



Object type: Double-headed Female Figure
Indigenous name: *Moai aringa*
Culture/location: Easter Island, Rapa Nui
Date: 19th century
Materials: Wood, bird bone, obsidian
Dimensions: H. 15 3/4 x W. 5 3/4 in
Institution and accession number: The Israel Museum, B02.0277



Object type: Carving of Mother and Child
Indigenous name: n/a
Culture/location: Easter Island, Rapa Nui
Date: n/a
Materials: Wood, shell, resin
Dimensions: H. 35 3/4 x W. 8 1/4 in
Institution and accession number: Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, 62-48-70/4060

In this summary, I will compare and contrast two figures that originated from Easter Island and Rapanui culture: a double-headed female figure (*moai aringa*) and a carving of a mother and child. I chose these objects because they are rare and there is debate surrounding them. There are many possible interpretations of each one; all of these interpretations stem from myths (Eggertsson 2011, 113). The Rapanui are known for having many myths that play a key role in developing their cultural identity. What I find so creative and intriguing is these figures' close ties with these myths. Figures such as the double-headed female carving and the mother and child carving, then, deserve to be appreciated as both beautifully crafted works of art and compelling cultural products.

Traditionally, the myths of Easter Island are passed down orally from generation to generation (Arredondo 2000, 44). According to Arredondo's analysis, each orator adds his or her own details to the legend; however, it has been demonstrated that a majority of the original stories and themes have been preserved over time. Hearing a story directly from a well-respected orator adds to one's respectability. Storytellers are regarded highly in Rapanui society. "Rapanui narration reflects the lifestyle of antiquity, and it appears intimately

tied to the world of gods and spirits, to *mana*, or power transmitted by the gods to men..." (2000, 44).

The wood from which these sculptures were carved would have been a valuable resource. The fact that both of these objects were made of precious wood shows that they were meant to be treasured (Fischer 2005, 44). As was the case in other Polynesian societies, when missionaries first arrived they often demanded that the Rapanui's wooden representations of gods and goddesses be burned (Heyerdahl 1979, 10). Therefore, these objects were most frequently hidden away or destroyed (Heyerdahl 1979, 12).

The mother figure is proudly holding and displaying her child. This gesture could be attributed to the Rapanui belief that women who were mothers should be admired. In fact, in the Rere Ao myth, an infertile woman stole a child and pretended that she was giving birth to it (Arredondo 2000, 44). Her actions caused her to become the laughingstock of her community (Arredondo 2000, 44). A son was preferred because he would stay near his parents, whereas a daughter had to leave the home to get married (Arredondo 2000, 46). Familial ties and genealogy were fundamental aspects of Rapanui life, as seen through mythology (Arredondo 2000, 46).

Similar to the mother and child figure, the double-headed female figure is not as thoroughly studied as other well-known moai figures from Easter Island. However, the double-headed female figure does share themes with *moai kavakava*, male figures that appear to be starving (Fischer 2005, 43). A reference to these male figures' emaciation is suggested by the double-headed female figure's collarbone, which is fully exposed and could be compared to the protruding collarbones of male *moai kavakava*. According to myth, after starving ancestors died their spirits were celebrated using *kavakava* figures (Eggertsson 2011, 114). *Akuaku* was the name given to the spirits of the famished deceased that were in limbo between their death and *pō*, the pure spirit in eternal serenity and bliss (Campbell 1974, 87). In broader terms, *moai kavakava* and *akuaku* represent the respect and peace between the spiritual and the physical world (Routledge 1919, 171). It is intriguing that in many Rapanui myths, the *akuaku* are males that are disguised as females (Eggertsson 2011, 118). *Akuaku* have female genitalia as well as male goatees (Eggertsson 2011, 118). The double-headed female figure has a goatee and is also concealing her genitalia, which may also suggest that she is a spirit in disguise, or *akuaku* (Eggertsson 2011, 118). Finally, the double-headed nature of the figure is significant because it shows that the spirit is so powerful that it can look to both the past and the future (The Israel Museum, *Harry N. Abrams, Inc.*, 2005, webpage).

Bibliography

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Carving of Mother and Child in Wood About 40" High. Photograph. From Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University.
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Double-headed Female Figure (*Moai Aringa*). Photograph. From The Israel Museum.
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