timeline for posterity.

## **Bodhisattva head**

**Schist**

**Kingdom of Gandhara**

**100-399 CE**

Malcolm MacDonald Collection

DUROM.1969.346



In Buddhist belief, a Bodhisattva is someone who has begun the journey towards becoming a Buddha. This particular head of a Bodhisattva comes from the ancient kingdom of Gandhara in modern day Pakistan and Afghanistan. Buddhism flourished in Gandhara during the 1st century CE and Buddhist art spread across the Far East. Malcolm MacDonald's Bodhisattva stands out for his wavy moustache and knotted hairstyle. Distinct from more familiar forms of Buddhist art, it shows off the fashions of the Gandharan period when it was made.

Malcolm bought the head whilst in India as High Commissioner. He did not fall in love with India as quickly as with China. He was shocked by its poverty and baffled by its art-forms, which were very different to what he was accustomed to in Singapore. Slowly he came to appreciate the art and architecture of India. He collected both bronze and stone sculptures. Because stone sculptures were less popular at the time, he was able to buy some magnificent pieces like this



Bodhisattva for very reasonable prices. Malcolm was particularly attracted to sculptures of beautiful, naked females but also appreciated other aspects of Hindu and Buddhist art.



Malcolm MacDonald performing his official duties as High Commissioner to India.

Malcolm MacDonald Papers, Palace Green Library

MAC 135/5/68

MAC 135/5/62

## Malcolm and the King

### Music, Dancing and Water-Skiing with Sihanouk

Malcolm MacDonald became friends with many world leaders. His closest friendship was probably with King Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia. Sihanouk was a remarkable man. He became King at the age of eighteen but in 1955 abdicated, becoming Prince Sihanouk in order to serve his country as Prime Minister. Sihanouk was a socialist who was passionate about improving the lives of his people. Malcolm also was a former Labour Party MP and the son of Britain's first Labour Prime Minister. They therefore shared common political goals, and became important allies during momentous events such as the Geneva Conference of 1961-1962 which ended the civil war in Laos. This was in large part due to Malcolm and Sihanouk's efforts.

Despite a twenty year age difference, Malcolm and Sihanouk became firm friends. These objects are personal gifts given to Malcolm by Sihanouk. Both men were both enthusiastic collectors of South East Asian antiquities. When Malcolm first visited the King's palace, it was *'more dreamlike than real... The place might have been a miniature museum representing various cultures arranged by the hand of a discriminating connoisseur'*. On official occasions they would sit together and watch

the Cambodian Royal Corps de Ballet perform to the sounds of the traditional orchestra. On more personal visits, they would dance to the tunes of Sihanouk's private ragtime band or watch films produced by the King himself. Sihanouk also taught Malcolm to water-ski and many times took him on tours of Cambodia's ancient ruins.



## Xylophone (*roneat ek*)

Wood, textile

Cambodia

Early 20th century CE

Malcolm MacDonald Collection

DUROM.1976.116



This xylophone was part of the gamelan set of King Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia. It bears the royal coat of arms and was played to accompany the Royal Ballet for which Sihanouk's eldest daughter was prima ballerina. Sihanouk abdicated in 1955 in favour of his father. As Prince Sihanouk, he served his country as Prime Minister.

The xylophone survived the Khmer Rouge cultural destruction of the 1970s because it was outside Cambodia. It was a diplomatic and personal gift from Sihanouk to Malcolm MacDonald. The two men became close friends as a result of Malcolm's frequent visits to Cambodia. On official occasions they would dine lavishly and watch the visual splendour of the Royal Corps de Ballet accompanied by instruments such as this xylophone. Malcolm recalled listening to *'the constant cooing and wailing, tinkling and rumbling, whistling and*

*sometimes even shrieking ejaculations of the orchestra*'. In the display case you can see a reproduction of one of the ballet programmes which Malcolm kept as a memento of these occasions.

In less formal meetings, they enjoyed watching films produced by Sihanouk himself or dancing with friends to more contemporary ragtime bands. Sihanouk introduced Malcolm to water-skiing, and on other occasions showed him around Cambodia's ancient ruins. This inspired Malcolm to write a book about the temple complex at Angkor Wat. Their friendship continued after Malcolm's retirement. He later described Sihanouk as *'probably the most independent, courageous and wise statesman in South East Asia'*.



The Cambodian Royal Ballet performing for Malcolm in 1949.

Malcolm MacDonald Papers, Palace Green Library

MAC 41/11/14

**Teapot**

**Porcelain**

**Thailand**

**1850-1900 CE**

Malcolm MacDonald Collection

DUROM.1979.32



This teapot was a gift from King (later Prince) Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia to Malcolm MacDonald. It symbolises their important diplomatic collaboration and close personal friendship. This five-colour (*bencharong*) style was originally used by the royal court of Thailand and was later adopted by the Cambodian royalty. It is a very high status gift. It was firstly given from the Thai royal family to their Cambodian counterparts. It became a diplomatic gift for a second time when given to Malcolm by Sihanouk.

Sihanouk and Malcolm first met at an official function in 1948 and continued to meet as friends even after Malcolm retired. Malcolm admired Sihanouk's genuine concern for the welfare of his people. Malcolm's father was Britain's first Labour Party Prime Minister, and perhaps he was surprised to find a fellow socialist amongst the royal families of South East Asia. When

they first met, the young Sihanouk was King of Cambodia, but he abdicated the throne and became a Prince. This enabled Sihanouk to become Prime Minister and do more to improve the lives of ordinary Cambodians. Malcolm tried to help Sihanouk remain neutral in the Cold War conflict that was ripping apart neighbouring countries such as Vietnam.

