



Housepost figure

On display

Title/Description: Housepost figure

Born: 1800 - 1950

Object Type: Figure

Materials: Wood

Measurements: h. 1003 x w. 200 x d. 230 mm

Accession Number: 156

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

Production Place: Lake Sentani, New Guinea, Oceania, Pacific

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

This house post figure was carved from a wooden log, then incorporated as part of a ceremonial house. The object was part of the house post when it was discovered and collected in the 1920s. When the designs on the wood are completed, varnish is traditionally added onto the carved post to protect it from insects.

The human figure carved on the post has deep meaning within its culture. The significance of the work can be understood by the amount of time that was spent carving the design. The skills and knowledge that were required to sculpt this design from a log are considerable. The confidence, belief and knowledge associated with being able to practise this type of carving carry a certain power.

Pax Jakupa, February 2023

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

Prior to missionary activity in the Lake Sentani area during the first decades of the twentieth century, the villagers living around the shores of the lake built large ceremonial houses which were constructed on piles over the water. These houses also served as the residences of the village leaders (ondoforo), who presided over rituals and other matters affecting the general welfare of the community. The main posts which supported the ceremonial house were carved with images of ancestral and mythic importance, and the present sculpture is a fine example of this type. It has been cut from the top of a post which originally projected up through the floor.

A range of human images of this kind survive (see Kooijman, 1959), some male, some female, others with breasts and prominent sexual parts which make their sex ambiguous, as in this case. There are also a number of mother and child images — an iconographic association between housepost figures and sexual fertility which is also apparent in the general phallic appearance of this particular example.

Sentani sculptures are widely admired as 'powerful' works of art by western critics, and in an essay on western approaches to non-western art Edmund Leach suggests why this type of reaction may

occur. He writes that one reason for our strong response lies to some extent in an image's partially disguised sexual ambiguity, which 'makes us aware, in a barely conscious way, that here is something quite out of the ordinary' (Leach, 1973 : 234). This comment seems particularly valid for this figure, as indeed it is for several other 'powerful' sculptures in the Sainsbury Collection, notably the 'fishermen's god' from Rarotonga (I89).

Lake Sentani figures were carved from very heavy hardwood, which no doubt helps explain the survival of this example. It was probably made towards the end of the nineteenth century, possibly with stone-bladed tools, and has weathered as a result of mistreatment and long exposure to the elements. Much of the surface has a charred appearance, which obscures details of the eyes, breasts and shoulder blades, and it seems likely that during the early period of missionary influence this image was burned before being cast into the lake (see Kooijman, 1959: 7).

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. 40-41.

Provenance

Acquired by the Sainsbury Family in 1939. Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
