



# Male figure

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## On display

**Title/Description:** Male figure

**Born:** 1800 - 1899

**Object Type:** Figure

**Materials:** Pigment, Wood

**Measurements:** h. 358 x w. 56 x d. 77 mm

**Accession Number:** 159

**Historic Period:** 19th century

**Production Place:** New Guinea, Oceania, Pacific, Yuat River

**Cultural Group:** Biwat

**Credit Line:** Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

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This sculpted male figure is an extraordinary piece that was created around the 19th century. The object appears as an old man looking at someone with an angry face, arguing over something. It's sometimes made for the men's house (*hausman*), for the initiation ceremony. The patterns and designs on the body, especially the arm and middle part of the figure, symbolize the initiation ceremony. This happens when young boys are kept in the men's house to go through initiation for some weeks or months.

The old men teach traditional knowledge and beliefs to young men as they go through the process of entering manhood. One of the things they do is cut patterns and designs on the body, on their backs. Starting from the shoulders down, the patterns will be created using a traditional blade and blood will be lost. Most importantly they want to leave scars on the body later after the sores are healed. This is only a brief part of what is taught in the men's house. The scars are evidence of initiation. The process still happens nowadays.

Pax Jakupa, February 2023

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

Although weathered and damaged this figure retains great sculptural vigour. The arms, now broken, would have reached forwards with the palms of the hands held inwards, a position which in profile would have enhanced the existing rhythm achieved by the chin, projecting abdomen and knees.

Fraser (1955: 20) noted 'a high degree of assertiveness' and an 'emphasis on aggressive qualities' in Biwat sculpture, and these characteristics are certainly in evidence here. The Biwat (formerly known as Mundugumor) were highly appreciative of fine wood sculpture, for sculptures were important as exchange valuables, and their possession conferred high status on the owner.

The original function of this piece is not clear. The base seems too large for use as a flute or lime tube finial, yet there is no apparent grip for use as a taro or sago beater. The groove around the base suggests that it was fixed to something, and its most probable use was as a flute finial. It has previously been attributed to the Iatmul (Wardwell, 1967: 74), but it undoubtedly originated from the Biwat people of the Yuat river, a tributary of the Lower Sepik. It resembles other known Biwat pieces, in particular a flute finial which was collected by Margaret Mead in 1933/4 and is now in the American Museum of Natural History, New York (Wardwell, 1967: 52). Eichhorn (1929: 75) has referred to this image as 'la figure du mort', but upon what grounds is not clear.

From the appearance of other Biwat figures the perforations around the chin would formerly have held a beard of human hair, while numerous feather and shell ornaments would have been attached to the neck, body, cap and ears. The eyes were inlaid with shell. There are traces of paint over most of the figure, white, red and black all being discernible. Early photographs show that previously there was more white paint on the face (see Eichhorn, 1929: 74; Basler, 1929: 68). The surface engraving is carefully done, notably on the back.

Steven Hooper, 1997

Entry taken from *Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection, Vol. 2: Pacific, African and Native North American Art*, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997) pp. 44-45.

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## Provenance

Acquired by the Sainsbury Family in 1954. Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.

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