Sihanouk was a fellow collector. Malcolm recalled the first time he visited his friend's private palace as *'more dreamlike than real... The place might have been a miniature museum representing various cultures arranged by the hand of a discriminating connoisseur'*. Throughout Sihanouk's apartments were Chinese rugs, Vietnamese lacquer, Japanese paintings, French furniture and ancient Cambodian Khmer sculptures of scantily clad women. Their exquisite forms stimulated a lasting interest in the Khmer civilisation which inspired Malcolm to write one of his many books.





Malcolm (right) sharing a joke in his first meeting with Norodom Sihanouk (centre) in 1948. With them is the French High Commissioner Léon Pignon (left).

Malcolm MacDonald Papers, Palace Green Library

MAC 41/11/1



Malcolm in conversation with Pignon and Sihanouk.

Malcolm MacDonald Papers, Palace Green Library

MAC 135/5/15

## People and Places

Malcolm MacDonald's success as a diplomat was a product of his energy and innovation, sympathy for newly independent nations and ability to strike up strong friendships. His collections reveal how these relationships helped Malcolm represent the British government whilst acquiring some beautiful art along the way.

In Singapore, Malcolm was a high status figure who associated with leading statesmen. His unassuming demeanour was deceptive, as he was an astute and effective diplomat. He formed close friendships with Prince Souvanna Phouma of Laos and King Norodom Sihanouk of Cambodia. These were emerging battlegrounds in the Cold War. Malcolm personally championed the opposition to communism in South East Asia but also hoped that new Asian nations could choose a neutral path rather than be forced into the global conflict. His passion for Chinese ceramics overcame national differences and Malcolm also became friends with communist leaders from the People's Republic of China.

Malcolm brought a new, informal style to diplomacy. This earned him the moniker *'the shirt-sleeve diplomat'*. He abhorred racial segregation and enjoyed entertaining his younger guests by walking on his hands. King Sihanouk's younger daughter was unimpressed, replying that *'I've got a monkey that can do that'*. But he did not only associate with the powerful. Other objects tell of Malcolm's enthusiasm for local craftsmanship in Borneo and dealings with antique dealers in Hong Kong. His unique personal qualities and wealth of insight into the cultures of East and South East Asia earned Malcolm the enduring respect of the British governments which he served.

**Figure of a Turfan man**  
**Glazed buff earthenware**

**China**

**775-825 CE, Tang dynasty**

Malcolm MacDonald Collection

DUROM.1969.31



**Qianlong bowl**

**Porcelain**

**China**

**1736-1795 CE, Qing dynasty**

Malcolm MacDonald Collection

DUROM.1969.204.A



As well as international leaders and Borneo head-hunters, Malcolm MacDonald had many friends in the world of collecting. His good relations with art dealers often enabled him to acquire pieces that he would otherwise never have afforded.

The doyen of the antiques community in Hong Kong was the well known dealer T. Y. King. In 1949, King was a

refugee. He departed Shanghai because, as a capitalist, he worried that his business might suffer under communism. A returning customer, Malcolm visited King whilst he was still unpacking in his new Hong Kong shop. Needing swift cash, King reduced his prices. This gave Malcolm an opportunity both to add to his collection and help King establish his new business. As he later remembered '*I seized it literally with both hands*'. This bowl and blue glazed figure were two of the items he bought on that occasion. Over the next several years, Malcolm continued to visit Hong Kong to buy more excellent items from King and other dealers. He would often pay well above market values for pieces that he particularly desired.

The bowl was made during the reign of the Qianlong Emperor from the 1730s to 1790s. This is authenticated by the blue seal mark on its base. Yellow glaze with green decoration was used specifically for dining in the imperial palace. The bowl depicts a pair of dragons chasing a flaming pearl through the clouds. The figure is typical of the Tang dynasty and probably depicts a Turfan man from west China.

Malcolm was a collector with a strong social conscience. In the wake of the Second World War, even reputable dealers might sometimes inadvertently sell antiques

which had been looted from their original owners. Malcolm made it known to all his guests that if they ever spotted one of their lost possessions amongst his collection, he would willingly return it to them. He did so on several occasions.

### **Dish in the shape of a canoe (*prahus*)**

**Silver**

**Brunei**

**1945-1975 CE**

Malcolm MacDonald Collection

DUROM.1979.142



### **Cigar holders**

**Silver**

**Brunei**

**1945-1975 CE**

Malcolm MacDonald Collection

DUROM.1976.139

DUROM.1976.140

DUROM.1976.141



These objects represent the exquisite craftsmanship of the silversmiths of the Sultanate of Brunei. Malcolm MacDonald was particularly friendly with a group of twenty master silversmiths led by an 80 year old craftsman named Haji Mohammed. Malcolm enjoyed sitting watching them at work whilst dangling his legs above the crocodile infested waters beneath the silversmiths' stilt house.

The dish is in the shape of a native canoe (*prahus*). Malcolm enjoyed canoeing along the waters of Borneo with his many local friends. In some ways the beautiful but dangerous landscape reminded him of his native Scotland. This replica silver dish was used for sweetmeats at ceremonial banquets.

The three cigar holders were made as gifts for special guests dining with the Sultan or other Brunei aristocrats. The butterflies are attached by a spring so that they could flutter around in the smoke created by a lit cigar. Malcolm had the legs added so they could stand decoratively on his dining room table at '*snooty*' dinner parties. Malcolm was a very informal diplomat, famous for refusing to wear a complete formal suit and preferring to work in his shirt sleeves. He easily got bored at such official functions and would rather entertain the children of his guests or admire his

collection of beautiful objects. Perhaps these lovely cigar holders made formal functions a little more bearable?



