



Canoe figurehead

Not on display

Title/Description: Canoe figurehead

Born: 1800 - 1899

Object Type: Figure, Head

Materials: Pearl shell, Wood

Measurements: h. 165 x w. 66 x d. 100 mm

Accession Number: 173

Historic Period: 19th century

Production Place: Oceania, Pacific, Roviana region, Solomon Islands

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

Canoes in the Pacific region were often decorated and elaborated far beyond the basic requirements of technical efficiency, for they were great ritual vehicles, used for important enterprises like ceremonial exchanges, fishing and war expeditions. The success of any enterprise was dependent upon divine favour, and many of the carvings on canoes, like this figurehead, referred to tutelary spirits, who protected the occupants and acted malevolently towards an enemy.

In the Roviana (New Georgia) area the local plank-built canoes were elaborately decorated with carvings and shell inlay (see Starzecka and Cranstone, 1974: 29, 41). Close to the waterline, beneath the prow, was attached a figurehead of this type, which Somerville (1897: 371) stated was 'to keep off the kesoko or water fiends which might otherwise cause the winds and waves to upset the canoe'.

These images, known as *musumusu* or *nguzunguzu*, usually have prognathous features and arms which reach forwards, in some cases holding a small head, as here, which may refer to a head-hunting trophy. Waite (1984) has suggested that figureheads with a pointed head date from the 1880s, while those with a rounded head, as is the case here, may be earlier. The large-lobed ears are damaged and some shell inlay is missing from the main face and the eyes of the small head; the nasal septum is pierced and there are three square holes at the back of the head for attachment to the canoe hull.

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. 71.

Provenance

Acquired by the Sainsbury Family in 1967. Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
