



Male figure ('Fishermen's god')

On display

Title/Description: Male figure ('Fishermen's god')

Born: 1775 - 1825

Object Type: Figure

Materials: Wood

Measurements: h. 407 x w. 195 x d. 205 mm

Accession Number: 189

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

Production Place: Cook Islands, Oceania, Pacific, Rarotonga

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

Among the masterpieces of Polynesian sculpture, this rare image is one of only seven of its type known to have survived from the early nineteenth century. They are generally referred to as 'fishermen's gods', an attribution which derives from the missionary John Williams, who spent over a year on Rarotonga during the 1820s and who provides us with the only first-hand reference to the type in the literature. In his *Missionary Enterprises* (1837: 116-17) he illustrates an example (almost certainly the London Missionary Society image in the British Museum, LMS I23) and states that this type of 'idol ... was placed upon the fore part of every fishing canoe; and when the natives were going on a fishing excursion, prior to setting off, they invariably presented offerings to the god, and invoked him to grant them success.' Williams then goes on to pay a barbed compliment to Rarotongan piety with the exhortation, 'Surely professing Christians may learn a lesson from this practice. Here we see pagans of the lowest order imploring the blessing of their gods upon their ordinary occupations. Christians, go and do likewise.'

Although unconfirmed from other independent sources, this 'fishermen's god' attribution is quite plausible, since in many areas of Polynesia carved images were mounted on the bow and stern of important canoes. Such images were not in themselves regarded as gods, but when carved in an appropriate way and from an appropriate material they functioned as representations of gods and as a suitable medium through which the god could manifest itself. During ritual, such as formal invocations for fishing success, the god was invited by the priest to occupy its material image. Morsels of food or flowers were offered as tokens of respect, a procedure which constituted a kind of exchange in return for divine blessings on the fishing expedition. A number of gods were recognised in Polynesian societies, many of them ancestral, and frequent ritual supplication and offerings were considered necessary in order to obtain divine favour and ensure success.

The form of this image, with massive head and abdomen, flexed legs and straight shoulder line, relates it to central Polynesian sculpture from the Society and Austral Islands, but its Rarotongan origin is clear from the distinctive eye and mouth form. It is unique among the known 'fishermen's

gods' in that it has a fully carved nose, stylistically similar to that on the famous tall Rarotongan image in the British Museum (LMS 169). It is also a particularly powerful example of the way in which Polynesian sculptors were not constrained in their work by considerations of naturalism. Representative portraiture was not the intention, but rather the evocation and realisation in material form of particular qualities — in this case fecundity, potency, solidity and permanence — conveyed in the emphasis on the head, abdomen and genitals, and in the phallic form of the sculpture as a whole.

The condition of the image is good, although the feet are damaged and the large pendent phallus, present on three other examples, has unfortunately been sawn off. This is probably a result of having originally been collected by London Missionary Society missionaries, who retained as souvenirs those 'idols' which were not destroyed in the early fervour of conversion. Two of the seven surviving examples (one in the British Museum, the other in the Peabody Museum, Harvard) have designs painted in black on the head and body, probably representing tattoos. This image may once have been so decorated, but no traces remain.

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) p. 18-21.

Exhibitions

'A World of Water: Can the Seas Survive Us?', Sainsbury Centre, Norwich - 15/03/25 - 03/08/25

Provenance

Acquired by the Sainsbury Family in 1949. Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