Malcolm in Vietnam (Indochina) experiencing a different South East Asian smoking experience with a long bamboo pipe.

Malcolm MacDonald Papers, Palace Green Library

MAC 135/5/9



**Cannon (*bedil gargabus*)**

**Bronze, wood**

**Brunei**

**1800-1900 CE**



Malcolm MacDonald Collection

DUROM.1976.117

This bronze cannon comes from Brunei. In the nineteenth century, Brunei Bay was a haven for pirates and cannons such as this one were used for protection on ships at sea and forts on land. It is lavishly decorated with animals such as a crocodile and bird, as well as Islamic imagery in the form of a double bladed sword (*zulfakar*). Islam has been the dominant religion in Brunei since the 14th century.

Malcolm MacDonald admired the Brunei bronze workers just as much as the local silversmiths. He bought six of these cannons to decorate the veranda of his palace at Bukit Serene in Singapore. He was particularly impressed that they were still capable of being fired in formal gun salutes. Unfortunately they once even caused injury to a young girl's leg.

**Bead necklace**

**Glass, textile**

**China and Sarawak**

**Date unknown**

Malcolm MacDonald Collection

DUROM.1976.155



***Borneo People***

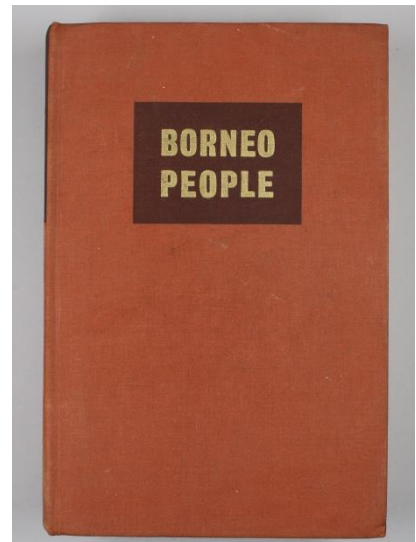
**Malcolm MacDonald**

**Book (paper)**

**United Kingdom and Canada**

**1956**

On loan from Craig Barclay



Malcolm MacDonald had many friends amongst the native peoples of Malaysian Borneo (Sarawak). One of the most remarkable was Lallang. She was one of the few women to become a chieftainess of the Kayan people.

Lallang built up a financial empire by owning caves where swifts built their nests. These nests were sold to

Chinese merchants for making the famous birds' nest soup. Lallang's unrivalled wealth and power earned her the nickname '*the Dollar Princess*' among some Europeans. Her quick wit and zest for life impressed Malcolm greatly. On one visit in 1947 he took his Canadian wife Audrey to meet Lallang. The two women instantly became friends, although Audrey worried that Lallang may not be able to control the head-hunting desires of her warriors.

On their first meeting, Lallang showed Malcolm two bead necklaces. She did not know their age, but they were a treasured family heirloom. The beads were from China and as such were rare among the Kayan people. Malcolm was able to deduce that the oldest beads belonged to the Tang or Song dynasty. Lallang explained that the owners of such Chinese beads would not part with them for any price for fear of bringing bad luck. Their friendship grew to the point where she was willing to forego this superstition and present him with one of her prized necklaces.

Malcolm wrote about Lallang in his book *Borneo People*. Published in 1956, it is a valuable record of a disappearing way of life. On the open page you can see a photograph of Lallang.

## **Military baton**

**Bamboo, silver**

**Laos**

**20th century CE**

Malcolm MacDonald Collection

DUROM.1976.144



This baton would have belonged to an army officer in the Royal Lao Army. Laos was a French colony which became independent in 1953. On the silver knob you can see a triple headed elephant. This was the official symbol of the Kingdom of Laos and its Royal Army until a communist coup in 1975. The three headed elephant was an historic emblem which symbolised the ancient name for Laos, 'Land of a Million Elephants'. Its appearance here makes the baton a fascinating relic of a brief but important period in Laotian history. Along the baton decorations include a calendar of auspicious and inauspicious days, writing in Lao script and panels depicting a lion, a bull and a dog.

Malcolm was given the baton by one of the many Laotian princes. Most probably it was a gift from his good friend Prince Souvanna Phouma. Malcolm was very much involved with the history of Laos. Its capital

Luang Prabang was one of his favourite cities in Asia. His frequent visits '*felt like jaunts not only in space but also in time*'. He enjoyed learning about Buddhism from the Crown Prince and sometimes sought collecting advice from the King, who was a fellow connoisseur. But Malcolm was closest to Souvanna Phouma. Souvanna Phouma wished Laos to be pro-western but neutral in the Cold War. Malcolm shared his hopes, but by the early 1960s the country succumbed to civil war. Because of his renowned expertise in South East Asian diplomacy and personal friendships, Malcolm was chosen to chair an international conference in Geneva to end the conflict.

## The Pursuit of **Beauty**

Malcolm MacDonald was an enthusiastic collector of an eclectic range of art-forms. He started with European porcelains, English furniture and paintings by artists including Turner, Van Gogh and Renoir. From the 1940s onwards, diplomatic postings overseas converted Malcolm to appreciating the beauty of Asian and African craftsmanship.

The pursuit of beauty was Malcolm's constant inspiration. '*I like beauty,*' he wrote, '*I love beauty, I worship beauty in all its earthly forms*'. This is evident in his enthusiasm for traditional Borneo culture, visits to ancient Cambodian ruins and promotion of wildlife conservation in East Africa. Malcolm was also an avid bird-watcher and a gifted writer who penned books about all these topics.

