



Substitute trophy head

On display

Title/Description: Substitute trophy head

Born: 1800 - 1950

Object Type: Figure, Head

Materials: Cowrie, Wood

Measurements: h. 330 x w. 140 x d. 180 mm

Accession Number: 153

Historic Period: 19th century, 20th Century - Early

Production Place: New Guinea, Oceania, Pacific, Papuan Gulf

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

The Substitute trophy head is specially created with traditional skills and knowledge. It was created with a specific purpose in ceremonies, to symbolise or indicate specific roles within the community. The artefact indicates that if a person is holding this object during the ceremony, he or she may be recognised as a chief in the family, village or community. The sculpture represents an individual's status, and it may also have a way of sending message to people in and around the community. Any artwork that is created tells a story of the person who made the work and is sending a message to the audience.

The sculpture had been created by adding other objects such as shells and bush paints on the face. The two shells represent the eyes with the white paints under the eyes section in the face. The object was given more concentration on the top part of the body, which is the head while the rest of the body seems to be supporting the top part.

Pax Jakupa, February 2023

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

Wood substitute trophy heads were either incorporated into images constructed of cane and bark cloth or were paraded as dance clubs, with fibre pendants hanging from the nose and ears (see Wirz, 1950: figs. 2-3, for comparable examples). They were made in the central areas of the Papuan Gulf, and this example most probably comes from the Wapo Creek/Era River region of the Purari delta.

Numerous masks and images were used during the complex ceremonial cycles conducted by the people of this region to promote abundance and renewal, both societal and agricultural (see Newton,

1961, and Williams, 1940, for a vivid account of the Elema ritual cycle). Associated with these rituals was the practice of head-hunting, since sacrificial victims were required at certain stages in the cycle, such as the completion of a ceremonial house. Accordingly, a pattern of revenge raiding existed, killing expeditions rather than open warfare, in which men strove to secure a head as a mark of manhood and as a trophy to be displayed in the ceremonial house. Williams (1936: 286) noted that 'a man-slayer was . . . the object of general admiration and some envy', and also that 'the head is regarded as the individual property of the slayer; he carries it in his arms in the dance; and he may leave it hanging under his own roof-tree. It is as much a record of his prowess in the raid as the pig and crocodile jaws are of his prowess in the chase.' Wood substitute trophy heads performed a similar function.

The head-hunting complex and its role in social life is unfamiliar to Europeans, yet this head conveys a certain grim, cadaverous quality which is instantly impressive. Although damaged about the chin and ears, the sculpture remains compelling, with an almost poignant twist to the head. There is a band of cross-hatching across the brows and a deep cavity in the centre of the mouth.

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. 56-57.

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.
