



Step for digging stick

On display

Title/Description: Step for digging stick

Born: 1800 - 1850

Object Type: Stick

Materials: Shell, Wood

Measurements: l. 178 x w. 90 x d. 180 mm

Accession Number: 183

Historic Period: 19th century - Early/Mid

Production Place: Gisborne, New Zealand, North Island, Oceania, Pacific

Cultural Group: Māori

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

Special carved steps (*teka*), often incorporating a figure, were attached to long digging sticks (*ko*) and used during important stages in the agricultural cycle — breaking the soil and planting sweet potato and other crops (Best, 192 5: 32—4z). The Maori, like most Pacific peoples, were predominantly agriculturalists, root crops being the staple, while hunting, fishing and gathering provided supplementary foods. Gardening was thus not a menial activity but one essential to survival, involving important ritual procedures under the direction of priests (*tohimga*), to propitiate ancestral deities, secure divine favour, and thus ensure the fruitfulness of the land.

This bold openwork carving represents a contorted figure, positioned as a support to the foot when the digging stick was in use. Three-fingered hands reach down to grasp the legs, which thrust forwards to join the chin, while the narrow body loops below. A low crest extends from the forehead and divides at the back of the head in the form of a T. There is an aperture running along the centre of the footrest. The eyes are pearl shell and nail replacements for the *Haliotis* shell originals.

This example is very similar in treatment to *teka* in the Auckland Institute and Museum (Best, 192 5 : fig. 23, 3rd from left) and the National Museum of New Zealand (ibid. .- fig. 30, top), indeed they could well be by the same hand, though documentation is lacking to support this. It is also comparable to another example in Auckland, from the Rongowhakaata group of the Gisborne area (see Mead, 1984, 1212).

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. 11.

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.
