



Figure on post

Not on display

Title/Description: Figure on post

Born: 1800 - 1850

Object Type: Figure

Materials: Pigment, Wood

Measurements: h. 512 x w. 74 x d. 74 mm

Accession Number: 192

Historic Period: 19th century - Early

Production Place: Marquesas Islands, Nukuhiva, Oceania, Pacific

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

In many areas of Polynesia wood or stone images were set up in sacred enclosures, or 'temples' (called *me'ae* in the Marquesas), which were reserved for important rituals connected with the welfare of the community. Handy reported that in the Marquesas Islands, prior to Christian conversion, figures were erected at the back of the *me'ae* and that they 'represented deified tribal ancestors — chiefs and inspirational or ceremonial priests who had been famous in their time and whose spirits had become the tutelary deities of the tribe' (Handy, 1923 : 236). It is probable that this male figure is a portable image of this type, for the rectangular-section post upon which it stands appears to have been designed to fit into a supporting framework, either on the prow of a canoe or possibly on a *me'ae*.

In over-all form this piece (which is illustrated in Edge-Partington, 1896: 24) appears to be unique, the only comparable example being a roughly carved figure on a long stake from Puamau, Hivaoa Island, in the Berlin Museum (reproduced in von den Steinen, 1928: III: BD, 14). The present figure is sculpturally interesting in that the symmetrical treatment of the body is offset by the long right arm which extends to the mouth, a gesture which occurs in figure sculpture from other parts of Polynesia.

The wood is pale and heavy and there are splits down the back of both figure and post. It is possibly breadfruit, for Porter (1822: 110 - 15) noted in 1813-14 that there were 'wooden gods' on Nukuhiva and that this species was used for images.

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. 24-25.

Provenance

Acquired by the Sainsbury Family in 1952. Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
