



Club

On display

Title/Description: Club

Born: 1800 - 1850

Measurements: h. 1480 x w. 180 x d. 120 mm

Accession Number: 193

Historic Period: 19th century - Early

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

This distinctive form of club ('u 'u), which was recorded by Cook and other early visitors to the Marquesas Islands, continued to be made until about the middle of the nineteenth century, by which time European influences and diseases had considerably disrupted the local culture. Later in the century smaller, lighter, more elaborate and less well finished versions were made for sale.

Traditionally most able-bodied men possessed a club, for inter-cultural disputes occurred frequently, both within and between islands. These clubs were probably produced by specialist craftsmen working in the service of chiefs, then distributed beyond the group via exchanges or as the spoils of war. They exhibit a remarkable consistency in their general appearance (see von den Steinen, 1928: vols. II, III; Oldman, 1943: pls. 9&6; Phelps, 1976: pls. 53-6), though the details are seldom identical.

This example is representative and very finely finished. A plain shaft with flaring butt expands into a bifacial club head, the 'foreheads' of which incline outwards and form a saddle-shaped link between. It is carved from 'ironwood' (*Casuarina equisetifolia*), and the dark glossy patina was produced by immersion in a local black mud followed by polishing with coconut oil. Formerly the lower part of the shaft may have been bound with coir cordage and tufts of dog hair.

Although interpretation of the detailed design is not possible, given the paucity of information available, the general form of these clubs is clearly anthropomorphic. They were a kind of god/ancestor image for direct practical use and their symbolic importance is evidenced by the considerable care expended on their manufacture and decoration, for their potency and effectiveness ultimately derived as much from ancestral favour as from their purely technical qualities. This anthropomorphism is a characteristic of clubs from many parts of Polynesia, where specifically bifacial examples occurred in the Marquesas Islands, New Zealand and Easter Island.

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. 26-27.

Provenance

Acquired by the Sainsbury Family in 1963. Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
