



Male figure on post

Not on display

Title/Description: Male figure on post

Born: 1800 - 1850

Measurements: h. 1200 x w. 135 x d. 130 mm

Accession Number: 187

Historic Period: 19th century - Early/Mid

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

This hardwood post figure remains an enigma. Though clearly of considerable age it is without collection data and neither its origin nor function is known. In a preliminary catalogue of the collection (Sainsbury, 1978) it was tentatively attributed to Tonga on the basis of a pencil inscription to that effect on the post in the hand of James Hooper. Since then an Oceanic provenance has been discounted. Further researches on East African sculpture have been carried out (Hartwig, 1980) and an origin from that region is now more probable.

However, more precise attribution remains difficult. Comparable images come from the Bongo of southern Sudan, while grave figures in post form occur in Ethiopia and among the coastal Bantu of East Africa. Nyamwezi carvings (which include those formerly attributed to the Kerebe, inhabitants of an island in Lake Victoria; see Hartwig, 1969: 85-102) offer some similarities.

In Kenya, the Giriama carved anthropomorphic memorial planks deriving from earlier Mijikenda memorial posts; the Zaramo of Tanzania produced realistic articulated grave figures. The form of the post, with octagonal-section top tapering to an eroded base, and the transverse grooves (which could be in imitation of lathe-turning) may reflect Arab or Swahili-Arab influence, which would make somewhere in the coastal Bantu area of southern Tanzania a likely place of origin.

The two large iron nails driven into either side of the upper part of the post, which may have served to suspend offerings, are hand-made. Since machine made nails were first developed in the nineteenth century the piece could date to that period, or even earlier.

Margaret Carey, 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. 217.

Provenance

Formerly in the collection of James Hooper.

Purchased by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury from K. J. Hewett in 1962.

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