

Wayang Shadow Puppet from Indonesia



Leather, wood and pigment, date unknown, British Museum London

This is an example of *Wayang Kulit*, a traditional shadow puppet from the island of Java in Indonesia. Shadow puppets are generally characters from the ancient Hindu tales of Ramayana or Mahabarata. The shapes of the character are cut from leather which is attached to cane to add rigidity. Although the puppets are seen only in silhouette by the audience, they are richly decorated with pigments. The shoulder and elbow joints are articulated to allow movement of these limbs, which the puppeteer achieves through manipulation of the cane rods attached to each hand.

The characters can be richly ornamented, in this case the hair is portrayed with many tight curls and is swept back in a loop behind the characters head. Fierce expressions are given to the faces of warriors and monsters. The main part of the leather retains a skin like tone and a richly decorated red loin cloth has been painted on. The cloth has been painted to give the impression of many folds to its trailing lengths.

Gold pigment has been applied to part of the headdress and to jewellery such as the necklace and armless worn by the character.

This particular character has a very fierce expression with long teeth and talons.

The gallery notes next to the exhibit in the British Museum describe Shadow Theatre as 'an important religious, social, political and artistic medium in Southeast Asia. It is associated with the spirit world, the fulfillment of vows and major life events'.