



Neck pendant

On display

Title/Description: Neck pendant

Born: 1700 - 1799

Object Type: Pendant

Materials: Nephrite

Measurements: h. 76 x w. 42 x d. 3 mm

Accession Number: 184

Historic Period: 18th century

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

Cultural Group: Māori

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

Neck pendants of this type (*heifiki*, *hei* = necklace, *tiki* = figure) are the most famous of all Maori ornaments and this example is among the most beautiful known. Its extreme thinness (4 mm max.) and the pale green nephrite (*pounamu*) from which it is made give it an exceptional light, translucent delicacy. The condition is remarkable, considering its fragility: only the details of the lower face have been lost through wear, while other features, like the three slender, curving fingers which grasp each thigh, are still clearly discernible. An unusual feature is the form of the shoulders, for in most *heitiki* both shoulder and upper arm appear as a continuous crescent between chest and elbow. The original hole above the right eye for a plaited flax suspension cord has worn away and been repositioned through the forehead. It has been suggested that *heitiki* represent ancestors or, given the frequent presence of a vulva, that they are 'fertility charms'. It is not possible to give a specific explanation, but most Maori art was to some extent connected with ancestors and their role in promoting fertility and abundance.

In the eighteenth century a variety of ornaments in nephrite, whale ivory and bone were worn by both men and women, but during the nineteenth century only the *heitiki* remained popular. Indeed, after the introduction of metal tools, many were made from redundant nephrite adze blades and their previous use is discernible in their form. During this period European settlement led to the dislocation of traditional Maori society, and as a result many *heitiki* passed, by one means or another, into European hands.

Nephrite, a type of jade, occurs naturally on the west coast of South Island and was highly prized by

the Maori, who worked it by a laborious process of chipping, grinding and polishing with sand and water. It is extremely hard, though brittle, registering 9 on Moh's scale of hardness. Nephrite formerly circulated widely throughout New Zealand as a result of inter-cultural exchanges or as the spoils of war.

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. 15.

Provenance

Acquired by the Sainsbury Family in 1971. Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