Representing Britain across the world gave Malcolm the opportunity to buy objects from a range of cultures. These included Indian stone sculptures, Japanese ivory, Cambodian bronze deities, African wood-work and Iranian ceramics for which he would haggle in the antique shops of Cairo. He became a renowned connoisseur but was not always known for shrewdness.

Malcolm supported contemporary craftsmanship as well as acquiring a collection of Chinese ceramics spanning four thousand years of history. He believed in the social impact of art, donating collections to university museums in Singapore and Malaysia. In Kenya, he saw art as a means of building a new, independent national identity and supported the teaching of craftsmanship to convicted prisoners. This makes Malcolm distinct from many other Western collectors. For Malcolm, art and beauty were as much about transforming modern society as recording relics of the past.

**Swatow ware plate**

**Porcelain**

**China**

**1750-1799 CE, Qing dynasty**

Malcolm MacDonald Collection

DUROM.1969.238.C



**Chipped Junware bowl**

**Stoneware**

**China**

**1260-1368 CE, Yuan dynasty**

Malcolm MacDonald Collection

DUROM.1969.96



**Longquan ware jar**

**Stoneware**

**China**

**1200-1300 CE, Song dynasty**

Malcolm MacDonald Collection

DUROM.1969.107





These three Chinese ceramics tell the story of Malcolm MacDonald's changing tastes as a collector. Upon first arriving in Singapore in 1946, Malcolm began collecting export wares. These were ceramics made in China for the export market in South East Asia. They were of a lesser artistic quality than imperial ceramics, but more easily available in Singapore. Most of the export ceramics Malcolm purchased were from the Ming or Qing dynasties. This plate with its many colours and flowery design represents Malcolm's more westernised tastes from this period of his life. Its colourful design is reminiscent of European ceramics which he first started collecting as a young man in his twenties.

Malcolm was introduced to imperial Chinese ceramics by his friend Dato 'S. Q.' Wong. 'S. Q.' was a wealthy Chinese businessman and community leader in Singapore. One day 'S. Q.' presented Malcolm with this slightly chipped Junware bowl. Dating from the Song dynasty, 'S. Q.' hoped this gift would introduce Malcolm to earlier types of Chinese ceramic which embodied a much simpler form of beauty. Visits to Hong Kong gave Malcolm the opportunity to begin a new collection of imperial Chinese ceramics.

After some time, 'S. Q.'s plan worked. Malcolm's foray into collecting imperial ceramics may have begun with

gaudier Ming and Qing pieces, but he soon came to prefer Song dynasty creations because of their technical perfection. He particularly loved Longquan Ware. This is a type of green glazed Chinese ceramic often known as celadon. It was mostly produced in kilns in the coastal province of Zhejiang, southern China. As his knowledge of Chinese ceramics grew, MacDonald realised that *'sentimental prettiness is a far lesser virtue than simple beauty'*. His tastes had developed away from the more westernised and familiar to a true appreciation of the Chinese conception of artistic beauty.

**Vase**

**Stoneware**

**Japan**

**1900-1950 CE**

Malcolm MacDonald Collection

DUROM.1969.80



This pretends to be a Henan ware vase from Song dynasty China. However, it is a fake produced in Japan during the early twentieth century. Although Malcolm

MacDonald was a connoisseur of Chinese ceramics, he still made the occasional mistake. These did not dishearten Malcolm but instead helped him to improve his knowledge. Throughout his life, collecting was as much about the pursuit of knowledge as the pursuit of beauty.

As well as falling victim to forgeries, Malcolm was not always a good haggler. A friend once tried to barter with an art dealer in Indonesia who had refused to lower his prices because he could get twice the asking price from Malcolm MacDonald. As Malcolm admitted, *'My reputation as a connoisseur was well-known in the antique shops of a dozen cities, in the workrooms of countless living craftsmen, among itinerant vendors who kept track of my travels from newspaper reports, by rogues trading in the "thieves' market" in Bangkok and... oh, all over the region. It was not always flattering to my shrewdness'*.

## **Junware bulb bowl**

**Earthenware**

**China**

**14th-15th century CE,**

**Northern Song dynasty**

Malcolm MacDonald Collection

DUROM.1969.87



Malcolm MacDonald collected over 400 examples of imperial Chinese ceramics covering 4000 years of history. Imperial Chinese Junware from the Song dynasty was one of Malcolm's favourite types alongside green glazed celadons and Tang dynasty figures. This particular bulb bowl is a fine example. It is in the shape of a drum and would have been a stand for a flower pot. It has a lavender blue glaze on the inside which passes into mauve on the outside.

Close runners up in Malcolm's affections included blue and white Ming porcelains and red underglaze wares from the Ming and Qing dynasties. You can find examples of these types collected by Malcolm in the permanent galleries.

**Figure of a camel boy**

**Earthenware**

**China**

**775-825 CE, Tang dynasty**

Malcolm MacDonald Collection

DUROM.1969.30



**Figure of a boar**

**Earthenware**

**China**

**700-800 CE, Tang dynasty**

Malcolm MacDonald Collection

DUROM.1969.32



When Malcolm MacDonald first visited East Asia in 1929, he began a lifelong love of Chinese ceramics. From the very beginning he was attracted to the beautiful figures created during the Tang dynasty. These figurines range from the realistic to the heavily stylised, and often convey a real sense of movement and life. But as a young man Malcolm was unable to afford such delights.

Living in Singapore in the 1940s and 1950s, he was able to make up for lost time. Tang figurines became a personal highlight of Malcolm's collection. Here are just two examples of a wild boar and a camel boy. On the camel boy you can see traces of unfired pigments showing the delicate brushwork on his eyebrows, moustache and belt.

