



Head from a male figure

On display

Title/Description: Head from a male figure

Born: 1800 c. - 1870 c.

Object Type: Figure, Head

Materials: Pigment, Wood

Measurements: h. 130 x w. 65 x d. 60 mm

Accession Number: 518a

Historic Period: 19th century

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

Credit Line: Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

This small tattooed head is a fine example of the Gisborne or Turanga school of carving, which continued to flourish during the middle of the nineteenth century on the East Coast, notably at Manutuke, some time after carving had declined in other areas. The Rongowhakaata and Ngati Kaipoho were the principal groups involved and the master carver Raharuhi Rukupo was particularly influential in maintaining this vigorous carving tradition. Work by him and Timote Tuhi, which is comparable to the head shown here, is illustrated in Barrow (1969: 36, 79).

Full facial tattooing (make) was undergone by men of high status during the course of their adult lives and although the full significance of this painful ordeal is not now known it was in part a process of ritual sanctification of chiefs, who were living representatives of deified ancestors and possessed powers derived from them. Women's facial tattoo was restricted to the lips and chin. (For a discussion of moko see Simmons, 1983.)

The tattoo on this small head is finely executed and exhibits an unusual feature in the truncated bands of engraved lines which arch above the eyebrows. The hair is shown tied up in a topknot, characteristic of the East Coast region, and the head has clearly been sawn off at the neck. The right ear is missing and a cord of twisted flax is tied to a ring screwed into the back of the head, suggesting that it may be from a *karetao* puppet figure, for which cords would have been necessary to operate the arms (cf. Barrow, 1969: 148, 151; Mead, 1984: 210). Puppets were used to dramatise myths and were not merely children's toys.

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. 7.

Provenance

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