



Memorial figure

Not on display

Title/Description: Memorial figure

Object Type: Figure

Materials: Wood

Measurements: h. 952 x w. 200 x d. 200 mm

Accession Number: 805

Historic Period: 19th/20th century

Production Place: Celebes, Pacific, Sulawesi

Cultural Group: Toraja

These distinctive wood images (*tau tau*) represent particular eminent individuals for whom full funerary rites, feasts and sacrifices have been carried out. Mortuary rituals still play a very prominent part in the life of the Toraja of south-central Sulawesi. Those conducted for high-ranking people involve lengthy preparations - the mobilisation of large amounts of food, goods and livestock, notably water buffalo for sacrifice, and the assembly of hundreds of people for the seven days of a full funeral sequence (see Crystal, 1985, for a detailed account). By such complex rituals the deceased is appropriately honoured, while the living relatives demonstrate and celebrate their wealth and resources, and thus, indirectly, the favour of the ancestors.

A *tau tau* image, normally of jackfruit wood, is commissioned from a carver after the death and is paraded, wearing fine clothing, during the funeral procession of the body. When the body itself is placed in a cliff vault, the clothed image is set up in a recess in the cliff, or, more recently, on a balcony structure where it can be seen from below. The age of this *tau tau* is not known, though it is unlikely to be recent; severe erosion at the back and base, and a weathered appearance, indicate prolonged exposure.

It has the remains of squared sockets for articulated arms, now missing, and, unusually, a square cavity in the back of the head, possibly for the insertion of moveable eyes in the hollow sockets. Pegged holes in the head will have been for attachable hair. There are two further pegged holes in each earlobe and a shallow groove across the top of the head. The ears and features, notably the eyebrows, are finely and sensitively rendered, a combination of the skill of the sculptor and natural weathering.

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. 93.