During his first visit to China in 1929, Malcolm remembered seeking out '*ghost like glimpses*' of its ancient imperial way of life. He visited a retirement home for eunuchs and watched a caravan of camels bringing goods for sale from across the Gobi Desert. '*Sauntering nonchalantly along, they were a picturesque vision of antiquated history*'. Malcolm liked Tang dynasty figures for the same reasons. Perhaps more than other types of Chinese ceramic, figures like the camel boy conjure up images of an almost forgotten way of life. In the other galleries you can find some Tang dynasty camels also from Malcolm's collection.

Perhaps the figure of the boar also reminded Malcolm of his friendship with Ong Tiang Swee, a Chinese businessman in Sarawak. Tiang Swee often invited Malcolm for banquets where the speciality was always roast suckling pig. Throughout his life, Malcolm adored Chinese food.

## Carving of a Kayan man

Wood

Sarawak

1950-1960 CE

Malcolm MacDonald Collection

DUROM.1976.125



This wooden figure depicts a Kayan man from Malaysian Borneo (Sarawak). He wears only a loincloth and has elongated ear lobes with large earrings. This is surprising because ear stretching was usually more prevalent with Kayan women than men. This practice was not adopted by Iban women, but Kayan girls had their ears elongated by about six inches. *'This seemed to me a frightful mutilation'*, thought Malcolm MacDonald, *'but in the eyes of Kayan men it is a supremely lovely touch'*.

Malcolm first met members of the Kayan people after already making friends with Iban personalities like Temenggong Koh. He was told that the Kayans were more artistic and considered themselves to be nobler than the Ibans. Malcolm refused to be swayed by such descriptions and admired both peoples. He particularly enjoyed watching Kayan men perform traditional

dances. The dance represented a head-hunter's combat. For Malcolm, the lively and vigorous dancing of the Kayan men was a much more impressive display of beauty than stretched ears. You can see photographs depicting both these traditions along the walls of this gallery.



A Kenyah man performing his head-hunter's dance. The Kenyah people were close neighbours of the Kayans.

Photograph by K. F. Wong

DUROM.1976.179.79



**Lacquer box**

**Myanmar (Burma)**

**1900-1950 CE**

Malcolm MacDonald Collection

DUROM.1979.34



This is a Burmese lacquer box in the shape of a duck. Malcolm MacDonald visited Burma regularly during the 1940s and 1950s. He became friends with Burma's Chief of Staff, General Ne Win. The Prime Minister suspected Ne Win of being a communist, but Malcolm was able to reassure him that this was unfounded. Malcolm was one of the few people to whom the very reserved Ne Win spoke candidly. He even taught Ne Win to swim in his palatial pool at Bukit Serene.

Whilst off duty in Burma, Malcolm enjoyed discovering the artistic skill of the Burmese craftsmen. He particularly admired the beauty of small, highly intricate lacquer boxes such as this example. Malcolm drew a link between the creative skill and deep spirituality of the Burmese people. He observed that they were *'by nature extremely gentle, in some materialistic ways no doubt ineffective, but in artistic and spiritual matters distinctly cultured people'*.

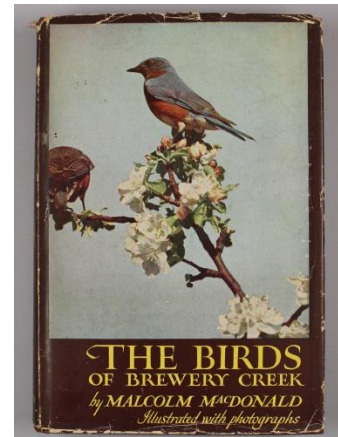
## ***The Birds of Brewery Creek***

**Malcolm MacDonald**

**Book (paper)**

**United Kingdom and Canada**

**1947**



On loan from Craig Barclay

Malcolm MacDonald was a worshipper of beauty in many forms. He explained that *'feasting my eyes on radiant beauty in its numerous natural or artistic forms was as vital to my healthy, serene mental and spiritual survival as was feeding my tummy on food and drink for my physical well-being... I liked Beauty, I loved Beauty, I worshipped Beauty'*. His lifelong pursuit of beauty included collecting art, exploring the natural beauty of places such as the Borneo jungle or Canadian Arctic, and enjoying the friendship of beautiful women.

Bird-watching was another expression of Malcolm's fascination with beauty. He wrote books about the birds he saw at home in Scotland, in Canada and in India.

Malcolm's hobbies as a bird-watcher and author played a surprising role in his career as a diplomat. In 1954 he

was in Washington to meet with the American Secretary of State John Foster Dulles. Dulles had a reputation for not being overly fond of the British. When they met for the first time, Dulles asked if Malcolm could guess what his personal 'Bible' was. Malcolm guessed the Bible itself. He was wrong. '*It's a book*', Dulles replied, '*called the Birds of Brewery Creek written by an author named Malcolm MacDonald*'. Dulles was also an avid bird-watcher and believed Malcolm's book was the best on the subject. They also shared a love for collecting Chinese ceramics. Although Malcolm failed to find a common policy with the Americans at the summit, he returned to Singapore having made a new friend.

## A Magician with a Camera

### The Photographs of K. F. Wong

Along the walls of this gallery you can see many photographs of traditional life in Borneo. They were all taken by Wong Ka Foo (1916-1998), who also went by the name of Ken Foo Wong. Affectionately called ‘the father of Sarawak photography’, he was born into a Chinese family at Sibu in Sarawak, Borneo. As a young adult he studied art and cinematography in China, determined to make a career as a photographer. K. F. Wong became one of the first colour photographers in South East Asia and achieved international renown for his photographs of daily life in Singapore and amongst the indigenous Dayak peoples of Sarawak. He exhibited his work at the Royal Photographic Society in London in 1950, becoming one of the prestigious Fellows of that society in 1959.

