



Object: Three Pendants
Indigenous name: Hei tiki
Culture/Location: Maori- New Zealand
Date: 19th–20th Century
Materials: Nephrite
Dimensions: 3 5/8 x 1 3/4 x 1/4 inches
Institution and Accession Number: The Museum of Fine Arts Boston, 2004.2237



Object: Petroglyph depicting Birdman Images
Culture/Location: Easter Island
Date: 18th Century
Materials: Tuff
Dimensions: Sizes vary
Institution and Accession Number: The Bradshaw Foundation

The Birdman Petroglyphs of Easter Island and the hei tiki of New Zealand represent artwork of the Polynesian Islands through formal properties such as materials, craftsmanship, and designs chose. The petroglyphs and hei tiki highlight the Polynesian method of employing resources associated with the land, low relief carving, and acknowledging an unseen force: mana.

The stone that is used in the production of the birdman petroglyphs is a type of rock that is significant to Polynesia because it is a direct product of volcanism. Tuff is made of volcanic ash which is common in Polynesia and the soft rock makes it easy to carve which is why those on Easter Island had a great deal of art made from this type of rock (Hefferan and O'Brien 2012). It was possible to carve the petroglyphs with simple tools such as an adze or other carving tools that have the capability to carve the tuff. A fair amount of carving was made before European contact and without metal tools. Tiki manaia, the Maori term for a human with a bird-like head, is a motif seen on many of their artworks (D'Alleva 1998). The hei tiki is often carved from nephrite and worn as a pendant. Nephrite is a much harder rock than tuff, so the carving of it would be more difficult, which in turn, could mean more mana, the energy force believed to be

in all humans and objects was transferred to the piece (Groube 1967). Nephrite, like tuff, is found in New Zealand but is not as common. It was one of the rarest gemstone which is one of the reasons it is highly valued, is also quite durable, making it long-lasting and difficult to carve. Some of the hei-tiki were made without metal tools while others were made with metal tools following European contact. Some of the pendants were acquired by Europeans on their travels (Kaepler 2008). They are carved in low relief and are richly detailed, suggesting that the objects were infused with mana.

Mana is infused in the carvings just like many other pieces of Polynesian artworks. The fine details of each carving show the mana that is represented within the sculpture along with the time and energy it took to produce the petroglyphs and hei-tiki. It is suggested that the Easter Island petroglyphs were carved over time, which could mean it was a ceremonial process in which carving was added later to the existing rock (D'Alleva 1998).

Motifs combining features of a bird and a human are depicted on artworks from both Easter Island and New Zealand. The petroglyphs of Easter Island portray a bird-man, combining the head of a bird with the body of a man (Paul and Lee). The Maori people had a name for the Bird-man, which is tiki manaia. Beaks and talons are the two features that are most common among art pieces and these pieces of art were used in ceremonies that could have been for honoring ancestors and also birth, depending on which island they are on. Hei tikis were associated with ancestors because that is what they depict. These pendants were passed down and worn on important occasions including the signing of peace treaties, funerals, and marriages (Skinner 1932).

The presence of motifs combining human and bird features, seen on both the petroglyphs and the hei tikis show that the people of Easter Island and New Zealand believed in a higher being that encompasses their cultures. The Birdman in Easter Island was recognized as godlike, but also may refer to ancestors (Kjellgren and Wagelie 2000). This motif shows their connection to resources from the natural environment through their appreciation of birds and the

stones used to make the pieces. While the pendants are small in size, they are monumental in form and symbolize many of the Maori ideals.

I chose these artworks because of my interests in the materials that they were carved out of and the carvings that were on each. The birdman reference seemed like it would be a peculiar entity to find carved on stone, which is another reason why I was fascinated that it was found within both cultures. Seeing how the connection the Rapa Nui and the Maori people have to the environment is displayed in their art gives me a deeper sense of appreciation for what they did and how they chose to share their culture.

Bibliography

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