

Moai Statues of Easter Island



Moai or mo'ai (/ˈmoʊ.aɪ/ ⓘ MOH-eye; Spanish: moái; Rapa Nui: mo'ai, lit. 'statue') are monolithic human figures carved by the Rapa Nui people on Rapa Nui (Easter Island) in eastern Polynesia between the years 1250 and 1500.[1][2] Nearly half are still at Rano Raraku, the main moai quarry, but hundreds were transported from there and set on stone platforms called ahu around the island's perimeter. Almost all moai have overly large heads, which account for three-eighths of the size of the whole statue. They also have no legs. The moai are chiefly the living faces (aringa ora) of deified ancestors (aringa ora ata tepuna).[3]

The statues still gazed inland across their clan lands when Europeans first visited the island in 1722, but all of them had fallen by the latter part of the 19th century.[4] The moai were toppled in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, possibly as a result of European contact or internecine tribal wars.[5]

DESCRIPTION OF MOAI STATUES OF EASTER ISLAND

Description

The moai are monolithic statues, and their minimalist style reflects forms found throughout Polynesia. Moai are carved from volcanic tuff (solidified ash). The human figures would be outlined in the rock wall first, then chipped away until only the image was left.[13] The over-

large heads (a three-to-five ratio between the head and the trunk, a sculptural trait consistent with the Polynesian belief in the sanctity of the chiefly head) have heavy brows and elongated noses with a distinctive fish-hook-shaped curl of the nostrils. The lips protrude in a thin pout. Like the nose, the ears are elongated and oblong in form. The jaw lines stand out against the truncated neck. The torsos are heavy, sometimes, the clavicles are subtly outlined in stone too. The arms are carved in bas relief and rest against the body in various positions, hands and long slender fingers resting along the crests of the hips, meeting at the hami (loincloth), with the thumbs sometimes pointing towards the navel. Generally, the anatomical features of the backs are not detailed, but sometimes bear a ring and girdle motif on the buttocks and lower back. Except for one kneeling moai, the statues do not have clearly visible legs.

Mo'ai quarry at Rano Raraku Though moai are whole-body statues,[14] they are often referred to as "Easter Island heads" in some popular literature. This is partly because of the disproportionate size of most moai heads, and partly because many of the images for the island showing upright moai are of the statues on the slopes of Rano Raraku, many of which are buried to their shoulders.

Characteristics

Easter Island statues are known for their large, broad noses and big chins, along with rectangle-shaped ears and deep eye slits. Their bodies are normally squatting, with their arms resting in different positions and are without legs. The majority of the ahu are found along the coast and face inland towards the community. There are some inland ahu such as Ahu Akivi. These moai face the community but given the small size of the island, also appear to face the coast.[11]

In 1979, Sergio Rapu Haoa and a team of archaeologists discovered that the hemispherical or deep elliptical eye sockets were designed to hold coral eyes with either black obsidian or red scoria pupils.[16] The discovery was made by collecting and reassembling broken fragments of white coral that were found at the various sites. Subsequently, previously uncategorized finds in the Easter Island museum were re-examined and recategorized as eye fragments. It is thought that the moai with carved eye sockets were probably allocated to the ahu and ceremonial sites, suggesting that a selective Rapa Nui hierarchy was attributed to the moai design until its demise with the advent of the religion revolving around the tangata manu.

The more recent moai had pukao on their heads, which represent the topknot of the chieftains. According to local tradition, the mana was preserved in the hair. The pukao were carved out of red scoria, a very light rock from a quarry at Puna Pau. Red itself is considered a sacred color in Polynesia. The added pukao suggest a further status to the moai.[20]

MARKINGS OF MOAI STATUES OF EASTER ISLAND

Markings

When first carved, the surface of the moai was polished smooth by rubbing with pumice. However, the easily worked tuff from which most moai were carved is easily eroded, such that the best place to see the surface detail is on the few moai carved from basalt or in photographs and other archaeological records of moai surfaces protected by burials.[citation needed]

Those moai that are less eroded typically have designs carved on their backs and posteriors. The Routledge expedition of 1914 established a cultural link[21] between these designs and the island's traditional tattooing, which had been repressed by missionaries a half-century earlier. Until modern DNA analysis of the islanders and their ancestors, this was key scientific evidence that the moai had been carved by the Rapa Nui and not by a separate group from South America.[citation needed]

At least some of the moai were painted. One moai in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art was decorated with a reddish pigment.[22] Hoa Hakananai'a was decorated with maroon and white paint until 1868, when it was removed from the island.

HISTORY OF MOAI STATUES OF EASTER ISLAND

History

The statues were carved by the Polynesian colonizers of the island, mostly between 1250 and 1500.[1] In addition to representing deceased ancestors, the moai, once they were erected on ahu, may also have been regarded as the embodiment of powerful living or former chiefs and important lineage status symbols. Each moai presented a status: "The larger the statue placed upon an ahu, the more mana the chief who commissioned it had." [20] The competition for grandest statue was ever prevalent in the culture of the Easter Islanders. The proof stems from the varying sizes of moai.[20]

Completed statues were moved to ahu mostly on the coast, then erected, sometimes with pukao, red stone cylinders, on their heads. Moai must have been extremely expensive to craft and transport; not only would the actual carving of each statue require effort and resources, but the finished product was then hauled to its final location and erected.