Malcolm MacDonald became friends with K. F. Wong because of their shared enthusiasm for Borneo and its people. They travelled around Sarawak together and collaborated on multiple books. Malcolm described his friend as a ‘*magician with his camera*’, admiring K. F. Wong for his talent and motivations. K. F. Wong was not a tourist taking holiday snapshots but an artistic

anthropologist dedicated to recording a vanishing way of life in the country of his birth.

These photographs offer a unique window into the history of the peoples of Borneo. Malcolm was equally dedicated to preserving this forgotten history by recording his own travels and adventures in his book *Borneo People*. They depict the lives of many different Dayak peoples, including the Ibans, Kayans, Kenyahs, and Punans. Their display in this gallery is inspired by K. F. Wong's major exhibition in Singapore in 1989. For his Singapore exhibition, K. F. Wong grouped his photographs into several themes which combine to tell an overall story: something we have chosen to replicate here. This photograph depicts an Iban chief exorcising evil spirits with a mop of banana leaves.



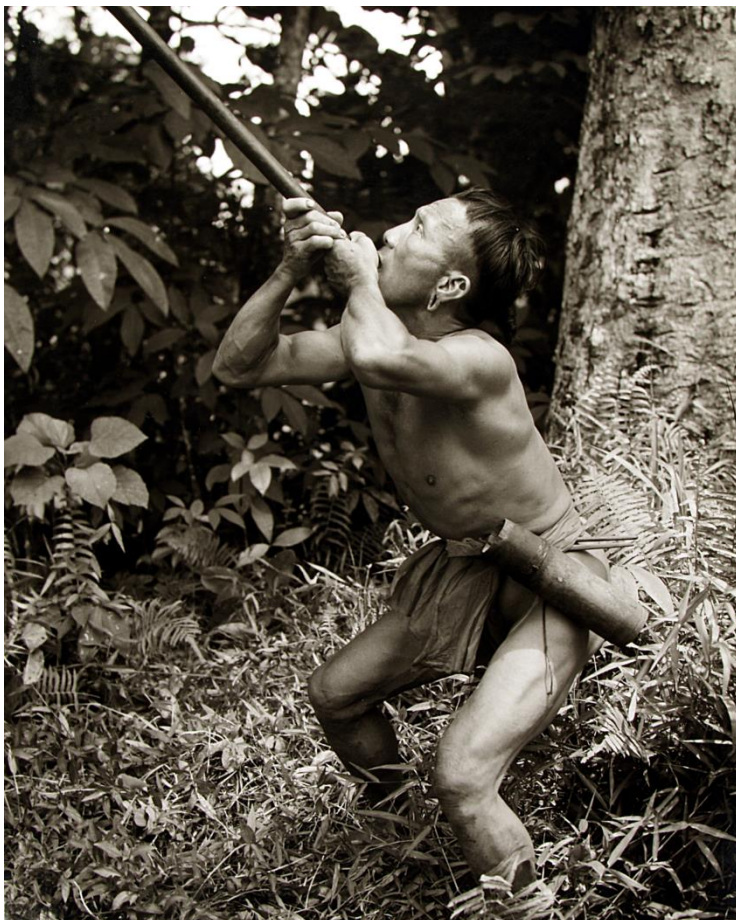
## Preparing food

Traditionally, the Dayak peoples hunted for food as well as to collect animal hides and bones for making clothing or tools. These photographs capture the effort and skill needed to put food on the table. A Punan hunter prepares his blowpipe, perhaps aiming at a bird or monkey hiding in the trees. An Iban fisherman with gold teeth (a symbol of wealth) prepares to cast his net. Meanwhile, a Kayan hunter cooks a pot of rice in the jungle.

DUROM.1976.179.24

DUROM.1976.179.20

DUROM.1976.179.45





## Ceremonies

Here K. F. Wong invites us to pay witness to traditional ceremonies in Borneo. Not for the squeamish, we peer over the shoulders at a group of elders reading omens from the liver of a newly slaughtered pig. More enjoyably, we can admire the silver finery worn by both bride and groom at an Iban wedding. Later in the evening, we join the party inside a longhouse where an accomplished Kenyah lady performs her hornbill dance.

DUROM.1976.179.76

DUROM.1976.179.68

DUROM.1976.179.80







## Trade

Borneo had become a centre for trade with India, China and Japan by the first millennium CE. Trade created opportunities for individuals to attain wealth and power. One of Malcolm MacDonald's friends, Lallang, became chieftain of the Kayan people by controlling the trade in edible birds' nests with China. Here we see a Punan man climbing an incredibly long pole to harvest these nests from the roof of a cave. Will he be brave enough to look down?

