



Free-standing male figure

On display

Title/Description: Free-standing male figure

Born: 1750 - 1850

Object Type: Figure

Materials: Haliotis iris shell, Wood

Measurements: h. 395 x w. 110 x d. 100 mm

Accession Number: 178

Historic Period: 18th Century - Late, 19th century - Early

Production Place: New Zealand, North Island, Oceania, Pacific

Cultural Group: Māori

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

his figure belongs to a small corpus of Maori images which were apparently made to be free-standing and were not part of a gable ornament or other architectural structure. Five, including the present fine sculpture, were reported and discussed by Barrow (1959), and a further example has since appeared in London (Sotheby's, 1983: 68-71). All are characterised by the presence of male tattoo designs on the face and — in two figures — on the buttocks; also by the attachment, or means for attachment, of human hair to the top of the head.

None of these images has a reliable collection history, although one now in the Hunterian Museum was apparently in Glasgow by 1831 (Scott, 1961: I5). Their traditional function is also not clear, for there are few references to such figures in the early literature. Crozet, however, made an interesting observation in the Bay of Islands area of North Island in 1772 when he noted that '... in the middle of every village there is a carved figure which appears to represent the tutelary god of the village. In their private houses are to be found similar figures like little idols placed in positions of honour' (Roth, 1891: 45). Also, the Reverend Richard Taylor reproduced an engraving of a chief with a small free-standing figure, clothed in a miniature cloak, which he refers to as a 'memorial idol' (Taylor, 1855: 62).

From the limited evidence available it seems likely that these images represent deified ancestors, and that they date to the period prior to missionary activity. The Maori had been in regular contact with Europeans since Captain Cook's first landing in 1769, and as a result had acquired metal tools and other exotic goods, but these early encounters with Europeans had only a limited effect on

indigenous Maori beliefs and rituals. Missionary influence, however, increased steadily during the decades following their arrival in 1814, and whereas ancestor images appear to have been acceptable to Christians when incorporated as architectural 'ornament' in elaborately carved Maori houses, they were not acceptable when they took the form of individual 'idols'. This may account for the rarity of the type.

This particular image is in general well preserved, though unfortunately it has been emasculated and the feet are damaged at the front and back. The hair, which formerly would have covered the back of the head, is also missing, though this reveals the topknot projection and holes for lashing. The ears are pierced for pendants and the right knee and possibly the navel are carved to receive *Haliotis* shell inlay, now lost; the eyes are inlaid with *Haliotis* shell rings, the right probably an ancient replacement, since the rim is not serrated. The eye inlay is not composed of two rings, as reported by Barrow (1959: 113).

A notable aspect of this sculpture is that the tattoo patterns on both face and buttocks are remarkably similar to those on the equally fine free-standing image in the National Museum, Wellington, which was formerly in the Oldman collection (Oldman, 1938 pl. 73; Barrow, 1959: 111-12; Mead, 1984: 124, 213). Although the Oldman image is clearly by another hand, the similarity of the tattoo patterns may indicate that both images were carved to represent the same deified ancestor, whose distinctive tattoo (with the right cheek and forehead left plain) was known and recorded within his community, most probably one of those inhabiting the Gisborne area on the East Coast of North Island.

Free-standing images of ancestral deities were a feature of ritual systems in other areas of Polynesia, and a close parallel with Maori images can be seen in the '*aumakua*' images of pre-Christian Hawaii (Cox and Davenport, 1974: 94-103), which are described as 'family or personal gods'. These are also relatively naturalistic in form, often having human hair. Such images acted as a channel for communication with ancestral spirits, who entered the images during ritual, and it is likely that New Zealand Maori images fulfilled a similar function.

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. 4-6.

Provenance

Acquired by the Sainsbury Family in 1963. Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
