



Chief's fly whisk

Not on display

Title/Description: Chief's fly whisk

Object Type: Implement

Materials: Coir, Hair, Wood

Measurements: h. 754 x w. 85 x d. 85 mm

Accession Number: 895

Historic Period: Late 18th/early 19th century

Production Place: Austral Islands, Oceania, Pacific, Rurutu, Tupua'i

Until comparatively recently much of the fine early wood sculpture brought back by Europeans from the central Pacific was generally attributed to 'Tahiti', which for a long period had been used as a catch-all term not only for the Society Islands (of which Tahiti is the largest island), but also for the whole of central Polynesia. It is now clear that many of these carvings originated from the Austral and Cook Groups, and this elegant type of fly Whisk is a case in point. For long known as 'Tahitian' fly Whisks, ethnohistorical analysis by Rose (1979) and others has shown that they were almost certainly made in Tupua'i or Rurutu in the Austral Islands. However, it is probable that many examples were collected in the Society Islands, since it appears that drums, whisks and other ritual items were supplied to chiefs on Tahiti and other islands by craftsmen on the Australs.

This attribution to the Austral Islands is further strengthened by evidence from an unpublished example in the Peabody Museum, Yale (no. 7154. 209919), which was collected on Tupua'i in June 1826 by Lieutenant Hiram Paulding of the United States Schooner *Dolphin* (information courtesy of David Kiphuth). Paulding wrote a lively account of his voyage, in which he describes his visit to Tupua'i, his friendship with 'King Dick', and their exchange of presents. He also makes direct reference to this type of fly whisk.

He wrote: 'At Toubouai, we added considerably to our collection of curiosities. The most ingeniously wrought article, was a lash, used by the natives for brushing the flies off their backs. The handles were carved to represent a man's face, or some animal familiar to them. The lash itself, was, in several strands, finely braided from twine of the cocoa-nut husk' (Paulding, 1831: 249).

There are two basic varieties of double-figure fly whisk, large and small, both of which have a similar general form: twin figures sit atop a columnar grip, which is separated from the decoratively bound shaft and coir whisk by a raised disc, the rim of which is engraved with tiny heads. Rose (1979) describes these whisks in detail and designates three types (A-C), dividing the smaller variety

according to the form of the hand grip. The figures on the larger variety (represented here: Rose type A) are more angular and crisply carved and they lack the lateral perforation through the body which occurs on most of the smaller whisks.

It is possible that these larger ones are a local post-contact development of the late eighteenth century, since only smaller examples were collected during Cook's voyages (Kaeppler, 1978: 39, 162) and the availability of metal tools would have facilitated greater precision in carving. Nonetheless, in creating both varieties of whisk the Austral craftsmen achieved a particularly elegant solution to the sculptural problem of representing twin figures addossé; the bodies are fused and the thighs are linked to repeat an inverted version of the arm arrangement on the front of each figure. The significance of this twin figure motif is not clear, but variations on this theme occur in the iconography of other Polynesian groups, notably the Marquesas and Cook Islands.

Besides performing a practical function, these whisks also served as batons denoting the high status of their owner. Some examples have small sections of pearl shell bound into the whisk, which would have flashed and rattled dramatically when in use. This example is virtually undamaged except for the whisk, which is a comparatively recent coir replacement, inexpertly attached. The patterned binding of plaited coir and human hair on the shaft is original.

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. 22-23.