DUROM.1976.179.47



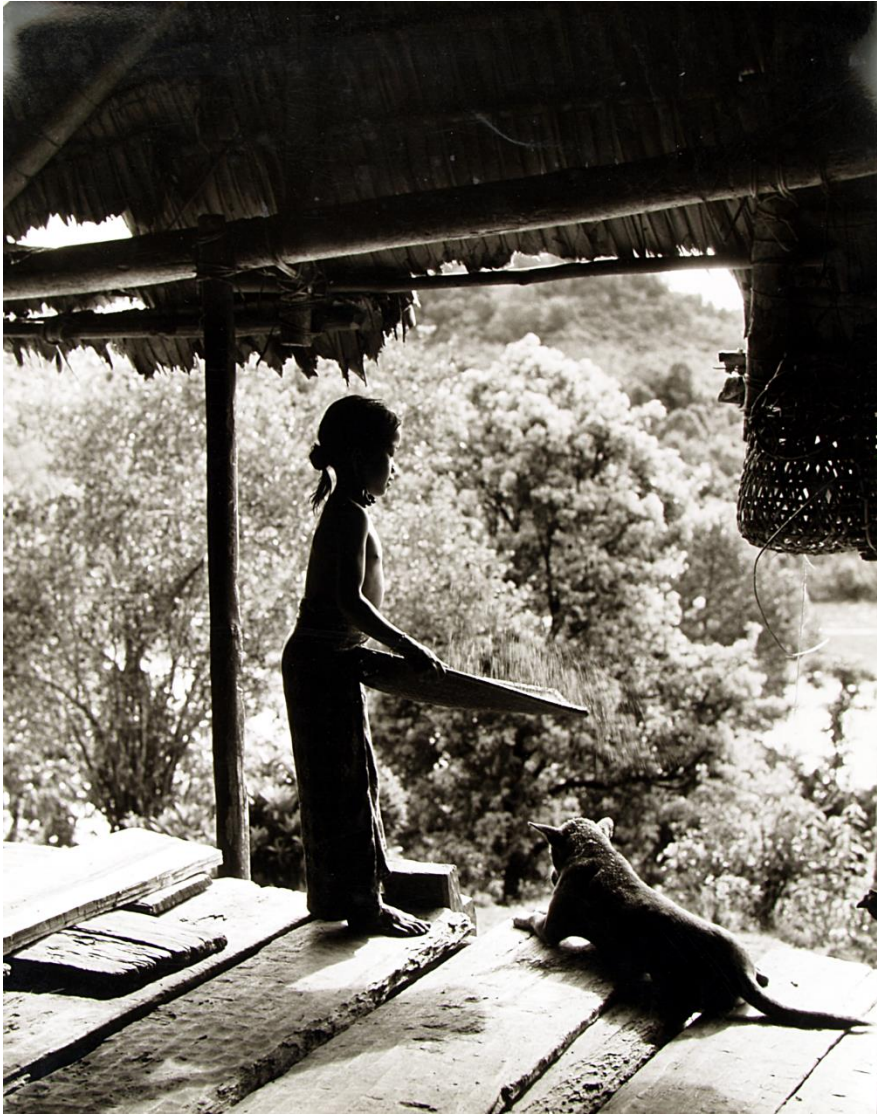
## At home

K. F. Wong's photographs don't just capture the action of dramatic events. He also documented the quieter moments of life in a Kayan village. The sturdy longhouse housed pigs on the ground floor and its human occupants upstairs, where a group of children sits on the veranda. In the other photograph, a young girl separates rice from its husk by tossing the pounded mixture into the air so the lighter husks float away. She is watched over by a dog. Images of ordinary events such as these helped K. F. Wong earn an international reputation for photographic art.

DUROM.1976.179.33

DUROM.1976.179.42





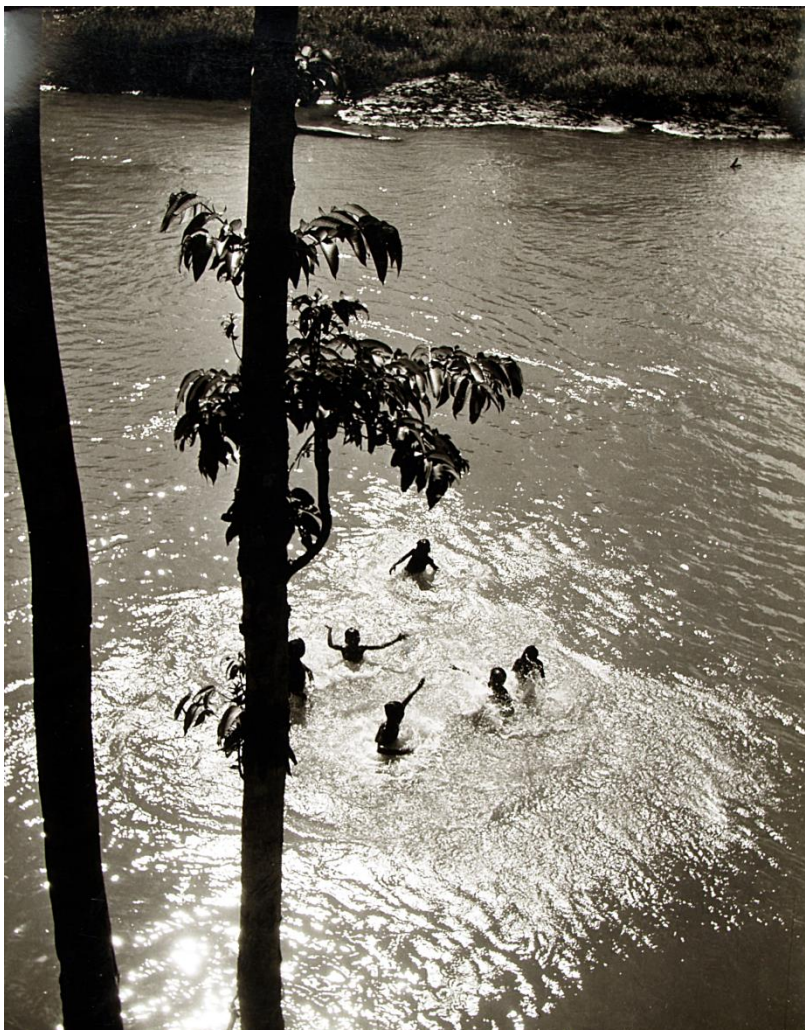
## On the river

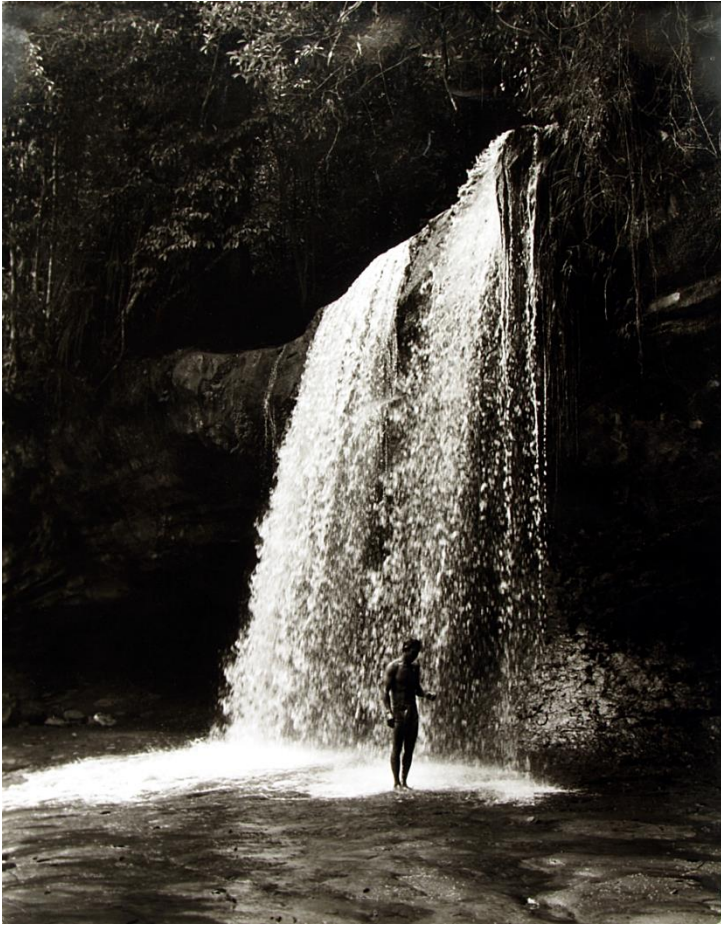
Rivers played a central role in the lives of the Dayak peoples of Borneo. Villages were built around rivers: a necessary source of water, food and transportation. Here we can see children playing, a man taking a shower under a waterfall, and four Iban ladies skilfully navigating the rapids.

DUROM.1976.179.60

DUROM.1976.179.6

DUROM.1976.179.5





## Everyday crafts

Malcolm MacDonald was fascinated by the beautiful craftsmanship produced by the necessities of everyday life. These photographs allow us to share his appreciation. A Kayan woman skilfully weaves a basket out of bamboo and rattan whilst a young boy looks on. A group of women then use such baskets for fishing in the river. You can see one of the Dayak baskets collected by Malcolm in the case to the right.

DUROM.1976.179.57

DUROM.1976.179.44







## Wildlife

The people of Sarawak (Borneo) share their environment with myriad species of flora and fauna. Perhaps most iconic is the orangutan – the Old Man of the Woods. For centuries the indigenous Dayak peoples lived in harmony with their environment. Today the magnificent orangutans are critically endangered by modern commercial activity.

DUROM.1976.179.7



## Tradition

Head-hunting was at the heart of Borneo culture. Under British colonial rule, head-hunting was not generally allowed. Nevertheless, its cultural legacy persisted through graceful head-hunter's dances which captivated Malcolm MacDonald. Here we see a dance performed by an Iban warrior. Bird fighting was another popular Borneo tradition, particularly during the annual spring festival to honour the gods of the harvest and fortune. In this photograph, a young Iban man proudly displays his favourite cockerel.

DUROM.1976.179.77

DUROM.1976.179.23





## Portraits

K. F. Wong was a businessman. His earliest commercial assignments were portraits, presenting beautiful and thoughtful portraits of their subjects. Here are just three. A Kayan girl is captured with an enigmatic look. She wears a Malay style dress but, more traditionally, has had her ears stretched by heavy rings. Also with enlarged ear lobes, a Kelabit chieftain shows off his leopard tooth earrings. Lastly, an inquisitive Iban child peers out cautiously at visitors.

DUROM.1976.179.32

DUROM.1976.179.19

DUROM.1976.179.26





## Acknowledgements

This exhibition was curated by Alexander Nicholas Shaw in partnership with the Oriental Museum. Alexander is a PhD researcher at the University of Leeds, funded by the White Rose College of the Arts and Humanities (WRoCAH) and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). His current research focuses on the British intelligence community in Singapore during the Cold War. Alexander first encountered Malcolm MacDonald as the political authority to whom most of these intelligence agencies were responsible. Malcolm's relations with his many spies were somewhat more turbulent than the friendships explored in this exhibition.

*Beauty and Diplomacy* would not have been possible without the hard work of the entire team at the Oriental Museum. Special thanks are due to Helen Armstrong, Craig Barclay, Rachel Barclay, Carolyn Gaw, Julia Oliver, Gill Ramsay, Mel Smith and Phil Smith. We are also grateful to Dr Victoria Bagshaw and Palace Green Library for providing many of the images used in this exhibition. In creating this exhibition we have been greatly inspired by Malcolm's own thoughts about his collections and how they should be displayed. We have tried to tell both the story of Malcolm's life, and also the

stories from his collections which he most wanted to be told.

The original purchase of Malcolm's collection of Chinese ceramics was funded by many generous public and private benefactors. A full list can be found downstairs in the MacDonald China Gallery.

